

# Mark Kiszla: Super season by Broncos' Von Miller worth dancing over

Mark Kiszla  
The Denver Post  
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Here's a scary thought: How good are the Broncos if quarterback Peyton Manning is the second-best player on the team?

The most valuable player on the Denver roster could be a subject of heated debate. But let there be no doubt. The dance contest is over. Who has the hottest dance moves on the Broncos?

"You know, I think I'm running away with it," Miller told me, during a recent, rare, boastful moment at Denver's practice facility. "I've been getting a lot of practice. And practice makes perfect."

Denver not only buried San Diego on Sunday, the Broncos destroyed the scared-of-his-shadow quarterback formerly known as Philip Rivers. Miller danced on the Chargers' grave in a 30-23 victory.

Impossible has become just another chore on the honey-do list for Miller. With three sacks against the Chargers, the second-year pro now has recorded 24.5 in his first 25 NFL games, evoking memories of the late, great Derrick Thomas.

"To be a great pass rusher in my opinion ... you've got to have a relentless pursuit and a fanatical effort to the ball," Miller said after his team's fifth consecutive victory. "You look around at the great linebackers playing now from DeMarcus Ware to Clay Matthews, and they have fanatical effort and relentless pursuit to the ball. I just try to apply that to my game."

Where does Miller go from here? The relentless pursuit of NFL history.

Since the sack became an official league statistic 30 years ago, only eight players have recorded as many as 20 in a single season. Nobody has taken down the quarterback more than the 22.5 times Michael Strahan did in the name of mayhem and the New York Giants in 2001.

Before this 16-game campaign is done, Miller could be dancing with legends and breaking an NFL record. "Derrick Thomas. To be even in the same breath with that guy is humbling," Miller said.

Wouldn't you hate to be Rivers, trying to go to sleep with visions of Miller in your head?

"When you can get in the quarterback's face, that's the worst thing for him," Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey said. "I'm sure Peyton would tell you that. You don't want guys in your face all the time."

The beauty is simple anatomy. The brain of a quarterback resides behind the thin curtain of his brave face. Get in the face of the QB often enough and you mess with the mind of even a seasoned NFL veteran. Rivers is one tough dude. But he spent much of the afternoon as antsy as a man tiptoeing across the interstate, hoping the big, orange No. 58 bus didn't flatten him.

"As a pass rusher, it's all about getting from point A to point B as fast as I can," Miller said.

We hold the destructive power of his sacks to be self-evident. So let's focus on a single play against San Diego, a snap when Miller didn't actually record a takedown of Rivers.

With 9 minutes, 18 seconds remaining in the fourth quarter and Denver holding a 27-16 lead, the Chargers threw caution to the wind and went for it on fourth down. Rivers barked signals at Denver's 46-yard line. San Diego assigned a receiver to slow Miller with a chip block at the point of attack, funneling the linebacker toward the heavy traffic in the middle of the line.

Miller, however, relentlessly swam through the debris to the point where Rivers was ready to unload his pass, and flew at the San Diego quarterback with a leap that would do Superman proud.

The result of Miller's mayhem? An interception by Denver safety Jim Leonhard.

If numbers had a sense of justice, Miller would have been credited with half a turnover.

Manning has changed everything for Denver, transforming the Broncos from a team with little more than a Tim Tebow prayer in the playoffs into a legitimate Super Bowl contender.

But the growth of the Denver defense, given its imagination by coordinator Jack Del Rio and its bite by Miller, allows the Broncos a shot at knocking off Tom Brady or whatever quarterback gets in their way during the playoffs.

"Coach Del Rio, he's like a wizard," Miller said. "But I think it all starts with the players."

The noise made by this Denver defense begins with Miller.

Get up, everybody. And crank the music.  
Miller is a sack-dancing fool.

# Woody Paige: Broncos all business marching through AFC West

Woody Paige  
The Denver Post  
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Afterward, in the locker room, there was no spraying of champagne, donning of championship T-shirts and caps, or breaking out of Twinkies, Ding Dongs and Sno Balls.

The players and the coaches went about their business professionally and impassively.

"We need to keep pushing forward and look at what is right in front of us," Champ Bailey said.

But, let's all be the first to congratulate the Broncos.

They clinched the AFC West Sunday.

Even before Thanksgiving.

The Broncos haven't been in such a comfortable position since, oh, 1998 — when they last won the Super Bowl.

Oh, the race is not mathematically over, but it's realistically and logically over.

The Broncos' ill-at-ease 30-23 victory over the Chargers was a three-fer.

And the Chiefs and the Raiders lost, as usual.

So the Broncos' insurmountable lead in the AFC West can be considered four games — with six to go. They definitely will win three, and probably four or five.

Will they get a bye the first playoff weekend, or have a home game? Who do they play first — the Steelers, the Ravens or, perhaps, the Colts?

But, first, the Broncos took care of a Chargers' team that seemed worse than the score. That defeat in the second half at San Diego on Oct. 15 has left the Chargers a dead team walking.

Philip Rivers, who had the yaps before, acts like he has the yips now. He threw a ton of passes outside and high, low and inside. Norv Turner looked like a guy who has a bad stomachache. And most of the players played like roasted and basted turkeys — as if they had been stuffed and covered with gravy.

The three-fer?

The division-leading Broncos won their fifth consecutive game.

The second-place Chargers lost their fourth game in five.

That's a two-fer.

And the Broncos have won both games over the Chargers in case of a tie-breaker. Forget that, though. Who's going to tie the Broncos? The Raiders? They were dipped and chipped by the Saints 38-17 and dropped to 3-7. The Chiefs? Ha. They drooled in a 28-6 thumping by the Bengals, and are 1-9.

What's next for the Broncos? A thankful Thanksgiving, then a trip to K.C. to play the thankless Chiefs, who are like a bye.

The victory on Sunday was cluttered and flawed, but the defense did play superb most of the time, and the offense played efficient enough several times, and the special teams had one special time.

When an early Peyton Manning pass was tipped, intercepted and run in for a touchdown, the concern was moderate, but not orange-alert. But the Broncos evened the score at seven and went ahead for good and for the rest of the satisfactory Sunday afternoon. It could have been 40-10 the way Rivers was leaking, and the way the Chargers were failing to run or hide or convert third downs (none until the third quarter).

However, even when the Chargers pulled to within eight points twice and seven with 1:24 remaining, nobody was in panic mode. In fact, when the Chargers on-side kicked at the end, 90 percent of the people already were gone. When do the stores open for shopping on Thursday? When do the playoffs start?

Fox wasn't ready to party. "In this league you're two games away from disaster. All that we're doing is looking . . . " know what's coming ? . . . wait for it "one week at a time."

He added: "If we continue to win, when the season's over, we'll know."

The coach is correct. Just because the Broncos couldn't lose the division if they forfeited half their remaining games, they still want to finish with a better record than, say, the Patriots and the Ravens. The Texans, with a near-miss on Sunday, are clutching a 9-1 record.

The Broncos need to recover from that continuing plethora of injuries. Willis McGahee went off with a knee injury in the first half — who knows for how long? — and a few others, including Damaryius Thomas, limped away.

But that Broncos' defense gets more Orange squash, mass, sack, crash and crush every week. Two interceptions, four sacks, three forced fumbles (by Rivers), one recovered), just three successful first downs on 16 third downs, only 53 yards rushing permitted, 16 miserly points given up to the Chargers' offense.

Manning was merely mortal, but finished with 270 yards and three touchdowns. And he's still on target for the second most productive season of his career — and his 12th double-digit victory total.

The Broncos "are as probably a complete team as we've played in terms of all three phases." The speaker was the opposing coach.

Turner knows that the Broncos won the division on Sunday. No Hostess Ho Ho's for the Chargers.

# Peyton Manning's Broncos bury Chargers to take distant AFC West lead

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 18, 2012

Get the ticket orders ready. Warm up the printer. Start circling some weekend dates in early January.

For the second consecutive season, the Broncos can make plans to play a home playoff game. The Broncos not only defeated miserably fading San Diego, 30-23, Sunday at Sports Authority Field at Mile High, they buried the Chargers' hopes of contending for the division title.

The AFC West is all but clinched after the Broncos (7-3) took a three-game lead — plus a head-to-head tiebreaker that essentially gives them a four-game lead — against the second-place Chargers (4-6) with six to play.

"We have to put our blinders on," said Broncos middle linebacker Keith Brooking. "Because it's easy to believe the hype. People are starting to tell you how great you are. How well you're playing. Our goal was not 7-3. Our goal was not to lead the division by three or four games when we were 10 games through the year."

For posterity sake, only one player got credit for the victory here on an unusually warm mid-November afternoon in Colorado. That was Peyton Manning. He threw three touchdown passes, although for the second consecutive week, it can be argued Manning and his offense were outplayed by the Broncos' defense and special teams.

Von Miller is fast becoming the NFL's most dominant defensive player since Ray Lewis in his prime, yet the Broncos' strongside linebacker and seemingly unblockable pass rusher is not the biggest star on his team.

Only quarterbacks have a won-loss record placed alongside their name, so Manning got credit for win No. 148 in his regular-season career, tying him for No. 2 all-time.

The quarterback Manning just tied? John Elway. Talk about a tie where both parties win. Elway is a Broncos quarterback legend whose legacy as a front-office executive is tied to Manning. As Manning succeeds, so does Elway as the Broncos' executive vice president of football operations.

"I want him to break all the records, especially the wins records," Elway said as he stood about 7 feet from Manning's locker. "I'd like to see him have many, many more wins. I'd like to see him double it."

It wasn't exactly fitting that Manning tied his boss on a day in which he threw an interception that was returned for a touchdown and took a safety to account for the Chargers' first nine points.

Then again, did Elway always play stellar in victory?

"Oh no," Elway said. "A win's a win. The good thing is the expectations are now up."

It was a strange offensive performance in that the Broncos had four, three-and-outs and surrendered two scores. They also had scoring drives of five, three, one and three plays.

"The way they were playing defense, it was hit or miss," Elway said. "They brought a lot of pressure, a lot of blitzes, a lot of man to man. You play against that kind of defense, it's not always going to look choreographed. They're going to get theirs because they took a lot of risks. The key is to get ours. And Peyton got his share."

As the Broncos built a 24-9 lead midway through the third quarter, a blocked punt by Denver's Nate Irving set up one Manning touchdown pass, an interception by Wesley Woodyard set up a field goal and a sack and forced fumble by Miller set up another Manning throw for a score.

That's 17 of 24 points aided by units other than the one Manning commands. And on the one sustained offensive drive for a touchdown, Broncos running back Willis McGahee did most of the work before Demaryius Thomas tapped both toes down while snagging a 13-yard touchdown from Manning.

"It's great when everybody produces, but offensively we know we're playing with fire as far as our third-down production and turning the ball over," Broncos tight end Joel Dreessen said. "There's going to be a time when that bites you. We've got to fix it. Luckily we're winning games while we're doing this."

McGahee didn't finish as he left early with a knee injury. But Manning and the Miller-led defense are Denver's finishers, anyway.

In terms of personal statistics, Manning can take aim at Brett Favre, who is No. 1 in wins (186) and touchdown passes (508). Manning is alone in second place with 423 career touchdown passes and a win next week in Kansas City would put him clear of Elway for No. 2 in regular-season victories.

"I've said it before John Elway was one of my favorites growing up. He still is one of my favorite quarterbacks," Manning said. "I feel honored to be part of the same organization that he is part of."

Before Manning can get anywhere near matching Elway's five Super Bowl appearances and two world championships as a *Broncos* quarterback, he must first reach the playoffs.

Consider that first step pretty well taken. So who was the better quarterback, Manning or Elway?

Elway's face lit up.

"That's why you have your job," he said with a laugh.

# Broncos RB Willis McGahee injures right knee, to have MRI exam

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 19, 2012

Willis McGahee seemed to be running toward one of his best games this season.

Not two minutes into the second quarter, the Broncos running back had 55 yards on seven carries against the San Diego Chargers. He was maintaining a strong grip on the ball as San Diego tacklers were intent on making ball-strip swipes on nearly every carry.

But McGahee suffered a right knee injury after an 8-yard run with 13:33 remaining in the second quarter, a play that immediately preceded Peyton Manning's 13-yard touchdown pass to Demaryius Thomas. McGahee did not return and will have an MRI exam Monday to determine the extent of the injury.

"It swelled up on him," Broncos coach John Fox said. "We'll know more (Monday)."

Ronnie Hillman and Lance Ball took over and finished the game at tailback. They combined for 78 yards rushing on 18 carries.

"We were short-handed there," Fox said. "We even had emergency scenarios in case something happened to one of those guys."

Hillman gained 21 yards on his first carry as a speed complement to the thrashing McGahee in the first quarter. But with McGahee down, Hillman as the featured back had only 28 yards on 11 carries.

"I haven't heard how Willis is, but what he told me, he said he would be all right," Ball said. "He's a tough guy."

If McGahee can't play next weekend at Kansas City, is the rookie Hillman ready to become the No. 1 tailback? Ball, meanwhile, has found his niche as a dependable backup. He rushed for 35 yards on six carries (5.8 average) and had three catches for 21 yards.

"It felt good to get back out there in the swing of things, carry the ball a little bit," Ball said. "Still the same holes. Just got to run through them and keep fighting."

# Broncos' key to win was harassing Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 19, 2012

Control is a relative term, it seems to the Broncos.

And through the years, when it comes to the AFC West race, the guy who usually is ripping things out of the Broncos' hands is Philip Rivers. Before Sunday's 30-23 Broncos victory, Rivers had won five of his six career starts in Denver, with the only Broncos win in that stretch having come when referee Ed Hochuli turned a fumble into an incomplete pass.

"So we knew we had to get to Philip," Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey said. "We couldn't let him get into that rhythm where he just feels like he can stand back there and go. We had some moments there where he did, but for the most part, we got it done."

The Broncos consistently harassed Rivers with one of the best pieces on any football chessboard — linebacker Von Miller — at their disposal and a defensive game plan designed to push Rivers out of his comfort zone.

As a result, Rivers threw his seventh fourth-quarter interception of the season and the Broncos earned the first season sweep of the Chargers since Rivers became San Diego's starter in 2006.

## What went right

Colts coach Chuck Pagano, a Boulder native, calls the guys who disrupt opposing offenses "game-wreckers."

And the Broncos just might have the ultimate game-wrecker at the moment in Miller, a player who can win match-ups with power and speed at any spot along the line of scrimmage.

With three sacks Sunday, he leads the NFL with 13 and also leads the league in tackles for a loss with 23. He forced two fumbles Sunday, both with hits on Rivers.

"Man, he's crazy right now," Broncos defensive end Elvis Dumervil said.

"I keep saying, I don't want to stop, I don't want him to slow down," Bailey said. "I want him to keep doing what he's doing."

Miller and Dumervil — who is tied for 10th in the league in sacks with eight, making the Broncos the only team with two players in the NFL's top 10 — have allowed defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio to consistently play coverage looks on long-yardage downs with a smaller, quicker lineup. The Broncos used a bevy of looks with five, six and even seven DBs.

After rookie Omar Bolden left the game with a concussion, it took every other defensive back the Broncos had in uniform to put the seven defensive backs into the formation.

### **What went wrong**

After spending much of the day with a low-wattage effort on offense, the Chargers found a little room to work with a 12-play, 80-yard touchdown drive to close out the third quarter and an eight-play, 95-yard touchdown drive in the fourth quarter.

On those two possessions, Rivers finally found his rhythm and attacked the Broncos' smaller cornerbacks — 5-foot-9 Tony Carter and 5-10 Chris Harris — with 6-5 Danario Alexander and 6-5 Malcolm Floyd. On those two drives, Rivers even did a little of what he's done more than most front-line quarterbacks in the league: go after Bailey in 1-on-1 situations.

"If you want to be a good defense, you can't allow plays like that," said Bailey, who is the team's tallest cornerback at 6 feet. "We've got some things we need to work on."

### **Up next:**

The Chiefs are 1-9, lead the NFL in turnovers and have struggled so mightily they have turned one of the most loyal fan followings into a disgruntled mass of growing apathy.

The Broncos' first order of business will be to remember their business. They had bouts of sluggishness against the Chargers on Sunday, so it won't take a lot for the coaching staff and some of the team's more experienced hands to offer some reminders.

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### **Von-tastic**

*Broncos linebacker Von Miller leads the NFL in sacks (13) and tackles for loss (23). He is also just one of two players — along with the Dallas Cowboys' DeMarcus Ware — to have at least 10 sacks and at least four forced fumbles.*

<b>Player.....</b>	<b>Sacks.....</b>	<b>Forced fumbles.....</b>	<b>Pass knockdowns</b>
Von Miller.....	13.....	4.....	1
J.J. Watt.....	11½ .....	0.....	11
DeMarcus Ware.....	10.....	4.....	0
Cameron Wake.....	9½.....	1.....	0

# Broncos' Elvis Dumervil, D.J. Williams make impact vs. Chargers

Tom Kensler  
The Denver Post  
November 18, 2012

Although their expected playing time for Sunday had been described as "uncertain," Broncos defensive end Elvis Dumervil and linebacker D.J. Williams didn't just get their feet wet in the Broncos' victory over San Diego.

The pair all but face-planted Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers in the turf.

"We have a lot of energy out there and we're having fun," Dumervil said of the Broncos' defense. "There's so many guys contributing. We felt like the whole game on defense, we were going to do the job."

Broncos coaches had said during the week they didn't know how many snaps Dumervil or Williams would get. After all, Dumervil had sprained his left shoulder the previous weekend in the victory at Carolina and sat out the final 2 ½ quarters of that game.

And Williams, everybody figured, would have to knock off a thick layer of rust, having sat out the first nine games because of two NFL suspensions.

As it turned out, both played a pivotal role in forcing Rivers into a frustrating afternoon.

Dumervil, whose availability for Sunday's game had been listed as "questionable," was in the opening lineup and did not look the worse for wear. He recorded six tackles (tied for third most on the team), a tackle for loss, a forced fumble and a sack.

"I've been in situations before where I had to play with pain," Dumervil said. "I don't like it. But you got to go. The team needs me, and I'm going to do whatever I can to help the team."

Dumervil's sack and forced fumble came on the final play of the game and prevented Rivers from attempting any kind of "Hail Mary" pass, with the Chargers down by a touchdown.

"There's so many guys contributing," Dumervil said. "We felt like the whole game on defense, we were going to do the job."

Williams entered the lineup on the game's fourth snap and immediately became part of the regular rotation. He finished with four tackles and a tackle for loss.

"I thought D.J. had a great week of preparation," Broncos coach John Fox said. "The guy obviously worked diligently while he was away from us."

If Williams felt rusty at all, it couldn't have been evident to the Chargers. A former University of Miami star, Williams spent the early part of the season working out in South Florida. Then, a few weeks before his suspension was lifted, he moved back to Denver to adjust to altitude.

"I have to credit my conditioning — the strength and conditioning coaches here," Williams said. "They helped keep me focused."

Often, Williams and his former backup, Wesley Woodyard, were in the lineup together. For the past few years, both played weakside linebacker, but it came as no surprise that the Broncos found a way to have them in the lineup at the same time.

Woodyard tops the Broncos in tackles (85), including eight on Sunday.

"We played together, and it was great," Woodyard said of Williams. "D.J. went out there and made some plays. That's what it's all about. A team needs to put the best players in the best places to make plays."

Nose tackle Kevin Vickerson said the Broncos' defense is developing an identity.

"We're playing fast," Vickerson said. "Everybody is playing together and playing fast. And everybody is being accountable to the guy next to him. I think that's been a major reason we're playing so well."

# Chargers praise Broncos after losing 30-23 in Denver

Irv Moss  
The Denver Post  
November 18, 2012

San Diego Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers put on his best game face Sunday night when assessing his team's chances of making the postseason after losing 30-23 to the Broncos.

No matter how Rivers tried to spin it, there was no mistaking a somber mood prevailed.

"We're 4-6, and we've been further out before and made it," Rivers said. "We have enough worries. We have to hang our hat on what we control. Denver's not going to lose four of six, I'll guarantee you that."

Coach Norv Turner wasn't able to make it sound much better.

"We've got to go week to week," Turner said of his team's chances to make the postseason. "We've got to find a way to win a game. We've got to get it fixed and get it fixed fast."

Turner was impressed by the Broncos.

"Denver's defense is outstanding," Turner said. "They're helped a great deal by their offense. They have a chance to be a very complete team."

Rivers pointed to the first half and wasted opportunities. The Chargers managed two first downs in the first half, one by penalty, and they punted eight times.

"We had chances early," Rivers said "We had opportunities and couldn't get it done. Our defense was playing well, but this is the best defensive team I've seen with the Broncos. They had a lot to do with our negative plays."

Turner noted it was a three-prong effort by the Denver defense.

"We couldn't get the run going. We had a tough time protecting, and they covered us tight downfield," Turner said. "Denver took away some things we normally are able to do. We made some plays in the second half. We had a chance to make a play or two and win the game. We didn't get it done."

Rivers also lamented the missed opportunities.

The Chargers got an extra possession by recovering an onside kick to start the second half, and also after tackling Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning for a safety. They did nothing with either possession.

# Broncos' Stokley enjoying comeback success

Mike Klis, Jeff Legwold, Tom Kensler and Irv Moss  
The Denver Post  
November 19, 2012

Brandon Stokley may have Peyton Manning to thank for extending his career.

But Manning is robbing Stokley of consideration for the award of NFL comeback player of the year. Manning figures to capture the honor in a rout after he missed the entire 2011 season to heal from four neck surgeries and is now the league's leading passer.

But Stokley had essentially been let go by three teams in the previous two years and had just one catch for 7 yards last season. Like Manning, Stokley is 36 years old. Unlike Manning, Stokley's career figured to be finished after a brief stint with the Giants last year.

Instead, the "slot man" was Manning's top receiver Sunday in the Broncos' 30-23 win against the Chargers with four catches for 55 yards, including a 31-yard TD.

"Brandon is one of my favorite teammates of all time," said Manning, who played four years with Stokley for the Indianapolis Colts. "It's fun to be reunited again on the same team. He has made a lot of plays for us all year."

Stokley has 32 receptions and five touchdowns through 10 games.

**A good day.** Turns out Elvis Dumervil, who left the win at Carolina with a shoulder injury, showed enough in Friday's practice to convince coach John Fox he should be in the lineup Sunday.

Dumervil started the game and had a sack on the Chargers' last play from scrimmage to finally slam the door on any comeback attempt.

"I thought we had a pretty good feel on Friday's practice," Fox said. "We went with it. It was a huge play for us."

Said Dumervil: "I always stay confident. I knew my situation. ... I felt like I was going to be able to go."

**Back to work.** The Broncos lost an opportunity just before halftime to put themselves in position for a long field-goal attempt.

After a Manning pass to Lance Ball for 12 yards, the Broncos did not get the ball back to the umpire, the official who spots the ball before each play is run, in time to run another play, so the final seconds ran out.

"That's something we're going to have to practice more," Fox said. "I don't think we located the umpire quite quickly enough. You know, that's on us. We've got to do a better job of preparing our players in that situation."

**Injury report.** In addition to running back Willis McGahee's right knee injury, the Broncos had other injuries.

Cornerback Omar Bolden had a concussion and did not return.

Wide receiver Demaryius Thomas suffered a knee injury but finished the game.

Defensive end Derek Wolfe suffered a right thigh injury, but he returned. Wolfe and Thomas will be evaluated further Monday.

**Broncos close the Gates.** In the teams' Oct. 15 meeting, San Diego all-pro tight end Antonio Gates hurt the Broncos with six catches for 81 yards and two touchdowns.

This time he managed just two catches for 17 yards and was kept out of the end zone.

"We wanted to contain Gates, and I felt like we shut Gates down," Broncos second-year defensive back Chris Harris said.

**Sweet sweep.** San Diego had won three in a row over the Broncos in Denver, and five of the past six. Broncos nose tackle Kevin Vickerson remembers when Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers would carve up the Denver defense.

"This is my first (two-game) sweep over them," Vickerson said. "Our pressure was getting to (Rivers). He threw a couple of balls in the dirt, (missed) a couple of open passes."

**First-half dominance.** The Broncos' defense limited San Diego to two first downs, one by penalty, in the first half. The Chargers punted eight times.

**Big hitter.** After the game, Manning was greeted by, among others, Rockies first baseman Todd Helton. They were quarterbacks at the University of Tennessee together. Helton briefly started ahead of Manning. Manning went on to have 423 more touchdown passes and 148 more NFL wins. Then again, Helton has 2,420 more hits.

# **Broncos RB Willis McGahee to have MRI on right knee Monday**

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 18, 2012

Broncos running back Willis McGahee was having a nice game, gaining 55 yards on seven carries when he went down with a right knee injury early in the second quarter.

McGahee suffered a knee injury after he gained 8 yards with 13:33 remaining in the second quarter, a run that immediately preceded Peyton Manning's 13-yard touchdown pass to Demaryius Thomas. McGahee did not return and will have an MRI on Monday to determine the full extent of the injury.

"It swelled up on him," said Broncos coach John Fox. "We'll know more (Monday)."

Ronnie Hillman and Lance Ball finished the game at tailback and combined for 78 yards rushing on 18 carries.

# **Mile High weather: Sleeveless warm in sun; insulated jacket in shade**

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 18, 2012

Ah, mid-fall in Denver. The sun is extremely bright. It's warm in the sun with the expected temperature in the low-60s for kickoff between the Broncos and Chargers.

But as your entering through the shaded gates at Sports Authority Field and Mile High? It's chilly. With the 2:25 p.m. start, I'm guessing it will be cold once the sun sets about the time the fourth quarter starts.

Carry a coat, is what I'm trying to say.

# Chargers would have early tiebreaker edge with win

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 18, 2012

I know. I know. It's way too premature to be talking about this. But let's say the San Diego Chargers defeat the Broncos today.

In that case, the Broncos would still be leading the AFC West with a 6-4 record while the Chargers would be a game back at 5-5. Record still trumps all and there would be a six remaining games for the teams to decide things.

But should they end up tied? Again, beginning with the scenario the Chargers win today, they would have the early tiebreaker edge. The head-to-head tiebreaker would be a wash. The Chargers and Broncos would each have one loss in the division. But the Chargers would have only two losses in the conference (Cleveland, Broncos) while the Broncos would have three (Patriots, Texans, Chargers).

It appears the Chargers have the tougher remaining schedule (at Pittsburgh, at Jets, home vs. Ravens, Bengals) and that loss to Cleveland may come back to haunt them. And I know, this is a what-if report based on a what-if. But there you go.

# **Peyton Manning can tie John Elway in wins today**

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 18, 2012

Strange isn't it? Peyton Manning has 147 regular-season wins, tied with Dan Marino for third all-time. John Elway is second with 148 wins.

so Manning can tie Elway with a win today against the San Diego Chargers. From Elway's perspective — go get me, Peyton. Elway didn't invest \$58 million over three years in Manning for the former Colts quarterback to NOT pass all his records.

This is case of two guys helping each other. If Manning wins, Elway wins as an executive. Even if he loses a slot on the all-time list.

No. 1 on the all-time list, by the way, is Brett Favre with 186. That would take some doing for Manning. He'd need to average 11 wins through four seasons with the Broncos to get there. But at this moment it appears doable.

# Chargers fall further behind Broncos, lose 30-23

Arnie Stapleton  
Associated Press  
November 18, 2012

DENVER (AP) — Even the San Diego Chargers are saying it: the Denver Broncos are playing solitaire in the AFC West now.

"We can't hang our hat on Denver doing anything from a collapsing standpoint," quarterback Philip Rivers said after the Chargers' 30-23 loss Sunday dropped them three games behind the Broncos, who essentially own a four-game cushion by virtue of their season sweep of San Diego.

"They're not losing four out of six, I can guarantee you that."

The Broncos (7-3) have long made a habit of blowing big division leads in November and December, but none of those teams had the dynamite duo of Von Miller and Peyton Manning.

"They've got a great team," Chargers safety Eric Weddle said. "Defense is playing great, you've got edge rushers, you don't have to blitz much, just play coverage. And you've got one of the best quarterbacks in the game playing at a high level. In fact, they're all playing well."

Miller dumped Rivers three times Sunday, forcing two fumbles and taking over the NFL sacks lead with 13, and Manning set a franchise single-season record with his sixth three-TD game.

Denver's fifth straight game with at least 30 points — 20 of which came off turnovers — also set a franchise mark. So, nobody in the Chargers locker room is counting on a repeat of 2008, when they caught the Broncos, who blew a three-game lead with three games to go.

"Of course not," Weddle said. "I'm not stupid."

There's always the wild card race, though.

"It's not like any teams are running away with it," Weddle said.

First, the Chargers, owners of just one win since September, will have to figure out how to fix a long list of problems on offense, defense and special teams — they had a punt blocked for the second straight week — and it doesn't get any easier with the Baltimore Ravens up next.

"At this point, I imagine we probably have to win out to even have an opportunity to get a playoff berth," tight end Antonio Gates said. "So, this week is critical. It's going to definitely show the character of our team. The guys in this locker room understand we basically backed ourselves against the wall again."

Rivers spent the day picking himself up off the grass. It didn't help matters that two of his offensive line starters were out with injuries in the first half.

"This definitely is as good of a defense as they've had since I've been here," Rivers said. "That may be too broad a statement because they've had some good defenses, but you remember most what you just dealt with."

And he'd just finishing dealing with Miller and Elvis Dumervil, who dumped him on the final play of the game, and even linebacker D.J. Williams, who had four tackles in his 2012 debut after serving two NFL suspensions totaling nine games.

Gates has spent a decade facing Denver's defense and this one ranks at the very top, he said. "Very disruptive," he said. "They're difficult to handle."

Especially Miller, the NFL's Defensive Rookie of the Year last season and league leader in tackles for loss even though he's dropping into coverage and playing linebacker more than he's rushing the passer.

"The majority of the time, he was trying to get his hands on me and disrupt my timing in the passing game," said Gates, who was held to 17 yards on two catches.

Although the final score shows this was a close game, it wasn't. The Broncos built a 24-9 lead, held San Diego to 3 of 16 on third downs, allowed just two first downs before halftime and forced 10 punts, three fumbles and a pair of interceptions.

"You can't play one half of football on offense, you can't get a punt blocked, you can't have blown coverages for a touchdown," Weddle said. "That's just not good football. Like I said, until we play well in all three phases, we're not going to win."

A three-play sequence in the third quarter showed just what kind of day it was for both teams.

Miller sacked Rivers for a 14-yard loss on third down. Nate Irving blocked Mike Scifres' punt at the Chargers 31. Seven seconds later, Brandon Stokley caught Manning's touchdown toss and just like that, it was 17-7.

"That was rough," Rivers said. "Those are game-changing plays and they made the game-changing plays. There's no consolation. The only objective is to win. But the only thing you can never question from our group is we're not ever going to quit. There's no lack of effort and we fight like crazy to the end. We'll continue to do that for the rest of the year."

And if coach Norv Turner's job is in jeopardy, his players definitely have his back.

"Fortunately we still have the right guys in this locker room and we have the right coaching staff that can get it done," Gates said.

NOTES: Rex Hadnot replaced LG Tyrone Green (hamstring) in the second quarter and David Molk replaced RG Louis Vasquez, who was shaken up but returned after halftime. ... LB Larry English (leg), CB Quentin Jammer (calf) also got hurt.

# Manning throws for 3 TDs in Broncos 30-23 win

Eddie Pells

Associated Press

November 18, 2012

DENVER (AP) — Passing by Peyton. Dancing by Von.

On the day Peyton Manning threw three touchdown passes and drew even with John Elway in the career win column, it was Broncos linebacker Von Miller who stole the show — not only with the three sacks and two forced fumbles that rattled Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers, but with the ever-evolving sack dance he uses to celebrate.

"You've got to show some excitement when you make a play," Miller said after spearheading a 30-23 victory Sunday that gave Denver a three-game lead over San Diego in the AFC West. "It's hard enough as it is out there."

But the Broncos (7-3) are making this look easy.

With their fifth straight win, they now have a three-game lead plus the tiebreaker over the rapidly fading Chargers (4-6), who lost their fifth of six and are now playing as much for jobs — namely coach Norv Turner's — as a playoff spot.

"They're not losing four of six, I can guarantee you that," Rivers said of the Broncos, in essence conceding the division race.

Manning tied Elway with 148 career regular-season victories, second place on the all-time list of starting quarterbacks, with Brett Favre still 38 wins ahead.

And Miller? He now leads the league in sacks with 13, after jumping ahead of Texans defensive lineman J.J. Watt, who had one in Houston's win over Jacksonville on Sunday to reach 11 1/2 for the year.

Miller celebrated his first sack with a pair of somersaults, then by getting up and doing jumping jacks with his arms bent at the elbow while he moved to the imaginary music. He said he was inspired by Sonic the Hedgehog, a character in a video game.

His teammates are every bit as impressed with the production as the celebrations.

"That boy works his butt off and plays with a lot of confidence, and I see him doing it for a long time," cornerback Champ Bailey said.

Miller's disruptiveness contributed to what was, overall, a choppy day for both quarterbacks.

Manning threw for 270 yards on 25-for-42 passing but also threw an interception that got returned for a touchdown by Eric Weddle to open the scoring and got sacked in the end zone by Shaun Phillips for a safety.

Even with those struggles, Manning reached 24 touchdown passes for the season and remained on pace for a 4,700-yard year.

"Everybody's got to have an angle on it," Manning said when asked if this win felt more difficult than it should have. "That's not how I see it. We beat a good football team. I kind of throw the records out the window. To score some points, and to settle for some field goals, and you may actually punt, that's part of playing against a good defense. We'll take the win and run with it."

Midway through the third quarter, the Chargers defense had accounted for all their scoring. That's when Rivers picked things up. All but 60 of his 258 yards came after San Diego trailed 24-9 and when Danario Alexander leapt over cornerback Tony Carter for a 21-yard touchdown, the Chargers were within 30-23 with 1:24 left.

The Broncos recovered the onside kick and ran some time off the clock. After a punt, Denver defensive end Elvis Dumervil sacked Rivers to seal the victory and extend a Denver winning streak that started Oct. 15 in San Diego, when Manning rallied Denver from 24-0 down for a 35-24 win. It was the first time a team had trailed by that much and gone on to win by double digits.

In the rematch, Turner's defense held the Chargers close, but the offense and Rivers took too long to get going. San Diego only had two first downs in the first half.

"We were not able to get the run going, we had a tough time protecting and they covered us down the field," Turner said. "So, the combination of those three things makes it difficult."

Overshadowed by Manning's arrival in Denver this year has been the blossoming of the Broncos defense with Miller as the headliner.

Dumervil's late sack gave the Broncos four for the game and 35 for the season. The constant presence of Broncos defenders in the backfield rattled Rivers, who had two touchdowns and two interceptions.

"This is the best defensive team they've had since I've been playing them," said the nine-year veteran.

When Rivers completed a 15-yard pass to Malcom Floyd in the third quarter on third-and-10, it snapped a string of 26 straight holds for the Denver 'D' on third

down, dating to the end of a win over Cincinnati two weeks ago. It was the longest streak in the NFL in 10 years.

Miller is putting himself in the conversation for Defensive Player of the Year.

He now has eight sacks over the past five weeks, and joined Reggie White, Jevon Kearse and Dwight Freeney as only the fourth player to record 11 or more sacks in his first two seasons. But the second-year player's favorite player is Derrick Thomas. He wears No. 58 as a tribute to the late Chiefs Hall of Famer, and though Miller shuns comparisons, his teammates know they could be looking at a future superstar.

"He's just getting started. He's crazy. Crazy day for him," Dumervil said.

NOTES: Broncos RB Willis McGahee left with an injured right knee and did not return. ... Weddle's interceptions return for a score gave the Chargers defense two touchdowns against Manning this season.

# Von Miller helps Broncos sack Chargers, 30-23

Pat Graham

Associated Press

November 19, 2012

DENVER (AP) — Peyton Manning isn't the only player the Denver Broncos brought in to make things happen.

Von Miller got the call from Denver, too, and the second-year linebacker is becoming as big of a headache for Broncos opponents as Manning is.

On a day Manning threw three more touchdown passes, Miller added three sacks and two forced fumbles to his tally to make it a miserable afternoon for Philip Rivers and the San Diego Chargers in a 30-23 win on Sunday.

The Broncos (7-3) stretched their lead in the AFC West to three games, and Rivers was all but conceding the division.

"They're not losing four of six, I can guarantee you that," said the quarterback, whose team fell to 4-6.

Not if the Denver defense keeps playing this way.

And especially not if Manning stays on the pace he's enjoying in his first season in the Mile High City. He won his 148th regular-season game to tie Hall of Famer John Elway for second on the all-time list for starting quarterbacks. He's 38 behind Brett Favre.

Manning was far from his best, too. The numbers looked decent — 25 of 42 for 270 yards — but he threw an interception that safety Eric Weddle returned for a 23-yard touchdown and was sacked for a safety.

"I guess I have to point out the obvious: That's a good NFL football team," Manning said. "We'll take the win and run with it."

But they may be running with it without Willis McGahee, who hurt his right knee early in the second quarter when he was tackled by defensive back Quentin Jammer and didn't return.

"It kind of swelled up so we're just going to be precautionary," Broncos coach John Fox explained. "We'll evaluate him moving forward."

With McGahee out, running responsibilities fell to Lance Ball and rookie Ronnie Hillman.

Ball's biggest contribution may have been on a block, when he slid over to pick up a blitzing linebacker to give Manning time to step up in the pocket and hit Eric Decker in stride for a 20-yard touchdown.

Hillman broke off a couple of solid runs, including a 21-yarder in the first quarter.

Still, the offense just wasn't clicking the same way as it does when McGahee's lining up in the backfield.

"We hope he's OK," Manning said.

Playing way better than 'OK' was Miller, who made things quite uncomfortable for Rivers. The speedy linebacker took over the league lead from Houston defensive lineman J.J. Watt with his three-sack performance. Miller has seven of his 13 sacks in the last three games.

"He's just getting started," said defensive end Elvis Dumervil, who brought down Rivers on the final play of the game. "He's crazy. Crazy day for him."

Miller used some nifty moves to get to Rivers over and over and over again.

Then, the real show began as he showed off his choreographed dance steps.

Miller, the second-overall pick out of Texas A&M last season, joined Reggie White, Jevon Kearse and Dwight Freeney as only the fourth player to record 11 or more sacks in his first two seasons.

His role model, though, is the late Derrick Thomas. Miller wears No. 58 as a tribute to the late Chiefs Hall of Famer and can take over a game just like Thomas used to as well.

"To be even in the same breath with that guy is humbling," Miller said. "It's about wearing '58' and playing in a way he would play."

Miller was constantly in the Chargers backfield, beating anyone they assigned to stop him. Even when Miller wasn't getting to Rivers, the quarterback was still hearing his footsteps.

Take this for instance: Late in the fourth quarter, Miller was chipped by tight end Antonio Gates and completely out of the play. Only, he quickly regained his balance enough to disrupt Rivers, who overthrew his target and into the hands of Broncos safety Jim Leonhard.

Such was the day for Rivers.

Such has been the season for the Chargers, whose postseason chances have grown even bleaker.

"We can't worry about that. We just have to go try and win a game," said Rivers, who threw two TD passes along and two interceptions. "We have to hang our hat on controlling what we can control."

The Chargers jumped out to a 7-0 lead when Manning's pass was batted up in the air and picked off by Weddle, who raced 23 yards for the score. San Diego also intercepted Manning for a score on Oct. 15 as the Chargers raced out to a 24-0 halftime lead.

But Denver scored 35 unanswered points in the second half for a 35-24 win.

This time, there were no big comebacks necessary.

Denver led 30-16 after a field goal by Matt Prater with 4:14 remaining. Danario Alexander hauled in a late 21-yard TD pass but the Chargers couldn't recover the onside kick.

"We aren't the type of team that gives up," receiver Malcom Floyd said. "All we can do is just keep chipping."

The Broncos feel the same way.

In their eyes, they've secured nothing even after winning five straight.

"Having a nice (division) lead, it's comfortable, but we need to get back at it and get better every week," Decker said. "We've got bigger goals ahead of us."

NOTES: Broncos special teams stalwart Omar Bolden suffered a concussion in the first quarter and didn't return. ... LB Nate Irving's block of Mike Scifres' punt was the first for the Broncos since Oct. 7, 2007, against the Chargers. ... Playing in his first game after missing the start of the season due to suspension, Broncos LB D.J. Williams finished with four tackles and one for a loss. "It's been so long since I've been in a live football game, be out there and be able to hit somebody," he said. ... Rex Hadnot replaced LG Tyronne Green (hamstring) in the second quarter and David Molk replaced RG Louis Vasquez, who was shaken up but returned after halftime. ... LB Larry English (leg), Jammer (calf) also got hurt.

# NFL: San Diego Chargers lose hope as Denver Broncos pull away

Associated Press  
November 18, 2012

Four years ago, the San Diego Chargers were three games behind the Denver Broncos with three to play, and they caught the Broncos to win the AFC West.

On Sunday, the Chargers lost 30-23 to the Broncos and dropped to three games behind their rival with six to play. But the Chargers aren't counting on a replay of 2008.

"Of course not," Charges safety Eric Weddle said. "I'm not stupid."

Maybe it's because these Broncos are led by future Hall of Fame quarterback Peyton Manning, but these Chargers believe Denver is playing solitaire in the AFC West now.

"We can't hang our hat on Denver doing anything from a collapsing standpoint," Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers. "They're not losing four out of six, I can guarantee you that."

The Broncos (7-3) have long made a habit of blowing big division leads in November and December, but none of those teams had the dynamite duo of linebacker Von Miller and Manning.

Miller dumped Rivers three times, forcing two fumbles and taking over the NFL sacks lead with 13, and Manning set a franchise season record with his sixth three-touchdown game.

"They've got a great team," Weddle said. "Defense is playing great, you've got edge rushers, you don't have to blitz much, just play coverage. And you've got one of the best quarterbacks in the game playing at a high level. In fact, they're all playing well."

# McGahee leaves game with right knee injury

Associated Press  
November 18, 2012

## **DENVER (AP)**

**Broncos** running back **Willis McGahee** hurt his right knee early in the second quarter when he was tackled by **San Diego** defensive back **Quentin Jammer** on Sunday.

McGahee's return is questionable. He has 55 yards on seven carries, along with one catch for 18 yards.

The 10-year veteran was helped off the field and onto the bench after the hard tackle from Jammer, who was shaken up on the play as well. Jammer is questionable to return after hurting his calf.

San Diego also lost linebacker Larry English for the rest of the game with a leg injury, while the Broncos are without special teams stalwart **Omar Bolden** after he suffered a concussion late in the first quarter.

# Broncos have stranglehold on division

Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

November 18, 2012

DENVER -- Can we see a wild comeback in the AFC West?

Well, yes -- a wild comeback earlier this season is what led to such a drastic separation in the division standings heading into the final six weeks of the season. That one great comeback will likely be enough to put to rest any drama in the division race this season.

Heading into Thanksgiving, there is very little intrigue in this division. It is Denver's to lose. The Broncos put a stranglehold on their second straight division title Sunday with a 30-23 win over the visiting San Diego Chargers in a game the Broncos controlled much more than the scoreboard indicated.

It was the fifth straight victory for Denver, which is now 7-3. San Diego is in second place, but it is 4-6 after losing its fifth game in the past six. Denver essentially has a four-game lead with six weeks left in the season because it swept San Diego and owns the tiebreaker.

The Broncos can clinch the division title as soon as Dec. 2. While Denver has seven wins, the three other teams in the division have a combined eight wins.

Still, Denver is not taking anything for granted. It knows firsthand (albeit under different administrations) that big leads can be blown. Denver had a three-game lead with three games to go in 2008 and blew the division. The team was 6-0 in 2009 before finishing 8-8 and out of the playoffs. The Broncos have talked about those blown leads often in the past couple of weeks. It will continue to be a topic until the division is officially clinched. Denver coach John Fox was not celebrating Sunday.

"In this league, you are two weeks from a disaster," Fox said.

Fox's tack is predictable and understandable. NFL teams can't take their foot off the pedal, and they never know what the future has in store.

But this can't be denied: Denver is, by far, the superior team in the division. It is playing at a high level and no one is showing signs of being able to do anything about it. The Chargers are out of sync on offense and quarterback Philip Rivers is

just making too many mistakes to allow the team to play winning football. Oakland is 3-7 and has allowed 135 points in the past three weeks and the Chiefs are 1-9 and leading the race for the No. 1 pick in the draft.

This is Denver's division to lose barring an unforeseen comeback. But, of course, it was a miracle comeback that spurred Denver's season and put the Chargers in a tailspin.

On "Monday Night Football" in October, everything in the AFC West changed when the Broncos turned a 24-0 halftime deficit into a 35-24 win at San Diego. The Chargers were 3-2 and the Broncos were 2-3 going into the game. Had San Diego not allowed one of the greatest comebacks in NFL history, it would have been in control of the division. Instead, the Broncos left San Diego that night tied for first place.

Neither team has been the same since.

Since halftime of Week 6, Denver has outscored its opponents 166-74. The Broncos are playing at a high level in every phase of the game. They look like a team that is preparing for a long January run.

Denver quarterback Peyton Manning (who threw for another 270 yards and three touchdowns Sunday) is playing at an MVP level, and second-year linebacker Von Miller is becoming a serious NFL Defensive Player of the Year candidate. He had three sacks and two forced fumbles Sunday and has 13 sacks on the season. The Broncos' defense, which has made impressive progress in the past month, forced San Diego to miss its first 12 third-down attempts. The Broncos had a streak in which it held opponents to 0-for-26 on third downs over a span of three games.

"Denver is an outstanding football team," San Diego coach Norv Turner said. "[It is] probably as complete a team as we've played in terms of all three phases."

While Denver is clicking, Turner's team is clinging to faint playoff hopes and thus, Turner is clinging to faint hopes of keeping his job. The problem is not San Diego's defense. It is playing well. Offensively, though, the team is out of sorts. The Chargers had two first downs in the first half, and the only reason the Chargers were in the game was the defense scored the team's first nine points.

Rivers threw two interceptions and lost a fumble. He has committed 43 turnovers since the start of last season, which leads the NFL. He had two other fumbles that San Diego recovered.

In fairness to Rivers, his offensive line is in shambles and his skill position players did little to help. But that's what happens when a team falls out of the race. Players don't respond. Nearly every player on the Denver roster is responding, which is another reason the AFC West is all but won.

# Rapid Reaction: Broncos 30, Chargers 23

Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

November 18, 2012

DENVER -- A few thoughts from the Denver Broncos 30-23 win over the San Diego Chargers.

**What it means:** The AFC West race is very close to being over. The Broncos (7-3) have won five straight games while the second-place Chargers (4-6) have lost five of the past six. Denver essentially has a four-game lead with six games to go because of a season sweep and the tiebreaker over the Chargers. Wacky things would have to happen for Denver not to win its second straight AFC West title.

**Manning milestones:** Denver quarterback Peyton Manning reached two career milestones Sunday. With his 148th career win he surpassed his boss, John Elway, for the second most wins by a quarterback in NFL history. Manning also threw three touchdown passes Sunday and now has 423 for his career. He entered the day tied with Dan Marino in second place for the most career touchdown passes in NFL history.

**Miller magic:** Denver second-year linebacker Von Miller had three sacks and forced two fumbles. He is a serious NFL Defensive Player of the Year threat. He was the Defensive Rookie of the Year last year. Miller has 13 sacks this season and 24.5 sacks in his career.

**San Diego's offense struggled:** The Chargers had two first downs in the first half and went 3-for-16 on third down for the game. They failed on their first 11 attempts on third down. Spanning three games, Denver's defense forced opponents to go 0-for-26 on third downs.

**Rivers' turnovers continue:** San Diego quarterback Philip Rivers threw two interceptions and lost a fumble. He has committed 43 turnovers since the start of the 2011 season. It leads the NFL.

**Key injuries:** Several players were banged up on both sides. Denver running back Willis McGahee (knee), San Diego cornerback Quentin Jammer (calf) and San Diego linebacker Larry English (knee) all came out of the game. There is no initial word on how serious the injuries are.

**San Diego's defense is not the problem:** The Chargers' first nine points were scored by their defense, and the unit has played well for much of the season.

**What's next:** Denver visits the Kansas City Chiefs (1-9) and the Chargers host the Baltimore Ravens.

# Halftime: Denver 17, San Diego 7

Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

November 18, 2012

DENVER -- Halftime thoughts from where the Denver Broncos lead the San Diego Chargers, 17-7.

- Last month, the Broncos scored the final 35 points to beat the Chargers 35-24. The Chargers led 7-0 but the Broncos scored the rest of the points of the half.
- Denver's offense started slow, but it has started to pick it up, while its defense has been terrific and San Diego's offense has been anemic. San Diego has two first downs and is just 0-for-7 on third down.
- Quarterback Peyton Manning is now in second place on the NFL's all-time passing list with 421 touchdown passes. He was tied with Dan Marino but pushed past Marino when he threw a touchdown pass to Demaryius Thomas in the corner of the end zone. It was originally ruled incomplete, but Denver challenged the call and won.
- San Diego's score came on a deflected pass that was brought back for a short interception return for a score by safety Eric Weddle, who always seems to be in the right place at the right time. That's a skill.
- The Chargers had a punt blocked for the second straight game. It was Denver's first blocked punt in five years. The last time was against San Diego as well.
- Broncos' running back Willis McGahee is questionable to return with a knee injury. Chargers' cornerback Quentin Jammer (calf) is questionable to return, and linebacker Larry English (leg) is out.
- Denver linebacker D.J. Williams has played some. His nine-game NFL suspension ended last week.
- San Diego's first-round pick, linebacker Melvin Ingram, is having a nice game.

# Good injury news for Chargers, Broncos

ESPN.com

November 18, 2012

DENVER -- The Denver Broncos and San Diego Chargers both got good injury news Sunday.

San Diego starting running back Ryan Mathews is active. So is standout Denver pass-rusher Elvis Dumervil. They were both questionable. Mathews had a neck injury and Dumervil had a shoulder injury.

As expected, undrafted rookie Mike Harris will make his sixth start of the season for the injured Jared Gaither.

In other AFC West news:

Oakland safety Tyvon Branch is inactive with a neck injury against the pass-happy Saints. Mike Mitchell will take Branch's place.

CBSsports.com reports part of the reason why Stanford Routt was released this month in Kansas City was because he missed curfew in San Diego on Oct. 31. The report indicated Routt missed curfew to check on his fiancée who recently underwent surgery. Routt has not been signed elsewhere since being cut Nov. 5

# John Elway talks Peyton Manning, success

Lynn Hoppes

ESPN.com

November 18, 2012

John Elway, executive vice president of football operations for the Denver Broncos, knew it was the right move to sign Peyton Manning -- even though he was coming off a serious neck injury -- to a five-year contract worth \$96 million in March.

With a four-game winning streak and a matchup today against rival San Diego, Elway repeated the line used in his TV commercial for Dove.

"It's working out well. So far, so good," Elway said. "The Broncos really do make me comfortable in my own skin."

Elway said Manning's best characteristic is that he always stays positive.

"That is his biggest strength. He doesn't let the negative things weight him down," Elway said. "He moves past them. The most important thing is to forgive oneself and move on."

And that's what the Broncos have been doing this season. Even games when Manning throws an interception or the team is down double-digits, Denver remains positive it can come back and compete.

"It's the same things I tell my kids. If you do the right thing, you don't have to worry about anything else," Elway said. "As long as you give 110 percent, you're going to be successful most of the time. Do not be afraid to fail."

# Week 11 Judgements: Broncos' dominant defense big reason for recent surge

Clark Judge  
CBSSports.com  
November 19, 2012

DENVER -- For all the attention Denver gets because of quarterback Peyton Manning -- and rightly so -- it's about time someone notices what's happening with the Broncos' defense. And what's happening is that it's shutting down opponent after opponent, with three of its last six victories over opponents who couldn't score more than 14 points. One of them was New Orleans, and you see what the Saints have done since Denver buried them.

"I think we woke them up," said Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey. So do I. But somebody should wake up to a Denver defense that stuffed San Diego on 11 of its first 12 third downs Sunday, held the Chargers to 54 first-half yards and forced eight Mike Scifres' punts -- *in one half*.

"I think it's the best Denver defense I've seen since I've been playing," quarterback Philip Rivers said afterward. "I don't know, just coming off the field I'd say it's as good a group as they've had because they can rush you with four down linemen, can play coverage and mix pressure."

Rivers should know. He was sacked four times and intercepted twice. He also fumbled three times, with one of them lost, and get used to it. But the Broncos can do that to you. This is a defense that had a run of 26 consecutive third-down stops ended Sunday when the Chargers finally hit after 11 misses in a row. That streak, which includes the past three games, is the longest in the NFL in 10 years and merely another reason to put the Broncos at or near the top of the AFC.

**2. Those three sacks do more than push Denver's Von Miller to 13 for the season; they have him in the race for Defensive Player of the Year with J.J. Watt and Charles Tillman ... and the gap is closing.**

**3. I don't know, but I think the Matt Ryan MVP campaign just got put on hold. Make Peyton Manning the frontrunner now.**

**4. Just a hunch, but if Dallas lost to Cleveland the Cowboys might've locked Jerry Jones AND Jason Garrett out of the locker room.**

**5. OK, Dallas fans, so you have to like the comeback of your Cowboys. But keep a couple of things in mind: 1) It was Cleveland, and 2) it was Cleveland without Joe Haden, its best defensive player.**

**6.** That makes it 43 turnovers for Philip Rivers since the start of last season, and when you canvas the Denver locker room there's a feeling is that he's missing the playmakers ... and the offensive line ... necessary to have the impact he and the Chargers had in past seasons. It's not just that the Chargers lost people like LaDainian Tomlinson, Michael Turner, Darren Sproles and Vincent Jackson as targets; they subtracted key offensive linemen like Kris Dielman and Marcus McNeill, too. In fact, on Sunday, Rivers had to operate a handful of series without both of his starting guards, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out what happens if the line springs leaks: Rivers isn't as good, and neither are the Chargers.

**7.** When they talk about the Black Hole in Oakland, I think they're referring to the middle of the Raiders' defense. It's gawd awful, with the Raiders hemorrhaging 135 points the past three games, an average of 45 per.

**8.** So Chad Henne didn't win. He threw for four touchdowns against the league's second-ranked defense and looked so good that Jacksonville should have serious reservations about Blaine Gabbert ... if it doesn't already. Henne's not exactly Tom Brady, but at least the Jaguars have a pulse with the guy -- which is more than I can say for Gabbert.

**9.** Since starting 5-0 last season, Detroit is 9-13, including the playoffs. Say good night, folks.

**10.** There is no way to underscore the importance of Baltimore's victory. The Ravens not only move two games up on Pittsburgh in the AFC North; they draw the Steelers next at home, where the Ravens won their past 15 and 23 of the past 24 regular-season starts. That's critical for a club whose only losses have been on the road and that still must face Denver and the New York Giants.

**11.** If I'm Chicago, I'm nervous. That image in the Bears' rear view mirror might be larger than it appears ... and it's the Green Bay Packers, winners of five straight and six of their past seven. It's also the Green Bay Packers, winners of seven of their past eight vs. Chicago.

**12.** Finally, the New Orleans Saints are back to .500, and, yep, they look like a playoff threat. But the next five weeks will tell us more: In order, they have San Francisco at home, Atlanta and the Giants on the road, Tampa Bay at home and Dallas on the road. That's a schedule of opponents that are a combined 32-16-1, and it's a litmus test for New Orleans.

**13.** If I'm Andy Reid, I take next year off. After 14 years in Philadelphia, the guy deserves a break. So, if I were Reid, I'd get away, try to relax and regenerate my battery. The guy has been through a ton of hardship this year, and the year's not over. When it is, I just wish he'd walk away and take care of himself for a change.

**14.** I hope that satisfies the Michael Vick bashers. The Eagles just stink, period.

**15.** Shame on the New York Giants if they don't win the NFC East. There's nobody there with a winning record, and, yeah, I know, Dallas plays four of its next five at home. So what? The Cowboys were lucky to beat Cleveland.

**16.** Once upon a time, Romeo Crennel and Charlie Weis were the coordinators on the NFL's best team, the New England Patriots. Now, each is in the first year of a head-coaching job and having ... ahem, less than scintillating results. Weis has lost his past 10. Crennel has lost his past seven. Combined the two are 2-19. Not a good year for the Belichick Tree.

**17.** Now you know why Tampa Bay paid the big bucks for Vincent Jackson. There is no way the Bucs go 80 yards in 50 seconds for a game-tying touchdown without the guy. Jackson makes Josh Freeman better, and Freeman never looked more accurate than on that game-tying drive when he completed three passes of 17 or more yards each -- including a 24-yard strike to Jackson. It was Jackson's sixth TD in his past seven starts.

**18.** The more I see USC's Matt Barkley, the more I like Oklahoma's Landry Jones.

**19.** Houston cornerback Johnathan Joseph says the Texans' defensive lapses are "things that can be fixed." Geez, I hope so. It's Jacksonville that put up 37 on you guys, for crying out loud. If you can't solve Chad Henne, good luck holding off Tom Brady ... and Peyton Manning ... and Joe Flacco. I think you get the idea.

**20.** Trust me, that Jets' victory *was* personal. For the Jets, losing to former offensive coordinator Brian Schottenheimer would've been a colossal setback for a team in disarray. Schottenheimer was ousted after last season, and his replacement -- Tony Sparano -- hasn't exactly covered himself in glory since. The last thing the Jets wanted to hear about was another mistake ... and they won't. Congratulations, guys, you dodged a bullet -- even if it's only until Thanksgiving, when the Jets play host to New England. Yeah, I know, when is a holiday not a holiday? When the Patriots come to town.

## **FIVE THINGS I LIKE**

**1. The competition for Defensive Rookie of the Year.** The field is loaded, with Chandler Jones, Bruce Irvin and Luke Kuechly among the candidates. But Green Bay's Casey Hayward could be the frontrunner, especially after making his team-best fifth interception Sunday. That's nearly half the team total (12).

**2. RG3 vs. Philadelphia.** Not only did he produce a perfect passer rating (158.3); he missed only one of 15 passes for a 93.3 completion percentage and had four touchdowns. It was the best percentage for a quarterback with four TDs since Steve Young did it in 1994.

**3. Fast finishes.** There were four more games Sunday where the winning points were scored in the last two minutes of the fourth quarter or in overtime. That makes 36 for the season, and that makes for must-see viewing.

**4. Jacoby Jones.** Talk about one of the year's most underrated moves. Getting Jones gave the Baltimore Ravens another weapon, with Jones producing his third touchdown off a return Sunday night. At some point, people are just going to stop kicking to the guy.

**5. Justin Blackmon with Chad Henne as his quarterback.** The Jaguars' first-round draft pick basically did nothing with Blaine Gabbert in the lineup. Then Gabbert bows out, Henne steps in and you saw what happened. Blackmon had 236 yards in catches -- or 14 fewer than he had the previous nine games. He also doubled his touchdowns to two.

## **FIVE THINGS I DON'T**

**1. Rob Gronkowski's injury.** A fractured forearm will keep him sidelined an estimated 4-6 weeks, and that's brutal for a team already operating without tight end Aaron Hernandez. Aside from Tom Brady, Gronkowski is the most potent weapon on the league's most potent offense, and losing him could jeopardize upcoming games vs. Houston (Dec. 10) and San Francisco (Dec. 16). Both are at Gillette Stadium. That means it could also jeopardize New England's bid for a first-round bye.

**2. Mason Crosby's accuracy.** He's 1 for 5 on field goals of 50 or more yards. Worse, he missed the same kick twice at the end of the first half Sunday. That was a 50-yarder that missed ... only Detroit's Jim Schwartz called a timeout just before Crosby swung into action. So he kicked again ... and missed again. Green Bay coach Mike McCarthy swears he has faith in the guy, but tell me he's not on a short leash. He should be. Green Bay entered Sunday's game with the league's worst field-goal percentage.

**3. Carson Palmer's accuracy.** The Raiders wanted touchdowns when they made the deal for Palmer, and the Raiders are getting them ... from opponents. In 19 games with the Raiders, Palmer has thrown five pick-sixes. The Raiders threw none from 2006-10.

**4. Patriots' "fans" booing Indianapolis kicker Adam Vinatieri.** You gotta be kidding. All the guy did was deliver three Super Bowls for the Patriots, plus make what might be the greatest field goal ever (2001 AFC playoffs vs. Oakland). And this is his reward? Please.

**5. Brett Keisel's timing.** The Steelers' defensive end jumps offside on third-and-7 with 2:04 left, costing the Steelers not only five yards but a lot of time. The clock wound down to the two-minute warning and gave Baltimore another third down -- meaning another 45 seconds, which turned out to be fatal.

## **FIVE GUYS WHO HAVE SOME 'SPLAINING TO DO**

**1.** Philadelphia defensive coordinator Todd Bowles. The Eagles haven't been just bad since he took over a month ago; they've been dreadful, never allowing fewer

than 28 points a game. In their first five games under Juan Castillo the Eagles never allowed more than 27, and mark down that change as the beginning of the end for the 2012 Eagles.

**2.** Cleveland defensive back Sheldon Brown. It was his 35-yard pass-interference penalty that set up Dallas' game-tying field goal to send a game Cleveland should've won into OT. It was also the Browns' second penalty of a series that started with 1:07 left. Bad things happen to bad teams, and the Browns are one of the worst.

**3.** San Diego coach Norv Turner. What was with that first-half game plan? I mean, 54 yards, two first downs and 0 for 8 on third downs? "The biggest issue is that we flip-flopped," he said. "You guys [reporters] have been talking about how much we move the ball in the first half and not as much in the second half. I think [it was] the culmination of three things: We were not able to get the run going, we had a tough time protecting and they covered us down the field." Explain that to president Dean Spanos, Norv.

**4.** Dallas defensive coordinator Rex Ryan. On Cleveland's go-ahead touchdown late in the fourth quarter, Ryan had to run two defenders on the field right before the snap -- one reason the Cowboys were out of position for Ben Watson's 17-yard touchdown catch. That's not supposed to happen, and it's definitely not supposed to happen with Ryan.

**5.** St. Louis coach Jeff Fisher. His Rams score with just under six minutes left to narrow the margin to 27-13, then go for ... two points? Huh? What's up with that? I mean, let's say they convert. That makes it 27-15. So what? It's still a two-score game. Sorry, someone's got to explain that one to me.

### **JUST ASKING BUT ...**

- Charlie Batch or Byron Leftwich?
- When does Philadelphia win another game?
- Who quarterbacks Arizona next week?
- Where does Michael Vick play next year?
- Who has the better shot to make the playoffs -- Seattle, New Orleans or Tampa Bay?

### **NUMBERS TO REMEMBER**

**3** -- Consecutive years with 10 Rob Gronkowski TD catches

**5** -- Interceptions of Matt Ryan

**12** -- Consecutive Baltimore wins in the AFC North

**31-4** -- Matt Ryan's career record at home  
**42** -- Philip Rivers turnovers since last season  
**46** -- Consecutive games with at least 20 Drew Brees completions  
**51** -- 300-yard passing games for Tom Brady  
**509** -- Yards catching by Andre Johnson and Justin Blackmon ... in the same game.  
**527** -- Matt Schaub yards passing  
**1995** -- Last time a rookie quarterback won in Foxborough (Kerry Collins)  
**2002** -- Last time New England had two interception returns for touchdowns in one game

### **MY TOP FIVE**

- 1.** Houston
- 2.** Atlanta
- 3.** Chicago
- 4.** Green Bay
- 5.** Baltimore

### **MY BOTTOM FIVE**

- 32.** Kansas City
- 31.** Jacksonville
- 30.** Cleveland
- 29.** Oakland
- 28.** Carolina

### **NEXT WEEKEND'S THREE BEST GAMES**

**Atlanta at Tampa Bay** ... This is what's known as a reality check, Tampa.

**San Francisco at New Orleans** ... Now we find out just how legit a playoff threat the Saints are.

**Green Bay at N.Y. Giants** ... Time for Eli Manning to prove Phil Simms wrong.

# Recap: Denver vs. San Diego

The Sports Network  
November 18, 2012

Peyton Manning threw for 270 yards and three touchdowns to lead the Denver Broncos to a 30-23 decision over the San Diego Chargers in an AFC West matchup.

Manning finished with 25-of-42 efficiency and an interception returned for a score by Eric Weddle for the Broncos (7-3), who have won five consecutive outings.

"There are no easy wins," Manning said. "We'll take the victory and run with it, and certainly we're always trying to get better."

Brandon Stokley totaled four receptions for 55 yards and one touchdown, Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker added TD catches, and Willis McGahee ended with 55 yards on seven carries.

Philip Rivers went 24-of-40 for 258 yards, two TDs to Danario Alexander and as many interceptions for the Chargers (4-6), who slid to their fifth defeat in their last six.

"Denver is an outstanding football team. They are as probably a complete a team as we've played in terms of all three phases," Chargers coach Norv Turner said. "We just didn't make enough plays offensively to find a way to win the game."

Alexander ended up with 96 yards on seven receptions, Malcom Floyd added four grabs for 67 yards to counteract a 47-yard, 15-carry performance from Ryan Mathews.

Matt Prater split the uprights from 32 yards away -- his third field goal of the contest -- with 4:14 left in regulation to give Denver a 30-16 edge, but San Diego narrowed its gap with 1:24 on the clock.

Alexander barely crossed the plane of the goal line before losing the ball while falling into the end zone. A lengthy review upheld the call on the field, which resulted in a 21-yard touchdown, despite replay indicating a knee might have been down before the ball crossed the plane.

The Broncos recovered the onside kick but went three-and-out. The Chargers gained possession at their own 13-yard line with 23 ticks left, but had no timeouts remaining. Rivers was sacked on the final play, which followed a short completion.

Manning encountered bad luck on Denver's second possession of the contest, as he threw right into the hands of Weddle, who ran 23 yards to the end zone.

Prater missed from 55 yards out on the following series, but Manning atoned for his earlier mistake with two minutes played in the second quarter, connecting with Thomas from 13 yards away to even the score. Originally ruled out of bounds, the hosts successfully challenged the call for a 7-7 game.

Wesley Woodyard then picked off Rivers and returned to the San Diego 8-yard line, and Prater hit from 19 yards away.

On the first play after the two-minute warning, Nate Irving blocked a Mike Scifres punt, and the hosts were set up on their foes' 31-yard line. On the next down, Manning hit Stokley in the end zone to make it 17-7.

After San Diego's first drive of the second half proved fruitless, a punt backed the Broncos within the shadow of their goal line. Shaun Phillips sacked Manning for a safety, but Rivers was sacked, lost the football and the hosts recovered on the Chargers' 25. Decker hauled in a 20-yard Manning heave and it was 24-9 Denver.

Rivers responded on the next series, hitting Alexander for an 8-yard score and cutting his team's deficit to eight.

Prater capped a Broncos' 67-yard, 10-play drive with a 30-yard field goal and 27-16 score with 10:43 remaining.

# Week 11 winners/losers: Peyton Manning, Tom Brady on collision course for playoff meeting

Jason Cole

Yahoo!

November 18, 2012

With the Denver Broncos putting some more nails in the coffin of the San Diego Chargers and coach Norv Turner on Sunday, there is one interesting issue to consider in the AFC playoff picture:

Will Peyton Manning and Tom Brady face off in the playoffs one more time?

Although the Baltimore Ravens still have something of an edge in the battle for the No. 2 spot in the AFC, it's going to be tough for them to hold on to that spot for the remainder of the season because of their remaining schedule. By contrast, the New England Patriots and Denver – both 7-3 after victories Sunday – each has only two games remaining against teams with winning records.

In short, it's not hard to paint a scenario in which Manning and Brady will be battling for the No. 2 and 3 seeds (New England has the upper hand having defeated Denver earlier this season). More important, it's a chance for two of the most dominant quarterbacks in NFL history to meet for the 14th time in their careers, but the first time in the playoffs since the AFC championship game in the 2006 season – eventually leading to Manning's only Super Bowl title. Brady owns a lead of 9-4 in the season, including 2-1 in the playoffs.

While some fans may be tired of the idea of Manning vs. Brady, football purists will never tire of it. With Manning having a Comeback Player of the Year-type season, a potential playoff matchup becomes that much more compelling when you consider that it seemed like a remote possibility going into the season.

In other words, savor the chance that they play again.

Here are the winners and losers for Week 11:

## Winners

- Give the New York Jets credit. In a week when the team appeared to be coming apart at the seams (there was the mess with backup quarterback Tim Tebow being called "terrible" and owner Woody Johnson reportedly meeting with GM Mike Tannenbaum and coach Rex Ryan on Tuesday), the Jets managed to get it together on Sunday. The win at St. Louis was surprisingly lopsided. More important, it came

after some early troubles, including the Rams going up 7-0 and the Jets having a field goal blocked.

- It appears that St. Louis rookie cornerback Janoris Jenkins took his one-game penalty for missing curfew very seriously. In the first half against the Jets, Jenkins deflected a third-down pass to force a punt, tackled Jets running back Shonn Green after a 1-yard gain on a first-down play inside the St. Louis 20-yard line and then blocked the aforementioned field goal attempt after the Rams held the Jets without a first down on that possession. Good stuff.

- Despite the overtime loss to the Houston Texans, congrats to Jacksonville Jaguars rookie wide receiver Justin Blackmon and backup quarterback Chad Henne. Blackmon came up with the first truly big play and game of his otherwise disappointing season when he broke away for an 81-yard fourth-quarter touchdown off a throw from Henne. That was the signature play of a seven-catch, 236-yard performance for Blackmon, who came into the game with 26 catches for 250 yards and one touchdown. While this was clearly borne of some bad tackling by Houston, it was a perfect example of what Blackmon should be, a better version of Baltimore's Anquan Boldin. Blackmon, who has been visibly out of shape all season, has the ability to move like a running back with the ball when he's at his best. As for Henne, he had a career-high four touchdown passes. That included a 67-yard scoring toss to second-year wide receiver Cecil Shorts, a fourth-round pick from 2011 who is actually the best receiver on the Jaguars' roster.

- In the 20-year history of NFL free agency, there have been very few players who have changed teams in a big-money deal and had it pay off (Reggie White, Deion Sanders and Bryce Paup are among a handful). However, wide receiver Vincent Jackson is already paying off in a big way for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers after signing his five-year, \$55.55 million deal. On Sunday, Jackson caught six passes for 94 yards, but his value continued to skyrocket with the victory over the Carolina Panthers. Jackson caught a 24-yard touchdown pass and a two-point conversion to force overtime as the Buccaneers came back to win their fourth in a row and cement their position in the playoff race under first-year head coach Greg Schiano.

- The Atlanta Falcons improved to 9-1 with a very ugly win over the Arizona Cardinals. The Falcons were down 13-0 after the first quarter as quarterback Matt Ryan struggled with three interceptions. However, Atlanta has become one of the best teams in the league at bouncing back after a regular-season loss under fifth-year head coach Mike Smith. The Falcons are now 16-3 in the next game after suffering a loss under him. In fact, the only time they have lost back-to-back games under Smith was in 2009, when Ryan struggled much of the season with injuries. Ryan finished with five interceptions and no TD passes, becoming the first QB since 2007 to do so in a victory.

- Despite the overtime loss to the Dallas Cowboys, give Cleveland quarterback Brandon Weeden credit for some impressive work on the road. Weeden came up with two sweet touchdown passes to tight end Ben Watson. Both throws were into tight spots against pretty good coverage by the Cowboys. Now, if Weeden had just

hit one of two earlier fade routes in the game, the outcome might have been different.

- If Green Bay Packers general manager Ted Thompson drafts a wide receiver in the second round, you can pretty much bank on that guy becoming an impact player. In addition to Greg Jennings and Jordy Nelson, Thompson can add Randall Cobb to that list. Cobb continues to impress in the absence of Jennings. On Sunday, he caught the game-winning touchdown in the fourth quarter and now has 54 catches for 574 yards and seven touchdowns this season. Beyond that, the second-year receiver is an excellent return man and has been used occasionally as a running back. On Sunday against Detroit, Cobb converted a third-and-2 run and finished with two carries for 19 yards. For the season, he has eight carries for 115 yards.
- Congrats to cornerback Aqib Talib, who opened his (likely brief) career with the New England Patriots by returning an interception for a touchdown in the lopsided victory against the Indianapolis Colts. The Pats hope it's an indicator of things to come. If Talib can play up to his talents, the Pats' secondary can improve to reasonable.

## **Losers**

- It wasn't all bad for Andrew Luck this weekend as his Colts got a dose of reality in New England. On Saturday, Luck enjoyed Stanford's upset of No. 1-ranked Oregon. However, Sunday was for lesson-learning as he had four turnovers, including two interceptions that were returned for touchdowns. Luck often left the ball too high on deep throws in each of his past two games. That's what happened on the aforementioned interception by Aqib Talib, who returned it 59 yards.
- Is this really what Dallas owner Jerry Jones pays all that money for? The Cowboys improved to 5-5 but that was about as ugly a victory as you could imagine – and it required the help of penalties for the game-tying field goal in regulation. The Browns committed 50 yards in penalties on the drive (the unnecessary roughness call when wide receiver Kevin Ogletree was hit was debatable, but not outrageous). The fact that the Browns were playing without their best player (cornerback Joe Haden) is telling. If the Cowboys expect to become something more than a mentally-weak, inconsistent squad, they can't allow games like this to be close.
- The meltdown in Arizona continued, but don't expect it to cost coach Ken Whisenhunt his job. The Bidwill family, which owns the team, is highly unlikely to fire a coach it has to pay off. Still, do people around the league think Whisenhunt did the right thing against the Atlanta Falcons when he pulled starting quarterback John Skelton after he completed only two of his first seven passes for six yards? Conventional thinking says if you have a lead like the 13-0 margin Arizona enjoyed early on Sunday, give a guy some rope. Instead, Whisenhunt put in rookie Ryan Lindley, a raw prospect who proceeded to play like it as the Cardinals scored only six points the rest of the way despite getting six turnovers (five interceptions and a

fumble). This should have been a lock to win. A big reason is that Lindley had a fumble returned for a score in the second quarter.

- The interception woes are again catching up with San Diego Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers. He had two more in the loss to the Denver Broncos and has 14 for the season, including nine in his past five games. That's a big reason why the Chargers have lost five of their past six after starting the season 3-1. Ultimately, his struggles play a strong role in the likely firing of coach Norv Turner and GM A.J. Smith. However, Rivers, who has been a big fan of Turner and even advocated for keeping the coach last season, isn't likely to go anywhere.
- Browns president Mike Holmgren is a classy guy and a great coach, one of only five men to take two different teams to Super Bowls as a head coach. However, his fawning of Cowboys owner Jerry Jones was silly on Sunday before the Cowboys-Browns game. As longtime Browns beat writer Tony Grossi noted, it was the first time Holmgren – who has already been linked to a potential Cowboys opening – has been on the field before a Browns game this season. What a coincidence.
- Oh, Oakland Raiders fans, I hate to do this to you ... well, except for those of you who drop f-bombs via electronic communication at the drop of a hat ... but here goes: In the past three games, the Raiders have allowed a total of 135 points. That's an average of 45 per game. In that time, the Raiders have faced more backup quarterbacks in garbage time (two, Chase Daniel of New Orleans and Tyrod Taylor of Baltimore) than they have interceptions (one).
- The Philadelphia Eagles. ... Enough said.
- Finally, to Jets linebacker Bart Scott: grow up. You used to be a good dude before copping a lame attitude. Don't be one of those guys who completely humiliates yourself at the end of your career.
- So much for kicking off the Nick Foles era in Philadelphia. Not that this was the poor lad's fault (although that haircut is on him), but he completed only 21 of 46 passes for 204 yards. He was sacked four times, reinforcing the notion that the problem with the Eagles is not with the quarterback. He also fumbled three times (all three were recovered by the Eagles) and was picked off twice. Although Michael Vick truly does have a serious concussion issue, this may force some of the Eagles assistant coaches to rethink their position on Foles starting the rest of the season.
- Speaking of Eagles assistants, the decision to fire defensive coordinator Juan Castillo continues to look like lunacy for Philly coach Andy Reid. In six games with Castillo as defensive coordinator, the Eagles were 3-3 and had given up 125 points. In the four since he was fired, the team is 0-4 and has given up 127 points.

# Broncos 30, Chargers 23

Dennis Georgatos  
The Sports Xchange  
November 18, 2012

DENVER -- Peyton Manning kept the Denver Broncos on a roll, throwing for three touchdowns in a 30-23 victory over the San Diego Chargers on Sunday.

The Broncos completed the first series sweep of their AFC West rival in seven years.

It was the fifth win in a row for the division-leading Broncos (7-3), who began their streak when they roared back from a 24-0 halftime deficit to beat the Chargers 35-24 at San Diego on Oct. 15.

Sunday's loss was the latest damaging blow for San Diego (4-6). With the Chargers' playoff hopes fading, questions are swirling around the future of coach Norv Turner.

Philip Rivers fought through a tough day, failing to convert a third down until the second half and taking four sacks while throwing two interceptions and fumbling three times, losing one. He finished 24 of 40 for 258 yards and two touchdowns, both to Danario Alexander, including a 21-yarder with 1:24 remaining.

The Chargers tried an onside kick, but Virgil Green recovered for Denver. After the Broncos were forced to punt, San Diego got the ball back on its 13-yard line with 23 seconds remaining. Elvis Dumervil had a second-down sack of Rivers, and time ran out.

Manning completed 25 of 42 passes for 270 yards. He increased his career touchdown-pass total to 423, giving him sole possession of second place on the all-time list. He also moved into a tie for second place all time with Hall of Famer and current Broncos executive John Elway with his 148th regular-season victory.

Von Miller increased his season sack total to a career-high 13 with three more on Sunday, twice forcing fumbles, including one that set up a touchdown. He led a strong defensive effort by the Broncos that saw them deny San Diego's first 12 third-down attempts, stretching their streak to 26 in a row spanning the past three games before Chargers finally converted one.

Denver also got a lift from the return of linebacker D.J. Williams, who served NFL-imposed suspensions for the first nine games of the season for violating the league's policy on performance-enhancing drugs and for an alcohol-related arrest.

Williams, who resumed practicing with the team this week, had a couple of key tackles, including a tackle for loss of Ryan Mathews to help Denver register a stop after the Chargers recovered an onside kick to open the second half.

Backed up near their own end zone after a San Diego punt, the Broncos gave up a safety when linebacker Shaun Phillips sacked Manning in the end zone, pulling the Chargers to within 17-9 with 12:48 left in the third quarter.

Miller had a hand in stalling San Diego's momentum, swooping in on a bull rush to sack Rivers and knock the ball loose. Linebacker Wesley Woodyard scooped up the fumble and returned it 12 yards to the San Diego 25-yard line, leading to Manning's third touchdown pass of the day, a 20-yarder to Eric Decker.

Rivers regrouped to lead a long touchdown drive that ended in an 8-yard scoring pass to Alexander.

Denver regained a double-digit advantage when Matt Prater kicked the second of his three field goals, a 30-yarder with 10:43 left in the fourth quarter.

San Diego struck first, with safety Eric Weddle intercepting a deflected Manning pass and returning it 23 yards for a touchdown. Denver ran off the next 17 points, including a second Manning touchdown pass following a block of a San Diego punt, to go in front 17-7 at halftime.

Catching San Diego's secondary flat-footed after a play-fake to running back Ronnie Hillman, Manning hit a wide-open Brandon Stokley for a 31-yard touchdown on the first play after linebacker Nate Irving broke through to block Mike Scifres' punt.

Denver moved in front for the first time with an assist from Woodyard, who intercepted a Rivers pass and returned it 25 yards to the San Diego 8-yard line. The Broncos netted 7 yards in three plays, settling for a 19-yard field goal by Prater that gave them a 10-7 lead with 11:33 remaining in the second quarter.

The Broncos tied it up at 7 on Manning's 13-yard touchdown pass to Demaryius Thomas. The receiver was initially ruled out of bounds, but the call was challenged by Denver coach John Fox. A replay review showed that Thomas got both feet down before going out of bounds in the end zone for the score.

The reversal gave Manning his 421st career touchdown pass, moving him ahead of Dan Marino for second on the all-time list. He trails only Brett Favre, who threw 508 touchdown passes.

NOTES: Broncos rookie defensive back Omar Bolden suffered a concussion in the first quarter and was held out for the remainder of the game. ... Denver running back Willis McGahee did not return after going out with a knee injury in the second

quarter. ... San Diego linebacker Larry English suffered a leg injury in the second quarter and did not return. ... Irving's punt block was the first for Denver since Tony Scheffler blocked one, also against San Diego, on Oct. 7, 2007. ... The Chargers have two wins in their past eight games, both against Kansas City.

# Manning, Broncos complete sweep of Chargers

Dennis Georgatos  
The Sports Xchange  
November 18, 2012

DENVER -- Peyton Manning got some help from his defense in shrugging off an early mistake.

Manning overcame a first-quarter interception that was returned for a score to throw for three touchdowns, and the Denver Broncos beat the San Diego Chargers 30-23 Sunday to complete the first series sweep of their AFC West rival in seven years.

"Certainly our defense created some turnovers, created good field position, and my hat's off to them," Manning said. "All those guys played great. I can't say enough about how well they played and how well they have been playing."

Von Miller especially. He increased his season sack total to a league-leading and career-high 13 with three more on Sunday, twice forcing fumbles by Philip Rivers, including one that set up a touchdown. Miller led a strong defensive effort that saw the Broncos deny San Diego's first 12 third-down attempts, stretching their streak to 26 in a row spanning the past three games before Chargers finally converted one.

"He's definitely someone you have to account for," Chargers tight end Antonio Gates said of Miller. "The ability that he has and the explosiveness that he has coming off that edge, that gives them a different element. Then you add guys like Elvis Dumervil and Champ Bailey to the equation, and D.J. Williams can help out. You have a group of guys who can come out and make plays."

It was the fifth win in a row for the division-leading Broncos (7-3), who began their streak when they roared back from a 24-0 halftime deficit to beat the Chargers 35-24 at San Diego on Oct. 15.

Denver leads San Diego (4-6) by three games in the division with six to play.

"It's great," Miller said. "We've got bigger goals. Who knows what they might be. We're just going to keep taking it one week at a time, and we'll see where it takes us."

Sunday's loss was the latest damaging blow for San Diego. With the Chargers' playoff hopes fading, questions are swirling around the future of coach Norv Turner.

"We had our chances early, and that's where I think we hurt ourselves," Rivers said. "Our defense played them really well. We kept getting opportunities offensively, and we couldn't get anything going."

Rivers fought through a tough day, failing to convert a third down until the second half and taking four sacks while throwing two interceptions and fumbling three times, losing one. He finished 24 of 40 for 258 yards and two touchdowns, both to Danario Alexander, including a 21-yarder with 1:24 remaining.

Following the late touchdown, Chargers tried an onside kick, but Virgil Green recovered for Denver. After the Broncos were forced to punt, San Diego got the ball back on its 13-yard line with 23 seconds remaining. Dumervil had a second-down sack of Rivers, and time ran out.

"Their defense is awesome," Alexander said. "They've got great players in their front seven who are great at rushing the passer, and they've got some pretty good DBs. Their defense, we've got to give them credit. They came at us hard."

Manning completed 25 of 42 passes for 270 yards. He increased his career touchdown-pass total to 423, giving him sole possession of second place on the all-time list. He also moved into a tie for second place all time with Hall of Famer and current Broncos executive John Elway with his 148th regular-season victory.

"I've said it before: John Elway was one of my favorites growing up, and he still is one of my favorite quarterbacks," Manning said. "I feel honored to be in the same organization that he is part of. But it's a lot of team wins, and certainly to be part of seven wins this year ... I'm grateful for a lot of people's help, coaches and players."

Denver also got a lift from the return of Williams, the linebacker who served NFL-imposed suspensions for the first nine games of the season for violating the league's policy on performance-enhancing drugs and for an alcohol-related arrest.

Williams, who resumed practicing with the team this week, had a couple of key tackles, including a tackle for loss of Ryan Mathews to help Denver register a stop after the Chargers recovered an onside kick to open the second half.

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# QBs make their mark on eventful Week 11, both good and bad

Peter King  
Sports Illustrated  
November 19, 2012

Eleven main characters from an eventful Week 11 that had its share of drama.

**1. Baltimore defensive keystone Terrell Suggs**, who was supposed to be in his seventh month of rehab for an Achilles tear right now, prancing off Heinz Field, savoring a three-game winning streak against the team he loves to hate. "Weird night," he said from the bus leaving the place. "No 52 [Ray Lewis], no Lardarius Webb, no Ben [Roethlisberger], no Troy Polamalu, no Hines Ward. Times are changing. But winning's all that matters."

**2. The Gronk, New England tight end Ron Gronkowski**, out for a month or so with a broken right forearm, suffered when the Patriots had a 34-point lead over the Colts late in the fourth quarter. There are some opinions on this. Before you freak too freakishly, Patsland, you'll have Aaron Hernandez and Visanthe Shiancoe this week to sub for Gronkle (the Gronk, Gronkle, Gronkie ... all nicknames NFLNet's Ian Rapoport is trying to patent on Mr. Gronk). About 31 other teams in the league would kill for Hernandez.

**3. Andrew Luck, Colts quarterback**, who turned the ball over four times in a game he knew he couldn't afford one.

**4. Houston wide receiver Andre Johnson**, 31, one of the great receivers of this era (132 games, 766 catches) tells me he thinks Sunday's game was his best.

**5. Ben Roethlisberger** and his dislocated first rib missed the 13-10 loss to Baltimore, and boy, was he missed. I'm not optimistic about him returning soon, and neither is a leading thoracic surgeon.

**6. The sixth playoff seed in the NFC.** Look at the combatants for it: Seattle, Tampa Bay and Minnesota, all 6-4, and a pair of 5-5s: New Orleans (the Saints may never lose again) and Dallas.

**7. Andy Reid.** Close to the end, barring a miracle stay by Jeffrey Lurie. Could Oregon coach Chip Kelly, his national title hopes dashed, be waiting in the wings? I believe he'll be a candidate to take the Eagles job after leaving the Bucs at the altar last year.

**8. Norv Turner.** We know the odds of San Diego making the playoffs after losing five of six. Not good. Turner and GM A.J. Smith likely had to make the postseason to stay. I'll be interested to see if club chairman and president Dean Spanos chases Reid, a southern California guy.

**9. The strange case of Matt Ryan and the Falcons.** A win's a win, I guess. But I

watched much of the 23-19 game. Atlanta survived five interceptions by Ryan and won because the Cardinals have the worst quarterback situation known to man. (Cue the Larry Fitzgerald weeping sound effect.)

**10. Robert Griffin III** just had a game for the ages. Anyone notice?

**11. Matt Schaub** did too. He threw for 527 yards as the 9-1 Texans survived the 1-9 Jags. This is one strange league.

### **The stories of the week:**

**1. There is no best team in the NFL.** I say it's New England, but let's be honest: If the Patriots played Houston or Baltimore or Denver tomorrow, how confident would you be? And the AFC is supposed to be the weak conference this year -- remember that. The NFL has America right where the league wants it: with the clicker in hand, or calling a cable provider asking to buy the Red Zone Channel for the last six weeks of the season.

**2. Of New England, Gronk and the Belichick substitution rules.** Gronkowski suffered his broken forearm Sunday in the 59-24 win over the Colts -- and the internet was abuzz Sunday night with news that the injury apparently occurred on the 59th point of the game, the extra point after the final garbage touchdown of the game. Why keep a valuable player in the game at that stage, some asked; others wondered why the increasingly valuable Gronkowski should be risking injury on any special teams unit.

The words "Belichick" and "karma" kept coming back from the ether, and I cannot argue. I've always thought the capriciousness of Belichick's early- and mid-fourth-quarter lineups in Patriot routs were his only weak points as a coach. It's bizarre to me that with a 28-point lead and 7:37 left in the fourth quarter Tom Brady was in the game -- and throwing twice -- to stretch the lead to 35. With a 31-point lead midway through the fourth quarter against the Rams in Week 8, backup Ryan Mallett entered the game. Good for him, and good for the Patriots long-term, to get the raw backup some playing time. So you'd think, then, that I'd view Gronkowski's injury in that same critical light. I don't.

Coaches have 45 active players each game. They don't have a "second team" of the point-after-try unit. The PAT is one of the most risk-free plays in football. Rodney Harrison, the former Patriot safety now in the NBC studio with me on Sunday nights, didn't get taken off the kickoff team in routs. And Tony Dungy, who coached the Colts and Bucs, told me: "Jeff Saturday was my right guard on the PAT team, and I'd never think of taking him off. All my years in football, I never heard anyone, never heard Chuck Noll saying, 'Well, we better get Jack Ham off the PAT team.' It's not something I'd question."

Whatever, the Patriots lose Gronkowski for a an important stretch (at Jets, at Dolphins, Houston, San Francisco), and from the looks of it, even if they do look like the best team in football right now, it's going to be tough to move past Baltimore and Houston and get a first-round playoff bye in the AFC.

**3. Heal, Ben, heal.** I'm told Ben Roethlisberger still has pain with many simple

movements, seven days after he suffered shoulder and first rib injuries in the Monday-nighter against Kansas City, and anyone forecasting a week for him to return is guessing. Roethlisberger has no sense when he'll be able to return. But according to Dr. Clark Fuller, the director of Thoracic Surgery at St. John's Health Center in Santa Monica, Calif., Roethlisberger has to be careful about returning too soon because of damage it can do to nerves in the right shoulder and arm, major blood vessels in the area, and, as Roethlisberger admitted last week, the aorta around the heart.

"This is not about being a tough guy," said Fuller, who has neither examined Roethlisberger nor seen his X-rays or scans. So he made it clear he was speaking generally about the dislocation of the first rib, which is connected to the breast bone on one side and the spine on the other. A throwing motion, he said, would not allow the rib to heal, and he would not recommend it anytime soon. "Playing football with a dislocated first rib would put you at severe risk. There are many things to be concerned about, including destroying the nerves in the arm."

Fuller said he thought Roethlisberger would miss a minimum of four weeks. "I do remember their coach, Mike Tomlin, not allowing that safety [Ryan Clark] to play in altitude in Denver because of his sickle-cell disease," Fuller said. "That is a good sign, to me. I believe he won't risk the health of Roethlisberger."

Meanwhile, back at Heinz Field ... Ravens 13, Steelers 10. They meet again in 13 days, and from what we saw of Byron Leftwich after the first drive of the game (he suffered a bruised rib at some point in the game), Baltimore will be a confident group if Roethlisberger doesn't play. Pittsburgh's last 12 drives featured eight punts, two fumbles, an interception and a field goal.

I kept watching Sunday night and thinking what the game must have been like for Suggs, who tore his Achilles in April, was told it'd be nine to 12 months before he could put full pressure on the Achilles and sprint, and then he returned after six. "Tonight," he said an hour after the game, "I was very emotional. I got to the stadium early and went out before the circus started. You know how these games are, and I just thought, 'Prayer really does work. I'm here. I'm playing.' Because when it first happened and I saw the doctor, he said nine months to a year, and the world just shook. I wasn't thinking about Ravens-Steelers, I was just thinking, 'How am I going to get back faster than that?' "

It was a classic Steelers-Ravens game. Ray Rice, 20 carries, 40 yards. Just 511 total yards of offense in 126 plays ... everything a battle. Suggs got two pressures of Leftwich in his 70 plays -- he played all but two defensive snaps. I was surprised to hear what he said when I asked him what this win, even against a depleted Steeler team, said about the Ravens. "It doesn't say nothing," Suggs said. "They got what we want -- all the championships. Nothing means anything to us ;til we get those. We gotta catch 'em in the ring race, then we'll be able to talk."

**4. Andre Johnson goes 14 for 273, and he was not playing Madden.** An amazing Sunday in Houston. This is modern football at its Monopoly-money best: Justin Blackmon and Johnson became the first two receivers in a game ever to each go over 200 yards. They combined for 21 catches and 509 yards, for a 24.2-yard

average reception. I'm incredulous just writing that sentence. Where will it all end?

"It's crazy," Johnson told me from the Texans' locker room. "I don't know what to say. I didn't know something like that would ever happen." Heck, it may never again. The story in Houston's 43-37 overtime win was the crazy overtime. Houston kicked a field goal. Jacksonville kicked a field goal. Schaub threw an interception. Jacksonville -- correctly, I thought -- went for it and failed on fourth-and-10 from the Houston 47? (Really, what do you have to lose when you're 1-9 and there's two and a half minutes left to play and you're tied against the top team in the conference? Go for the win.) On the second play after that, Schaub threw a wide-receiver screen to Johnson on the right side of the formation, and Johnson ran 48 yards for the winning touchdown.

Johnson said he's fully healthy for one of the first times in recent years, and he's able to practice and go through the normal drill work he's had to miss because of two knee scopes and a bad hamstring injury over the past two seasons. "My stride is opening up," he said. "I feel like I have my legs back, my explosion. I can't tell you how many OTAs, how many training camp practices, how many regular practices I missed. I feel like I've been battling so many injuries the last two or three years." Schaub threw for Johnson 19 times Sunday, and look for numbers like that to be the rule, not the exception, down the stretch."

**5. On concussions and the future of playing hurt.** The co-chair of the NFL's head, neck and spine committee, Dr. Richard Ellenbogen, told me the problem with players being removed from game immediately after being concussed is that a concussion is often not immediately apparent. Alex Smith played most of a series after being concussed last week, as did Jay Cutler. "We've had 193 instances of the athletic trainers upstairs calling down to the sidelines this year to tell medical officials to check out a player," Ellenbogen said. "Regarding concussions, there is no perfect rule for diagnosing a concussion. Often times, because players on the field have so much adrenaline going, a concussion doesn't show up for some times." The key, he said, is not only diagnosticians looking for concussions, but self-reporting, and we know how difficult that is during the course of a game.

I asked Ellenbogen about what I find to be a smart proposal by the players association -- the adoption of a rule that would have an independent neurologist on the sidelines for all NFL games. He said he didn't like the idea, comparing it to showing up for surgery and having a surgeon you'd never met before do the operation. He said team physicians on the sidelines know the players and can best understand what is happening to them medically. Agreed, but there's also the chance that a team-employed physician is going to have the best interests of the team at heart over the player. Seems the argument over that slippery slope has been going on for years.

One other interesting note from Ellenbogen, the chairman of the department of neurological surgery at the University of Washington School of Medicine. He attended a FIFA-sponsored conference on head trauma three weeks ago in Zurich and came away with respect for rules. That's right: rules. "Rules count," he said. "When the NFL changed the spot where teams kick off from, injuries went down 40 percent in a year. In soccer, FIFA outlawed elbowing in head-balls, and concussion

rates were reduced significantly. When people say all these rules are ruining the game, I say, 'No they're not. They're making the game safer.' " Ellenbogen said to me at one point he wasn't paid by the NFL. I asked him why he did the job. "Good question," he said. "My wife would really like to know that. Two reasons. One, if I took \$100,000 to do the job, then I lose all my credibility; everything I say, you could say, 'Well, what do you expect? He works for the NFL.' Two, the trickle-down effect. If the NFL can work with the IOC and some of these international sports federations to institute rules and programs to make games safer, then we all win. I went to Roger Goodell and [legal counsel] Jeff Pash, and I asked for \$75,000 to give to the Centers for Disease Control, to put a sort of concussion [recognition] course on the site for coaches and parents. They said sure. Now that's the CDC's most hit-upon site."

## **The Deep End**

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

After their 1-3 start the Tampa Bay Buccaneers have gone 5-1 since and averaged 34 points a game in doing so. On the face of it Josh Freeman's 94.6 quarterback rating and 21-7 touchdown-to-interception differential seem to indicate a substantial reason for the turnabout, but that would be too simple; Freeman's season (and his performance here) has been far more enigmatic than that.

**Going deep.** Freeman is a very good deep passer who has been aided hugely in that regard by the offseason acquisition of Vincent Jackson. Before this game only Joe Flacco threw deep (more than 20 yards downfield) more frequently; 17.8 percent of passes for Flacco, 15.4 percent for Freeman. But it hasn't just been quantity. Freeman's 838 yards on deep passes leads the NFL and he'd thrown four touchdowns without being picked off entering Sunday's game in Carolina. Through 10 weeks of the season, he'd been the best deep passer in the league.

**The short game.** He struggles on shorter throws. When he has to read linebackers in coverage and when the space is condensed, his passer rating drops from 125.6 on those deep throws to 86.2 on throws between zero and nine yards. Compare this with Peyton Manning, who rates 95.8 on deep throws but 115.9 on those same underneath passes.

**Game on the line.** Freeman continued with his problems in the short game in Charlotte (rating of 73.7, including a bad interception for a pick-six) but also initially couldn't find his targets when passing deep. Of his six passes over 20 yards, the first five were either incomplete or intercepted. However, as is often the case with Freeman, with the game on the line he then made the last one count, finding Vincent Jackson with a laser in the end zone for the score, which would eventually take the game into overtime. There he completed all three of his OT passes including the game-winning touchdown to Dallas Clark.

Freeman deserves tremendous credit for elevating his game, with the arrival of trusted veterans like Clark and Jackson. The Buccaneers have already exceeded

most expectations and can go even further this season ... but Freeman's play is not without flaws. If he is to take the next step as one of the game's best quarterbacks, he needs to clean up his short game and become more efficient between zero and nine yards.

## **Fine Fifteen**

**1. New England (7-3).** No Gronk for a while, but I'd be surprised if the Patriots don't score enough to beat the Jets Thanksgiving night. This is a ridiculously explosive team, with a defense that played better Sunday than it had in recent weeks. I had to think about the top of the rankings for some time Sunday night, and the fact that no one can stop the Patriots  tipped the scales. In their last three games: nine takeaways, two defensive touchdowns (both Sunday), 47.0 points per game.

**2. Houston (9-1).** Now for the Three-Game Trip From Heck: at Detroit (Thanksgiving afternoon), at Tennessee (Titans 10-4 in last 14 against Texans), at New England. AFC home-field in the playoffs on the line.

**3. San Francisco (6-2-1).** The Niners will be hard-pressed to go 2-0 over the next seven days, with Chicago tonight and the Saints, on a short week, in New Orleans next Sunday.

**4. Green Bay (7-3).** Does anyone throw a prettier ball, dropped out of the sky into a postage-stamp hole, than Aaron Rodgers? He did it again on Sunday with the rainbow to Randall Cobb to send the Packers past the Lions.

**5. Atlanta (9-1).** Sorry, Falcons fans. Just seeing too much out of this team, especially on offense, that I don't like the last couple of weeks.

**6. Denver (7-3).** The Broncos have won five games in a row. Scored in the 30s five games in a row. Won the five games by an average of 13.6 a game.

**7. Baltimore (8-2).** Three wins in a row in the game's fiercest rivalry, by 28, 3 and 3 points. Loved the hitting and instincts I saw out of cornerback Corey Graham Sunday night in Pittsburgh.

**8. Chicago (7-2).** With Jay Cutler under center, they'd be in the 4-5 range of these rankings.

**9. New Orleans (5-5).** Since Oct. 1, 5-1, with the margin of the five wins at 11 points a game.

**10. Pittsburgh (6-4).** That was just plain weird, seeing strong-armed (or so we thought) Byron Leftwich wind up, throw bombs downfield, and have them flutter to earth three or five or eight yards short. The Steelers have to survive without Ben Roethlisberger for now, and there's only a one-game cushion over Cincinnati for the moment.

**11. Tampa Bay (6-4).** Haven't seen that much pure jubilation on a sideline in a long time than what the Bucs showed after winning in overtime at Carolina. Stat line that'll make football traditionalists happy: Doug Martin, 197 carries, 1,000

yards, 5.1 yards per rush, seven touchdowns.

**12. Seattle (6-4).** On his bye Sunday, Russell Wilson went to church and when he left, he told the minister, "Go Hawks!" He went grocery shopping and told his checkout gal, "Go Hawks!" He went to ... You get the message. The guy ends most conversations □ with the media and with real people □ with "Go Hawks!"

**13. Minnesota (6-4).** Strap it on, Vikes. Next three foes are 21-7, and two are on the road.

**14. New York Giants (6-4).** NFC East gets tighter, and the Giants, on the bye Sunday, aren't playing well. They're a game up on 5-5 Dallas, two up on 4-6 Washington, and the Cowboys and 'Skins play Thanksgiving Day in Arlington. If Dallas wins, the Giants will be playing for the division lead next Sunday at home against Green Bay.

**15. Indianapolis (6-4).** Thought they were ready to play a shootout game against New England. I thought wrong.

## **The Award Section**

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

**Robert Griffin III, QB, Washington.** The best game of a precocious rookie season: 14 of 15, 200 yards passing, four touchdowns, no picks; 12 rushes, 84 yards, in the 31-6 rout of the Eagles. I talked to a long-time NFC East executive Sunday night, and he said: "I am not happy this guy's in our division for the next 15 years. In fact, I'm pissed." And this from Santana Moss, who made one of the touchdown catches, a spectacular one: "Robert's going to go out there and keep being special. He ignites our fire."

**Andre Johnson, wide receiver, Houston.** With 14 catches, 273 yards and the game-winning touchdown, Johnson had the game of a lifetime. He told me it was the best game of his starry NFL career. The Texans escaped with an overtime win that never should have been this tough. Well, it wouldn't have been possible without the tough catches and the long runs of Johnson.

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

#### **John Abraham, DE, Atlanta.**

One of these days -- I have no idea when -- he'll start playing like his age, 34. He still sprints around end as though he's a decade younger. With the Falcons in a 13-3 hole in the second quarter Sunday, Abraham went careening around right end, caving in the tackle, and strip-sacked rookie QB Ryan Lindley just as he was about to throw.

**Von Miller, OLB, Denver.** He could win this every week. Another ridiculous game in the division-defining win over San Diego, with three sacks and two forced fumbles. With 24.5 sacks in his first 25 NFL games, he's approaching Lawrence Taylor/Derrick Thomas impact ... and he's only 23.

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

**Julian Edelman, WR/PR, New England.** Weaving and sprinting and feinting his way through the Colts' punt team, Edelman, with the Patriots trailing early in what appeared destined to be a shootout, took an Indy punt 68 yards for a second-quarter touchdown. Just because it didn't turn out to be a shootout doesn't negate the beauty of Edelman's return.

**Leodis McKelvin, CB/PR, Buffalo.** McKelvin's name gets lost in the great return men of this era. It shouldn't. Since entering the league four years ago, McKelvin has had touchdowns on a kickoff return (98 yards) and three punt returns (80, 88 and 79 yards), and that last one came the first time a Bill touched the ball Thursday night. It was a put-it-in-overdrive, Wile E. Coyote breakneck sprint up the left sideline, through the Dolphin defense, and it was the Bills' lone touchdown of the night — vital to a 19-14 Buffalo victory.

**Janoris Jenkins, CB, St. Louis.** For his sprinting-around-the-corner, full-extension, perfectly timed block of a Jets' chip-shot field goal attempt. As pretty a blocked field goal as you'll ever see.

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

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

**Sebastian Vollmer, tackle, New England.** Having a great season protecting Tom Brady's front side, Vollmer allowed but one quarterback pressure in 35 Brady pass-drops, and he pushed the pile for a 4.6-yard rushing average in the run game. There's little question that Vollmer has turned into one of the most valuable Patriots. His ability to play against speed-rushers on the outside and power guys on the inside has made him one of the best right tackles in the game in only his fourth year as a pro.

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

**Jerry Rosburg, special teams coordinator, Baltimore.** A special-teams coach has to invent a new core every year, and Rosburg showed his value again Sunday night in Pittsburgh. The punt-return he coaches produced the only Ravens touchdown of the game -- a 63-yard cannon-shot by the quick and fast Jacoby Jones -- and it's the third return touchdown by Jones of the season. Rosburg has also had to wean the Ravens from a veteran kicker to rookie (Billy Cundiff to Justin Tucker), while improving the overall play of the kicking game, which last year was a sore spot.

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

**Andrew Luck, QB, Indianapolis.** The mantra around the Colts all week, entering their game at the explosive New England, was they couldn't turn it over. Give the

Patriots any freebies, and the Colts had no shot. We can debate whether it really would have mattered in New England's 59-24 win, but let's be honest here: Luck handed it over four times, leading to 21 New England points. Let's say he converts two of those four into Indy touchdowns. Is it so far-fetched that the Colts would have been in the game late, say, behind 45-38 as the clock wound down? All we do know is that because the Patriots returned two of their three picks off Luck for scores and turned a fumble into a touchdown drive, this game was never much of a game from the middle of the third quarter.

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

"At this point, talking about the playoffs seems inappropriate."

-- *San Diego quarterback Philip Rivers, after the Chargers fell three games behind Denver Sunday with their second loss of the season to the Broncos.*

Even if the Chargers go 6-0 down the stretch, Denver would have to go 2-4 or worse for San Diego to win the division.

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

"In the locker room after the game, the way they were just dancing around and acting. The enthusiasm is so raw. It's just awesome. They are so passionate ... I just love the college game. I love the pageantry. I loved that both teams were in their home uniforms. I thought that was so awesome. I just got a kick out of watching their student body and our student body. I can't wait to hug my mom, shake my dad's hand and kiss my kids."

-- *First-year UCLA coach Jim Mora, after his Bruins beat USC 38-28 in the battle for Los Angeles Saturday at the Rose Bowl. Last year, USC beat UCLA 50-0, paving the way for UCLA to make a coaching change and hire the fiery Mora, who felt he was unfairly and precipitously fired as an NFL head coach in Atlanta and Seattle.*

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

"That's the old rule number one you never do. You're in your 15th year, and you kind of just say, 'Who gives a ----.'"

-- *Peyton Manning, miked by NFL Films for NFL Network's "SoundFX" show, running off the field after throwing a pass across his body, rolling right and throwing left, hitting Brandon Stokley for a touchdown against Carolina eight days ago.*

Manning sounded like a coach often in the miking, gathering his offensive mates at one point and barking: "Let's address this now, so we don't do it at the end of the game and say, 'This is what went wrong.' We've made mental errors on every single play. I don't have to review 'em, right? There's not one thing they've done to stop us, right? Do our jobs better, and we'll execute. All right? Let's go. Hone in."

### **Stat of the Week I**

Shawne Merriman, who had his first sack of the season Thursday night for Buffalo, averaged 13.2 sacks per year in his first three NFL seasons. He's averaged 1.2

sacks per year in his last five seasons.

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

The quarterback coach of the Indianapolis Colts, Clyde Christensen, has tutored Peyton Manning and now Andrew Luck, but he has been around defensive greatness in his life too. For two years in college, when he was a backup quarterback at the University of North Carolina, he roomed with Lawrence Taylor in a Chapel Hill dorm.

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

Three of them:

- Nov. 14. Step on the Hertz bus at O'Hare. Andy Williams and a chorus are warbling. "*Ding dong, ding dong ... It's the most wonderful time of the year ...* " Christmas carols eight days before Thanksgiving. Why, America? Why?
- Ten-letter billboard, huge, on I-65 south on the drive to Indianapolis, somewhere around Valparaiso: "HELL IS REAL." Yikes!

And this: There's a Starbucks in downtown Indy, on the circle surrounding the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, and I pulled up behind an Indianapolis police officer in front of it, put my flashers on, and ran in to get coffee. On my way out, five minutes later, the officer rolls down his window and says to me, "That your car?"

"Yes," I said.

"Need your driver's license," he said. "I can't believe you did that, right behind a cop. You parked in front of the hydrant."

"My God, I never saw it," I said. "What an idiot I am."

He took my license, wrote out the ticket, handed it to me, and I said, "Sorry." I got in the car, and as I got set to leave, the officer got out of his car and gave me the stop sign, walking to the passenger window. I rolled it down.

"Give me that ticket," he said. "You were just in there for a couple minutes."

"No, I did it," I said. "It's OK. My fault."

And I started to realize: This man is about to rip up a ticket, for whatever reason, and I'm trying to argue him out of it?

Play idiot much?

Officer: "No, I'll take it. Just come back and see us. Say nice things about our city."

Me: "Hey, thanks a lot."

Say nice things about Indy, the greatest city on the face of the earth, kind sir? Sure thing!

### **Tweet of the Week I**

"Rivers is to turnovers what an ATM is to cash ... just keeps giving it away."  
-- @wingoz, ESPN anchor Trey Wingo, watching San Diego quarterback Philip Rivers give the Broncos opportunities in Denver. The final: Denver 24. San Diego 16.

### **Tweet of the Week II**

"Good job today #NYJETS for beating up on Shotty n the #RAMS"

-- @santonio10, injured Jets wideout Santonio Holmes, who watched the Jets' road win against St. Louis and Rams offensive coordinator Brian Schottenheimer (last year's Jets' OC) from home.

### **Tweet of the Week III**

"Sanchez lookin good! Don't let me see 15 back on the field ...

-- @RealJoeNamath, watching Jets-Rams after an ineffective running play by number 15, Tim Tebow, in the first half.

Poor Tebow.

### **Tweet of the Week IV**

"Anonymous Jets: Mother Teresa "terrible."

-- @NYPost\_Serby, columnist Steve Serby, who's good for one of these per week. Or more.

### **Tweet of the Week V**

"I'm sick about this crap. Philly is my home. I feel like I'm letting my family down"

-- @BrentCelek, the Eagles tight end, after Philadelphia's sixth straight loss, the first six-game losing streak of the Andy Reid Era.

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

1. I think this is what I liked about Week 11:

a. Kyle Williams and Jairus Byrd. Two Bills who never give up.

b. A.J. Green on end-zone fades. He can catch 'em one-handed, in a physical mismatch, whatever.

c. I was totally wrong about Nick Folk. I thought he should have been cut in camp, but he continues to kick well, as he did with a 51-yard field goal in the first quarter at St. Louis.

d. Phil Dawson -- with his fourth 50-yard-plus field goal of the season Sunday in Dallas -- now has a comfortable lead as the NFL's 2012 All-Pro kicker.

e. Justin Blackmon, with a preview of the future if Jacksonville ever gets a quarterback worthy of him, with a 63-yard catch.

f. Good pursuit of Tony Romo, Juqua Parker. Good-looking Cleveland D in The

House That Jerry Built.

g. Arian Foster's in-traffic cuts. Things of beauty. How'd this man not get drafted?

h. Rip the Jets for some bad draft picks if you will, but Muhammad Wilkerson (round one, 2011) is not one of them. Second straight week with a big play in the opponents' backfield, this time a strip of Sam Bradford that helped turn the tide in the Jets' win.

i. Dezman Moses, with a great strip of a scrambling Matthew Stafford.

j. Running back on the all-underrated team from Sunday: LaRod Stephens-Howling.

k. When you beat Joe Thomas for a sack, that's one you put in your career time capsule, DeMarcus Ware.

l. A major-league goal-line stoning of Jags running back Jalen Parmele by Houston inside linebacker Bradie James.

m. Play of the Day: The catch by Santana Moss with two Eagles all over him, turned into a touchdown.

n. You're not going to defend a fake-punt play better than Tampa Bay special-teams coordinator Bob Ligashesky did at Carolina Sunday. The Bucs acted like it was their call, not the Panthers', and sniffed it out easily.

o. You go, Aqib Talib. Great pick. Instinctive 59-yard return for touchdown.

p. You too, Alfonzo Dennard. What a return off Andrew Luck.

q. Great free agent acquisition for San Diego, wideout Danario Alexander.

r. Just my imagination, or does Malcolm Jenkins make a huge defensive play in every New Orleans game -- as he did with an interception returned for TD in Oakland?

**2.** I think this is what I didn't like about Week 11:

a. Announcers who say "Tanney-hill." There's no "y" in the man's name. Short "e" in Tannehill.

b. Jets defense on fourth-and-goal in the first quarter. Two receivers uncovered in the end zone? Who designed that brilliance?

c. Nick Foles. Lord, what a nightmare for the Eagles.

d. Ryan Lindley was worse. Significantly.

e. Come on, Eagle safeties. That's Aldrick Robinson we're talking about, scoring a touchdown, wide open, on you and your mates.

f. The Arizona tackles. They're going to get people fired on that team.

g. Are you kidding, Dez Bryant? Tiptoeing out of bounds a yard short of a first down

with your team down 10-0?

h. Great FOX graphic 26 minutes into Cards-Falcons. "Passing yards: Atlanta 141, Arizona 1."

i. Armanti Edwards wide open on a corner route in the end zone for Carolina. Cam Newton throwing it three yards over his head. There aren't many times when a receiver's that open in the end zone, and when he is, a good quarterback has to hit him.

j. The ridiculous non-booth-review in Carolina just before the half, when Tampa receiver Mike Williams didn't complete the act of a catch, the ball was plucked out of the air by a Panther defender, and no replay review was initiated from the booth. Williams didn't catch it, and it probably wasn't an interception, but that's a play that has to be reviewed. It certainly was not a catch by Williams, which was the ruling on the field.

k. Michael Turner, who looks like he's running with cement shoes.

l. Tough, tough luck for Brandon Meriweather, who appeared to rip up his knee, not touched, against Philadelphia.

m. Onside kicks aren't supposed to travel 22 yards, Dan Bailey.

n. Please explain that performance against Jacksonville, men of Bum Phillips.

o. Patriots fans booing Adam Vinatieri. You kidding me? Your team chose not to sign him when he got too expensive. He saved your bacon in gigantic playoff game after gigantic playoff game. Stop it. Just stop it.

p. Preview of what I won't like about Week 12? Panthers-Eagles. Monday night. Combined record: 5-15. Start your Jon Gruden coaching rumors early, folks.

**3.** I think I know what it feels like to be Emmett C. Burns now. He's the Maryland state legislator who criticized Raven Brendon Ayanbadejo for his support of same-sex marriage. Vikings punter Chris Kluwe, justifiably in my opinion, all but firebombed Burns in his blog and in a piece for Deadspin.

The other day on Deadspin, Kluwe ripped the 44 voters for Pro Football Hall of Fame in the kind of piece I thought was reserved for mass murderers, all because we haven't elected Ray Guy to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The voters, Kluwe said, were "indolent cows" guilty of "heartless effrontery," were "selfish, short-sighted, too g----- lazy to learn the subtleties of kicking," "indolent, slothful, petulant, ignorant and flat-out stupid," "small-minded," "UNWILLING TO LEARN" (all caps).

Added Kluwe: "This is a player who pinned opposing offenses back inside their 20-yard line instead of simply booting a touchback, winning the battle of field position before anyone realized there was even a fight." And he bleated to the selectors: "How dare you tell a man who devoted his life to perfecting his craft that he's not worthy of admission among the game's greatest?" A few points from this one lazy

cow:

- Re the gall we have for not enshrining a man "who devoted his life to perfecting his craft:" Nowhere in the bylaws of the Pro Football Hall of Fame does it ask selectors to make hard work and endless dedication the key elements for induction. If so, Lawrence Taylor wouldn't be in and Reggie Williams would. Taylor wasn't much for practice, but he showed up on Sunday and played great. Williams, the longtime Bengal linebacker, was one of the hardest workers in any walk of life I've ever seen. A nice player, but no one would mistake him for a Hall of Famer. Did Ray Guy work harder than Dave Jennings or Tom Blanchard or Reggie Roby? No clue. Nor does it matter.

- Re Guy pinning opponents back so consistently: In the 11 years Guy played that stats were kept on punts inside the 20-yard line, he had 210 such punts, an average of 19.1 per season. In two of those years, there were 14 games played, and in another year, because of a strike, there were nine games played. So it's not exactly apples to apples to compare his number to those recorded by today's punters -- and, certainly, there's more emphasis on dropping balls inside the 20- now. But last year, 13 punters had 25 or more punts land inside the 20-; in 2010, 16 punters had at least 25 punts inside the 20-. I'm not convinced 19 punts a year inside the 20- is special, in that day or this one.

- Kluwe points out that Guy never had a punt returned for a touchdown. That is a tremendous accomplishment. Give Guy credit.

- I'll remind you, Kluwe, of something you forgot to mention because it didn't fit your plotline: Gross punting average is not the only important stat for punters, to be sure. But it's how history judges punters, the same way batting average judges hitters. It may not be the best judge, but can you say it's meaningless? Ray Guy's career gross punting average is 42.4 yards, good for a 78th-place tie on the all-time list.

- I've always wondered why no one ever asks with the same intensity as is done for Guy, "Why isn't Jerrel Wilson in the Pro Football Hall of Fame?" Maybe it's because he didn't hit the gondola in Superdome with a punt once, as Guy did, according to legend. I don't know why else Wilson and Guy wouldn't be discussed with the same fervor. Wilson played 217 games, mostly for Kansas City. Guy played 207, all for Oakland. Wilson out-averaged Guy, 43.0 to 42.4. Each won three punting titles, Wilson with averages of 44.8, 44.8 and 45.5, Guy with averages of 42.2, 43.8 and 43.3. (Wilson also won two American Football League punting titles before Guy was a pro.)

- As for the future of punters in the Hall of Fame -- of course, there are none now - - I'm open to one or more being in. I think Shane Lechler's body of work will be worthy of discussion for Canton someday; no one who punted for at least a decade is closer than two-and-a-half yards to Lechler's 47.6-yard career average. I think, as far as kickers go, Adam Vinatieri has a very strong case because of his string of clutch playoff kicks over the past 11 years.

So don't think I won't vote for a punter or kicker (if I'm still on the committee). I

believe in special teams' impact on the game; I have long supported Steve Tasker's case, because I believe he's the best special-teams player in NFL history, and special teams is worthy of being represented in the Hall.

I'm all for a healthy debate on all subjects Hall of Fame, which you know if you read this column and follow me on Twitter. I like to consider all angles, and not just the incendiary ones. We're not out to get punters. We're out to be fair. Kluwe doesn't think we are, and if he can present further evidence to show me I'm wrong, I'll listen.

Finally, I'm disappointed in Kluwe. I like him. He's the kind of independent voice football, and all of sports, needs. His column in Deadspin is beyond mean-spirited things. It's the kind of thing you'd pen to read at the trial of the men who dismembered your mother with an ax.

I'm open to hear your thoughts on all of it. I'll print some of the best emails in my Tuesday column.

**4.** I think ref Bill Vinovich made a tremendous call in Atlanta. With Cards quarterback Ryan Lindley back to throw, Falcons defensive end John Abraham stripped Lindley of the ball with Lindley's arm extended back. Very, very close whether Lindley was in the act of throwing or simply had the ball up in the air, verging on throwing. The ball bounced away, and the Falcons picked it up and ran it back for a touchdown, and there was no whistle, and the touchdown was ruled. Reviewed by replay, the call stood. Perfect call by Vinovich, and good job by the crew in not blowing a whistle when everyone was standing around before it got picked up.

**5.** I think, speaking of officiating, I'd like to ask the NFL one thing: You mean Tony Corrente gets a \$9,000 fine for accidentally cursing on an open mike, and replay officials Bob Boylston gets nothing for blowing a touchdown call in Carolina-Denver? Bad, bad precedent set there. If I were Tony Corrente, I'd be appealing that \$9,000 fine. And I am fairly sure he'll get some, or all, of that fine back. Deservedly.

**6.** I think Cam Newton is playing nothing like an entertainer or an icon, though his defense didn't help him down the stretch in the loss to Tampa Bay, allowing four long drives in the last 25 minutes of the game.

**7.** I think Atlanta's Mike Smith is too good of a coach to have thrown a replay-challenge flag after a turnover ... and he's lucky it didn't cost him in a big way. In the third quarter of the Arizona-Atlanta game, Cardinals safety Greg Toler made an incredible save of a fumble going out of bounds, batting it back in the field of play so a teammate could recover the fumble. Smith thought Toler has stepped out of bounds. So he threw the challenge flag to appeal the call. But the NFL has instituted automatic reviews on all turnovers, with an odd rule attached: If a coach throws the challenge flag on a turnover before the review has begun, the coach gets a 15-yard unsportsmanlike penalty, and the replay-review is negated. If the officials on the field have already been buzzed, notifying them a review must take place on the field, there is a penalty but the review goes on. Because this review hadn't started, Smith got the 15-yard flag and had the review negated. Arizona

couldn't take advantage of Atlanta's error, though, and the Falcons won the game. Still, it's a pretty easy call --on a turnover or scoring play, keep the flag in your pocket.

**8.** I think I am so, so sick of the debate over elite quarterbacks. How meaningless is this stupid debate about who is elite and how many quarterbacks should be in the elite category? Every time I hear another question asked about elite quarterbacks I want to stick my finger down my throat.

**9.** I think, and I've got my NBC hat on here, you'll enjoy Cris Collinsworth's idea on the Thursday night Pats-Jets game on NBC. John Madden's going to introduce the game, focusing on his Thanksgiving tradition of football, family and food, and NBC, which has a Thursday night game for the next decade, will inaugurate the John Madden Thanksgiving Player of the Game. Collinsworth's idea, executed by game telecast director Drew Esocoff. I'm looking forward to seeing Madden's ode to turkey and football.

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

a. Congrats to Cornell wideout Luke Tasker, son of Steve, for a great senior year at Cornell: 75 catches, 1,207 yards, 16.1-yard average. Chip off the old special-teamer.

b. Personal college football note of the week: Take a bow, Dick Ebersol. You're the one who always believed Notre Dame could get back to the top of college football.

c. No Matt Barkley Saturday ... I mean, how can Notre Dame not play Alabama for the national title in a month and a half?

d. Good luck editing the *Washington Post* to my old neighbor in Boston, Marty Baron. Very good newspaper man.

e. Great line: "I don't know who deserves more blame: Western Carolina for taking the money, or Alabama for scheduling Western Carolina." That's from NBC studio host Jimmy Roberts, showing highlights of the game between national power Alabama and one of the worst teams in the NCAA FCS, formerly NCAA I-AA, Western Carolina.

At the time the highlights were shown, Alabama had possessed the ball five times and had a 35-0 lead; the final score was 49-0. Roberts also had one of the best stats I heard all weekend: In its last 27 games, Western Carolina is 2-0 against 1,200-student Mars Hill (N.C.) and 0-25 against all other teams. Western Carolina got a check for \$475,000 for playing the game Saturday.

f. Welcome to the world, Asa Cormier. You've got a good big sister and a couple of great parents. They'll never lead you astray.

g. Coffeenerdness: Woman in the Indianapolis Airport Friday, in front of me in line at the Starbucks in the rotunda/lobby before the security gates, was just finishing some kind of frappuccino, a huge one, and got to the front of the line. "Grande pumpkin spice latte, with four extra shots." So ... you've finished a 16-ounce frap, loaded with caffeine, and now you're getting a pumpkin drink, which normally has

two shots of espresso, and now you're getting six shots. Wow. I wonder if she's been to sleep since.

h. Beernerdness: Had the pleasure of the Strand Brewing Company's (Torrance, Cal.) 24th Street Pale Ale, a tan ale, filled with malt. Bitter, but a very easy drink. Liked it a lot.

i. All this talk about Twinkies makes me want one. Like, now.

### **Who I Like Tonight, and I Mean Stefan Fatsis**

Fatsis has written an enlightening piece for Slate on why young children shouldn't be allowed to play tackle football, and wherever you fall on this issue, it's well worth your time to read. Of all the great lessons football teaches, I have to say I agree with Fatsis: I think there are too many dangers in allowing young children whose brains are still in their formative stages to play tackle football. If I had a son, I would wait until he was 14 or 15 before allowing him to play tackle football.

Fatsis quotes NFL head-trauma adviser Dr. Robert Cantu as saying he's proposed to ban tackle football until kids are 14. Writes Fatsis: " 'Youngsters are not miniature adults,' Cantu said. For starters, he explained, their brains are not fully myelinated, meaning their nerve cells lack the complete coating that offers protection. That makes them more susceptible to concussions and means they recover more slowly from them than adults. Cantu said children have big heads relative to the rest of their bodies and weak necks, creating a 'bobblehead-doll effect' that elevates the risk of concussion. They typically play in the oldest equipment, with the least educated coaches, and with little or no available medical care."

Football wouldn't likely die if kids didn't play until they were in high school, or if only flag football were allowed at an earlier age. Just a couple of weeks ago, I spoke with the man who might be the Offensive Rookie of the Year this season, Tampa Bay running back Doug Martin. He never played a football game 'til he got to high school. The point about the future of football that I think everyone should realize is this: All options are on the table.

Now, for **San Francisco 17, Chicago 13** tonight at Candlestick. It's likely I would have picked the 49ers if Jay Cutler were healthy as a mule. But with an Alex Smith-Jason Campbell matchup, I'd be very surprised if Chicago could muster enough offense to win. Not because at his peak Campbell isn't a good enough player to win a shootout against Alex Smith; but because Campbell has practiced with the first unit of the Bears for exactly four full days of his life. It's hard to go up against a defense of San Francisco's pedigree and pressure if you've only been practicing with the guys you'll be playing with for a week.

### **The Adieu Haiku**

*So no more Twinkies.  
No! Oh the humanity!  
I'll miss Ding Dongs too.*

# Broncos defense gets in on act in victory over Chargers

Lindsay H. Jones  
USA TODAY Sports  
November 18, 2012

DENVER – When Peyton Manning considered his options during his two-week long free agent courtship last spring, he looked not just at coaches and climates, but at the rest of the supporting cast.

In Denver, Manning liked the young offensive line with a stud left tackle in Ryan Clady and a pair of young wide receivers, Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker, both with star potential. He saw a player-friendly head coach in John Fox, and an offensive staff led by Mike McCoy that was willing to tailor an offense to suit the quarterback, and not the other way around. He saw a boss in John Elway that he could relate to on a level that only the most elite players can.

What Manning couldn't have predicted back in March is the support he'd get from the Broncos defense.

With all due respect to Dwight Freeney and Co., Von Miller and Champ Bailey and the rest of the Broncos' defense has given Manning something he rarely had in Indianapolis: A defense that is as fearsome to opponents as Manning is.

The Broncos extended their lead in the AFC West to three games over San Diego Sunday with a 30-23 win against the Chargers at Sports Authority Field at Mile High in a game in which the Broncos defense sacked Philip Rivers four times, forced seven three-and-outs, intercepted two passes, and recovered a fumble. The Broncos also blocked a San Diego punt.

"This is definitely as good, if not the best, defense they've had that I can remember," Rivers said. "It's not like we're the first team that's come in here and struggled a bit. I watched that Saints film [from Oct. 30], and it was a little rough there, too. It's not like offenses come in here and go up and down the field."

Denver didn't allow San Diego to convert a third down until midway through the third quarter, for a streak of 26 straight third-down stops dating back to Nov. 4 in Cincinnati, where the Bengals were stopped on their final three tries. The Carolina Panthers went 0-for-12 on third downs last week, and the Chargers were stopped on their first 11 attempts.

"We realize that with a quarterback like Peyton Manning, we need to get him the ball as many times as we can," Broncos middle linebacker Keith Brooking said. "So the turnovers, the three-and-outs -- honestly the more we can get the ball into Peyton's hands, with our offensive weapons, we're going to be well off."

Indeed, the Broncos now have won five straight games and have a three-game lead in the AFC West over San Diego, as well as tie-breaker after sweeping the season series against the Chargers for the first time since 2005.

Sunday's game in Denver felt like a direct extension of the teams' last game, on Oct. 15 in San Diego, when Denver rallied from a 24-0 halftime deficit to win 35-24. If AFC West momentum shifted to the Broncos on that Monday night in October, the Broncos seem to have established an insurmountable lead before Thanksgiving. Denver, at 7-3, has a three-game lead and the tie-breaker over San Diego after sweeping the Chargers for the first time since 2005. The Broncos have a pair of games left against Kansas City (1-9) and one game against Oakland (3-7).

"We can't hang our hat on Denver doing anything from a collapsing standpoint," Rivers said. "Six to go, they're not losing four out of six, I can guarantee you that. Not that that's going to make us try any less hard."

Until this season, Rivers had been a nightmare for the Broncos, winning nine of his first 11 starts against the Broncos. Most of those wins, however, came before Von Miller.

The Broncos' second-year linebacker forced two fumbles and sacked Rivers three times Sunday, and celebrated one of his sacks with a pair of somersaults. It was his second three-sack game in the last three weeks to bring his season total to 13, a half-sack ahead of Houston's J.J. Watt for the NFL lead.

"He's just getting started," Broncos defensive end Elvis Dumervil said. "That was a crazy day for him."

And yet, it was the type of day that proved the Broncos could win even when Manning and the Broncos offense are not perfect. Manning threw three touchdowns (to Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker and Brandon Stokley) but completed only 59.5 percent of his passes – his second-lowest percentage of the season. He also had a pass deflected, intercepted and returned for a touchdown in the first quarter.

Denver's offense struggled to sustain drives after running back Willis McGahee left in the second quarter with a right knee injury, and five drives ended with a punt after three plays. The Broncos also settled for three short field goals when drives stalled short of the end zone.

"I guess it's a good thing when a three-and-out is shocking to you all. It means we're doing something well," Manning said.

Manning also scoffed at questions that perhaps Sunday's win wasn't easy enough. It was win No. 148 (in the regular season) for Manning – passing his boss, Elway – for No. 2 on the all-time list, so it was plenty good enough.

"There are no frustrating wins in my opinion when you get to be my age and you've played all kinds of games that every win is special," Manning said. "I certainly appreciate it."

# Broncos RB Willis McGahee to have MRI on injured knee

Lindsay H. Jones  
USA TODAY Sports  
November 18, 2012

DENVER – Denver Broncos running back Willis McGahee tried to return to Sunday's game against San Diego after suffering a right knee injury in the second quarter.

McGahee went to the locker room to be examined by trainers. He returned to the sideline for extensive stretching on the training table, and he hopped on the stationary bike to try to get loose.

But with swelling that would not subside, the Broncos decided McGahee's day was done after 55 yards on seven carries. Broncos coach John Fox called the move "precautionary."

"We're concerned about everything. This is a week-to-week business and profession," Fox said. "We've got guys that we feel good about. We'd love to have Willis, and it's going to be a blow if we don't, but we feel good about the running back position."

McGahee will get an MRI on Monday to determine how severely injured his knee is and Fox would not speculate Sunday evening if McGahee would be able to play next week in Kansas City.

McGahee's locker was empty by the time the locker room was opened to reporters after Denver's 30-23 win.

Should McGahee be unable to play, rookie Ronnie Hillman could make his first career start. Hillman has emerged as McGahee's primary backup, though veteran Lance Ball had six carries and three catches Sunday against the Chargers. Former first-round draft pick Knowshon Moreno also could be in play for the first time since Sept. 17. Moreno has been a healthy scratch in the last eight games.

# Broncos LB D.J. Williams returns Sunday

Lindsay H. Jones  
USA TODAY Sports  
November 18, 2012

Denver, Colo. – The long wait is over for Denver Broncos linebacker D.J. Williams.

Williams, the Broncos' leading tackler in four out of the last five years, will be on the Broncos' active game-day roster today against San Diego – the first time Williams will play in a game since Jan. 14.

Williams served a nine-game suspension for violating the league's banned substance policy (six games for a failed test for performance enhancing drugs) and personal conduct policy (three games after his second driving while ability impaired conviction). Williams was with the team in training camp but did not play in any preseason games.

Williams practiced all week under a roster exemption, and was added to the 53-man roster Saturday. The Broncos cleared room for Williams earlier in the week by waiving rookie safety Duke Ihenacho, who was then re-signed to the practice squad.

Williams has been a full-time starter for the Broncos at a variety of inside and outside linebacker positions since he was drafted in the first round in 2004. But he won't slide back into his starting role – not with such a long absence from the team, and not with the current linebacker corps playing well for the last month. Williams will likely play in a limited role in defensive packages, and possibly on special teams.

"I could never say we don't need a guy like that," cornerback Champ Bailey said. "We'll see how we work him in and what he does and go from there."

Bailey and defensive end Elvis Dumervil, the other longest-tenured Broncos on defense, welcomed Williams' return. Several current Broncos starters, like middle linebacker Keith Brooking and safety Mike Adams, have yet to play with Williams, but Dumervil believes Williams' return – in whatever capacity – will make the Broncos better.

That could be important today in facing San Diego tight end Antonio Gates, who scored two touchdowns against the Broncos last week. The Broncos in the past have used Williams – Denver's biggest linebacker – to cover tight ends.

"It makes us more explosive. He is athletic, he is smart and he is a great athlete," Dumervil said. "It's huge. I think we can do a lot more different things. We're excited. Having D.J. back obviously brings us more depth. I think guys have been playing at a high level, and having a guy like that come on board, it says a lot of good things to us."

# Champ Bailey: Tebow 'was one of my all-time favorite teammates'

Chris Strauss

USA TODAY Sports

November 18, 2012

Tim Tebow's New York Jets teammates might not have had the nicest things to say about him this week, but several of his former Denver Broncos mates weighed in with nothing but compliments about their ex-quarterback.

"He was one of my all-time favorite teammates," cornerback Champ Bailey told the Denver Post. "One of the best teammates I've ever had. Just because of the way he handled everything. It's not easy being him. Still not, obviously. He might not be able to stand back there and throw that ball like some, but he plays with a lot of heart. You can't knock a guy who tries that hard and puts that much into it."

Wide receiver Demaryius Thomas told the paper that he texted encouragement to Tebow after the reports of locker room discord broke this week. Fellow pass-catcher Eric Decker also sang his praises.

"Obviously, everybody has opinions on the guy," Decker said. "Mine was, I respected the guy. His passion for the game, what he did on Sundays â?? it wasn't always the most conventional way, but it was a win. A lot of guys bought in and trusted more."

Clearly that passion hasn't transferred in New York, but the way the Broncos players still gush about Tebow certainly gives hope in his ability to thrive in a different environment next season.

For as much cheerleading as his former teammates are doing, you'll notice that none of them were asked if they'd still rather have Tebow under center than current Broncos starter Peyton Manning, who leads the NFL with a 108.0 passer rating. Those answers probably wouldn't be as glowing.

# 'Von Miller Is The Next Lawrence Taylor, Plain And Simple'

Dave Krieger

850 KOA

November 18, 2012

On at least one San Diego third down Sunday, a third-and-10 early on, Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio dispatched two defensive linemen, two linebackers and seven defensive backs.

If five defensive backs is a nickel defense and six is a dime, I'm guessing seven is a quarter, or possibly a JFK half-dollar, considering the effects of inflation.

As defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson pointed out afterward, Von Miller wears a linebacker's number (58) but he's generally rushing the passer, so maybe that was a 3-1-7 alignment rather than a 2-2-7. Either way, let's just call it Del Rio's freakout package.

That's what it did to Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers, who was under pressure because of Miller and looked downfield to see nothing but the Broncos' alternate blue uniforms. Symbolizing the frustration he showed much of the day, he threw the ball away into his own bench.

"I've never been a part of a team that's shown this many looks," said cornerback Champ Bailey, now in his 14th season. "It's funny because every guy that comes out there could start. It's not like we've got a bunch of guys we're just trying to get playing time. These guys can play. I've got to give Jack a lot of credit for trying to utilize all the guys he has around him."

Do all those different looks -- pretty much every coin in the change machine -- confuse opposing offenses?

"I sure hope so," Bailey said. "I think it does. But I think the most important part of our defense is that front. They've been getting it done and that's what's really enabled us to play better."

Good as the front wall has been overall, the difference maker is Miller, who took over the NFL lead in quarterback sacks Sunday, adding three to his previous 10. He became just the fourth NFL player since 1982 to record at least 11 sacks in each of his first two seasons, joining the late Reggie White, Jevon Kearse and Dwight Freeney.

"I told him today, he's a beast, man," Vickerson said.

"That boy works his butt off and he plays with a lot of confidence and I see him doing it for a long time," Bailey said.

"Von Miller is the next Lawrence Taylor, plain and simple," said safety Rahim Moore. "No lineman in the country -- born, not born, past -- can block him."

With the inquiring minds, Miller takes his lead from Bailey, returning the compliment.

"I think it all starts in the secondary," he said. "I don't think our guys in the background get too much credit. We got Champ Bailey out there, Chris Harris, Rahim Moore's been having a great season. I think that's where it starts."

The media scrum around Miller afterward was almost as deep as the Broncos' defense. He used the word "relentless" relentlessly to describe his mindset, citing other dominant defensive players who play with that attitude, including the Cowboys' DeMarcus Ware, a two-time league sack champion who had 19.5 a year ago and has 10 so far this year, three back of Miller's league-leading total.

"He's explosive, he's fast, he's a savvy football player," Chargers center Nick Hardwick said of last year's defensive rookie of the year. "He uses his hands and feet well and ties his moves together."

"It's probably his speed," said San Diego guard Rex Hadnot. "He probably runs under a 4.4 (40-yard dash). He's really fast and plays pretty physical."

For the second week, the Broncos' defense took the lead. The offense ended up scoring 30 points, but 17 of them came as a result of Chargers turnovers (a Wesley Woodyard interception, a fumble forced by Miller on one of his sacks, and a punt blocked by Nate Irving), giving Peyton Manning and the offense short fields.

Manning's streak of 300-yard passing games came to an end -- he managed only 270 -- although he did throw for three touchdowns again, becoming the first quarterback in Broncos history to do that six times in the same season. And he still has six games to play. The previous record was five, set by John Elway in 1997. Still, the story was the defense again, and Manning knew it.

"Anytime you have a change in the defensive coordinator and you have some new players, it's going to take time forming a little chemistry and getting on the same page," he said. "I think they just continue to get better each week, understanding coach Del Rio's system, and those guys are playing at a really high level right now. It sure is fun to watch."

In fact, the offense sputtered enough that someone actually asked Manning if he felt more happiness or frustration after this one.

"Happiness," he replied. "We won, didn't we? Are you not happy? Strange question . . . strange question."

The defense surrendered a couple of late drives that made the final score closer than the game actually felt, but the Broncos' growing confidence on the defensive side is a propitious sign for the postseason.

And, yes, although they can't talk about it, we can start talking about that now. With a record of 7-3, they lead the Chargers by three games with six to play, and effectively four since they swept the season series and own the head-to-head tie-breaker.

In the process, they stretched their string of third-down denials to 26 over three games, the longest such streak in the NFL in 10 years, before the Chargers finally converted one into a first down. San Diego finished three of 16 on third down.

"It's the best defensive team they've had since we've been playing against them," said Rivers, who has been playing the Broncos twice a year since taking over the starting job in San Diego in 2006. "This is definitely as good, if not the best defense they've had that I can remember."

Bailey, of course, was having none of it.

"You look at the fourth quarter, they had two drives that we just can't give up," he said. "We're better than that. We've shown we're better than that. It's just being consistent. We've just got to find a way to keep pressing on the gas throughout four quarters.

"Never become complacent. That'll put you on your couch."

It's now five in a row since they came back from a 24-0 halftime deficit in San Diego on Oct. 15. On both sides of the ball, the Broncos are on a roll.

# **KLEE: Denver's 'D' the reason for 'W'**

Paul Klee  
Colorado Springs Gazette  
November 18, 2012

DENVER – To find the proper perspective and an honest appraisal of the Broncos, the wise move is to find Champ Bailey.

Denver's Voice of Reason wears jersey No. 24.

And Champ says Denver's defense has a problem: Too many men on the field... who can make big plays.

"Every guy that comes out there can start," the future Hall of Fame cornerback said after Denver dumped San Diego 30-23 Sunday.

"When you have to find ways to get guys on the field, that's a great problem to have," he said. "I have to give Jack (Del Rio, the defensive coordinator) a lot of credit. He's finding ways to get guys in there and making plays and getting some playing time."

The problem has become the rest of the NFL's to deal with. Denver isn't simply the Peyton Manning Show, not even close. Did you walk away from Sports Authority Field or the TV thinking Manning was the reason the Broncos won their fifth straight?

I didn't, either. And that isn't taking for granted the brilliance of Manning.

Peek at the numbers: His sixth game this season with at least three touchdown passes (franchise record); 423 career touchdown passes (second alltime, moving him ahead of Dan Marino); 148 wins by a starting quarterback (second all-time, tied with John Elway).

Is it because we expected this of Manning when he signed with Denver in March?

Is it because Denver was blessed with Elway for 16 seasons that local observers are jaded from Hall of Fame quarterback play?

It's probably because Denver's defense thumped San Diego and owned the Sunday stage. The final score doesn't accurately describe how the defense performed.

Until San Diego's first offensive touchdown drive — late in the third quarter — the Chargers had managed only 64 yards on 40 plays.

We're not accustomed to that kind of D in this Big D.

Sports Authority Field shook as the nastiest pass rush in the NFL added four more sacks, extending its league lead to 35. Von Miller had three more, extending his league lead to 13. The Broncos extended their AFC West lead to three games, plus the head-to-head tiebreaker with the Chargers.

The wild West is the one-sided West.

The Broncos will be a playoff team, again, thanks largely to a defense that owes Philip Rivers a rent check for camping out in his backfield most of Sunday afternoon.

"It's the best defensive team they've had since we've been playing against them," said Rivers, whose three-game win streak in Denver was wrecked.

"They are probably a complete a team as we've played in terms of all three phases," Chargers coach Norv Turner said.

Truth is, Bailey wasn't being completely honest. The cagey vet wouldn't label this Broncos 'D' the best in his nine years here. (It is, for sure.) Part of his duty as the elder statesmen is to keep his younger mates motivated to sack and tackle as if their playing time depends on it.

"I definitely have the throttle down on him (Miller), so hopefully he keeps going," Bailey said.

Truth is, Denver hasn't seen a pass-rusher like Miller, not the way he's turning offensive linemen into matadors.

"If you can get in the quarterback's face, that's the worst thing for him. I'm sure Peyton would tell you that," Bailey said. "You don't want guys in your face all the time."

The knock against this defense was that it couldn't get off the field. Del Rio fixed that.

Spanning games against the Bengals, Panthers and Chargers, the Broncos stopped 26 consecutive third-down attempts. That's the NFL's longest streak over the past decade.

"I think it all starts in the secondary," Miller said.

"I think the most important part of our defense is that front," Bailey countered from the other side of a businesslike locker room.

The Broncos have scored at least 30 points in five straight games, a franchise record.

Why that's promising: At least four players in the locker room suggested Denver hasn't played a complete game. Here's an educated guess the other 49 believe the same.

"Never become complacent," Bailey said. "That will put you on your couch."

Wise man, that Champ.

# Peyton Manning and the Broncos stand above the AFC West

Michael David Smith  
Pro Football Talk  
November 18, 2012

In case there was any doubt before, there's no doubt now: The Broncos are in complete control of the AFC West.

Today's 30-23 win over the Chargers gives the 7-3 Broncos a three-game lead over the 4-6 Chargers in the division, and Denver has now swept the season series and owns the head-to-head tiebreaker as well. With the Raiders out of it at 3-7 and the Chiefs even further out of it at 1-9, Broncos fans might as well start preparing to see a home playoff game right now, because with six games to go in the regular season, there's virtually no chance of the Broncos failing to win their division.

Peyton Manning looked excellent as usual against the Chargers, throwing three touchdown passes — his sixth three-touchdown performance in the Broncos' last seven games. Manning, who headed into today's game in a tie with Dan Marino for the second-most passing touchdowns in NFL history, now has 423 career touchdown passes, second only to Brett Favre's 508.

As Manning continues to make his case for the league MVP award, Broncos linebacker Von Miller is making a strong case that he deserves to be considered for Defensive Player of the Year. Miller sacked Philip Rivers three times, forced him to fumble twice and also had a tackle behind the line of scrimmage on a running play. A dominant presence for Denver's D, Miller is a big part of the reason that the Broncos have a chance not just to be a good team, but a great team.

And for the rest of the season, greatness is what the Broncos will be trying to achieve. We already know they're going to win the division, but when Manning came to town, their goals got a lot higher than that. With the division all but wrapped up, the Broncos' attention now turns toward home-field advantage in the AFC playoffs as the Broncos attempt to march toward the Super Bowl.

# McGahee doesn't think he has serious knee injury, MRI likely coming

Mike Florio

Pro Football Talk

November 18, 2012

Running back Willis McGahee, who overcome a decade ago one of the most gruesome knee injuries in football history to become a steady and productive running back, has another knee injury.

Per a source with knowledge of the situation, McGahee doesn't believe the injury is serious.

He'll likely have an MRI on Monday to gauge the specific condition of the knee and any associated ligaments and cartilage.

If McGahee can't play, he'd likely be replaced by Ronnie Hillman. The backup would be Lance Ball. At the bottom of the depth chart is former first-rounder Knowshon Moreno.

# **Knee injury sidelines Willis McGahee**

Michael David Smith

Pro Football Talk

November 18, 2012

Broncos running back Willis McGahee left Sunday's game against the Chargers with a knee injury and did not return.

McGahee was off to a good start, with seven carries for 55 yards, but he went down hard when he was tackled on that seventh carry and stayed on the ground in obvious pain. No details were given other than that he hurt his knee.

With McGahee out, Ronnie Hillman got the bulk of the work at running back, and Lance Ball also got an increased workload. Those two would likely share the running back duties going forward if McGahee needs to miss any games.

# Postgame Analysis: Broncos 30, Chargers 23

Andrew Mason  
CBSSports.com  
November 18, 2012

This time, it was the Chargers who surged late. But two things didn't change for San Diego in its rematch with Denver: the Broncos won -- 30-23, in this case -- and Von Miller and Elvis Dumervil made life miserable for Chargers QB Philip Rivers and their overmatched OTs, Mike Harris and Jeromey Clary.

The Broncos moved to 7-3 and can now safely think about bigger goals than simply winning the AFC West for a second consecutive year. San Diego dropped to 4-6 with losses in five of its last six games on a rapid skid into irrelevance -- although the tenuous nature of wild-card leaders Pittsburgh and Indianapolis offers the Chargers a flicker of hope.

"I don't think this was a must-win situation but I do think it was critical that we get on the right track," said Chargers TE Antonio Gates.

The biggest reason why the Chargers remained off course was their inability to contain Miller and Dumervil, who continued attacking Rivers from the flanks. They combined for four sacks and three forced fumbles; one led to the Broncos' final touchdown and another ended the Chargers' last-gasp attempt at a comeback in the final seconds.

**When the game turned:** With the teams tied at 7-apiece early in the second quarter, Rivers dropped back and threw an errant pass intended for WR Danario Alexander that Broncos LB Wesley Woodyard easily intercepted. Unlike many of Rivers' throws, this one was not under extreme duress; he simply threw a dart that didn't clear Woodyard and was way behind Alexander.

"The passes he did have, he was just rushing it," said Broncos DT Kevin Vickerson. "Our pressure was getting to him and then our run game -- we stopped the run, made them one-dimensional."

Denver took the lead for good three plays later after settling for a 19-yard Matt Prater field goal. San Diego went three-and-out on six of its next seven possessions and gained just 16 yards on its next 17 snaps, while the Broncos gradually built their lead up to 15 points.

**Highlight moments:** Eric Weddle's 23-yard interception return for a first-quarter touchdown. The pass from Manning was tipped by CB Marcus Gilchrist and gave the Chargers their only lead, at 7-0. ... Broncos LB Nate Irving blocked a Mike Scifres

punt in the second quarter; it was the first punt block for a Bronco since TE Tony Scheffler blocked a Scifres punt attempt in 2007.

**Key stat:** Before allowing the Chargers to convert three consecutive third-down chances on a third-quarter touchdown drive, the Broncos had stopped the Chargers, Panthers and Bengals on 26 consecutive third downs dating back to Nov. 4. This was the longest streak in the league since 2002.

### **Top-shelf performances:**

- Miller: Three sacks for 29 yards in losses, two tackles for losses, two forced fumbles.
- Manning: 25-of-42 passing for 270 yards, three touchdowns and an interception. He moved into second place all-time on the league's touchdown pass list (423) and has thrown three touchdown passes in six of the last seven games.
- Broncos LB Wesley Woodyard: One fumble recovery, one interception, one tackle for loss, eight tackles overall.
- Chargers DT Kendall Reyes: two sacks, two tackles for losses.

### **What they said about Miller's three-sack performance:**

- Broncos CB Champ Bailey: "When you can get in the quarterback's face, that's the worst thing for him, and I'm sure Peyton (Manning) will tell you that. ... I've got to give him a lot of credit. That boy works his butt off and plays with a lot of confidence, and I see him doing it for a long time."
- Broncos DT Vickerson: "I told him today, 'You're a beast, man.' I mean, he can be special. He is a special kid, but he can be special. He definitely has what it takes."
- Chargers C Nick Hardwick: "He's explosive. He's fast. He's a savvy football player who uses his hands and feet well. He ties moves together. He's just a good football player."

**Injury update: Broncos** -- RB Willis McGahee left in the second quarter with a knee injury and did not return. The knee swelled after team trainers worked on it on the sideline and he was in the locker room during the second half. CB Omar Bolden suffered a concussion in the first quarter and did not return. **Chargers** -- P Mike Scifres was treated on the field after suffering a blocked punt but returned. ... CB Quentin Jammer suffered a calf injury in the second quarter and didn't return.

**Going forward: Broncos** -- A trip to woeful Kansas City next weekend will bring an end to the Broncos' run of five consecutive games against losing teams; if they avoid stumbling against the Chiefs, they'll be ready for a three-game stretch that

includes games against improving Tampa Bay and surging Baltimore, sandwiched around a Thursday night trip to Oakland. That three-game run should determine whether the Broncos can push for a first-round bye. **Chargers** -- With the AFC West title almost certainly out of reach, San Diego's only plausible hope is a wild-card spot. The Chargers trail the Colts by two games for the final playoff position, and the only team on the rest of the schedule with a winning record is Pittsburgh, which is likely to be without QB Ben Roethlisberger when the clubs meet in two weeks. The Chargers have lost five of their last six and are clearly sliding, but if they beat Cincinnati next week and the Steelers in a fortnight, they have a pulse with a three-game closing stretch against the Panthers, Jets and Raiders, teams that are a combined 9-21.

# Swelling of Willis McGahee's knee puts Broncos in wait-and-see mode

Andrew Mason  
CBSSports.com  
November 18, 2012

The Broncos will wait and see what further examination on RB Willis McGahee's right knee reveals, but the fact that he was able to jump on a stationary bicycle and pedal soon after he was injured in Sunday's game against San Diego offers hope that the injury isn't serious.

McGahee, the Broncos' leading rusher, left the game after a collision with San Diego's Quentin Jammer. He walked to the sideline under his own power and was treated on a massage table by a team trainer, but left for the locker room at halftime and did not return.

"(The knee) kind of swelled up, so we're just going to be precautionary," Broncos coach John Fox said.

When the swelling abates, McGahee is expected to undergo an MRI examination.

*ProFootballTalk.com* reported that a source close to McGahee believes that the injury will not be serious.

Without McGahee, the Broncos' running game lost power. McGahee, Lance Ball and Ronnie Hillman combined for 81 yards on nine carries (a 5.6-yard average) before McGahee was injured; after the play, Hillman and Ball collectively gained 52 yards on 16 carries -- leaving them with a 3.25-yard average.

If McGahee misses any time, 2009 first-round pick Knowshon Moreno would return to the lineup. Moreno has been deactivated eight consecutive games after losing a fumble at Atlanta in Week 2.

# Your take on the Broncos' win ... in six words or less

Andrew Mason

Mile High Sports

November 19, 2012

**DENVER** – Is it possible that some Broncos fans have become spoiled again?

That's a blunt assessment — probably excessively so — but I'd thought the last five seasons without a winning record would reap a simple appreciation when success finally returned.

Instead, a home victory over the team that had long been the hometown 53's tormentors was greeted not with ebullient enthusiasm, but the sentiment that it could have been more elegant.

Sure, there were mistakes. But Von Miller diced up a hapless foe in his one-on-one matchup, Peyton Manning hit three different receivers for touchdowns and the Chargers never led after early in the second quarter and resorted to desperate tactics like an on-side kickoff to open the second half. It didn't work, because the Chargers promptly squandered that field position with a three-and-out forced by the Broncos' ascendant defense.

Super Bowl-caliber teams win games like this — when they're not at their best and grit through regardless. Take Sunday's games, and look at the Packers in Detroit, or the Texans against the Jaguars, or the Falcons against the Cardinals. They were sloppy and shaky — and victorious. That's fine company for the Broncos to keep.

**@RSH089**

A long overdue Chargers' season sweep.

**@wesly\_bateman**

Be more efficient on 3rd down.

**@CaliBronco20**

I hope McGahee is all right.

**@HeathMooreCO**

Not greatest offensive effort, but enough.

**@100Broncoholic**

The orange crush is officially back!

**@Real\_Rob\_Clark**

D.J. Williams (kidding, but he played well first game back).

**MASON: No argument here.**

**@CesarOmarBTS**

Work hard on fumbles.

**@jarommoore**

Way way way way too close.

**@geraceandy**

Offense still needs work, defense awesome!

**@StoyWare**

Closer than it needed to be.

**@AemaITheAFGHAN**

Close 'til end, take ugly win.

**@tigervixxen**

We hung on for dear life.

**@NightTrainLayne**

Finally stepped on Chargers' throat.

**@5cullen7**

Get healthy Chris Kuper.

**@ScottBenedict1**

How 'bout them Broncos!

**@denverdude8**

Defense! Von = D.P.O.Y and Woodyard = Pro Bowl

**@RenKnowItAll**

FOOTBALL RULES!

**MASON: Huck it, chuck it, football!**

**@Kped722**

Need to win games like that.

**@Amazing\_23**

Fumble issues need to be addressed now.

**MASON: "If not us, who? If not now, when?"**

**@Truth480**

Loss of Wolfe, McGahee worrisome.

**MASON: Wolfe came back. McGahee might not be serious.**

**@afeather1**

Defense faded. Offense struggled. Disappointing win.

**@joehowarddesign**

There's no pictures on the scorecard.

**@broncs0727**

Offense needs to gel.

**@Mikedecicco**

Closer than it shoulda been.

**MASON: Really? I predicted a seven-point Broncos win. The result sounds about right to me.**

**@5280Hawk**

home playoff game!!

**@BroncosForums**

Das Football spiel war viel wunderbar.

**MASON: Alles klar, Herr Kommissar?**

**@kndh19**

Fox is a wuss, PFM overcomes.

**MASON: This isn't Madden. The wise play isn't always to go for it — especially when a field goal means the difference between being up nor or two scores — or when it increases the gap from 11 to 14 points in the fourth quarter, which means the Chargers have to mount two touchdown drives rather than one (since they could tie with field goal, a touchdown and a two-point conversion). There are proper times to go for it on fourth down. What we saw Sunday was not.**

**@MadVillainCK**

Denver Broncos – 2012 AFC West Champions.

**@already27**

Von Miller Defensive player of 2012.

**@amac1515**

Offense needs to get rolling again.

**@payyobill**

Chargers are unplugged for the season.

**MASON: Not for the wild card. If anything, Sunday showed they have a pulse, and they have the schedule and improving play from their defensive line to pull off a Houdini act — perhaps at Pittsburgh's expense.**

**@MinimalBroncos**

What? We might finish over .500?

**MASON: It has been a while.**

**@pigghat**

AFC West down. AFC up next!

**@SoCalAvsFan**

Denver Broncos. 2012 Division Champs.

**@davidjohny**

D smashing nails in coffins again!

**@jskobe**

Couldn't watch. But beating SD rocks!

**@OSingh91**

Suffocating defense, acceptable offense, team win.

**@5280Orange**

Ugly win was ugly.

**MASON: By last year's standards, it would have been a masterwork.**

**@djthump**

Broncos D wins the game.

**@SpaceCowboyLG**

Someday (consistent) offense will find you.

**@richardrush28**

Lot of mistakes, still a Win.

**@RhettRothberg**

Just win baby.

# **Acee: Chargers' offense simply not powerful enough**

Kevin Acee  
U-T San Diego  
November 19, 2012

The locker room had mostly emptied, the bulk of the San Diego Chargers' players and coaches having dressed and left.

Quarterback Philip Rivers already had addressed the media, showered and was fitting his boots under his jeans as he tackled the topic of the Chargers' suddenly impotent offense.

In his first six years as the starting quarterback, the Chargers offense averaged 25.6 points a game and never finished worse than eighth in offensive points scored. The 2011 season was the Chargers' eighth straight averaging at least 25 points, a stretch unmatched in NFL history.

Through 10 games this season, the offense is averaging 19.5 points and ranks 21st in the NFL.

Pushed to do more than take blame for his part, which can be measured by his 14 interceptions, Rivers finally said this: "It's not an excuse, but we've had a lot of change. We've tried to grow. We have grown, just not (to) where we need to be to win a game."

I will add that many of the new players simply don't deserve to wear the same uniform worn by Vincent Jackson and Darren Sproles, Kris Dielman and Marcus McNeill.

Never has it been so apparent that this is A.J. Smith's mess.

It's not Smith's fault the left side of his line had to retire early because of injury, but it is his fault that Jackson and Sproles were not kept. And it's not Smith's fault that Jared Gaither is absolutely stealing money, but the highest draft pick Smith ever has invested on an offensive lineman is a second-round pick, and the guy starting in Gaither's place was undrafted this past April.

The Chargers can talk about being close, but even if it's true, missing by a few plays each time adds up over six games.

It adds up to this team just not having enough good players, and it is no longer an escapable conclusion.

Sunday's 30-23 loss, in which the offense amassed 54 yards and zero points in the first half, illustrated that more than any before it.

There was \$29 million in guaranteed money paid to free agents in March that paid little to no dividend on Sunday. Gaither missed his sixth game, Eddie Royal left with a hamstring injury after returning one punt for one yard, and Robert Meachem caught one pass for 10 yards.

Coach Norv Turner will no doubt be fired from his third head coaching job. But it is increasingly likely Chargers president Dean Spanos also does what I never thought he would and decide he needs a new man acquiring talent.

# Chargers know AFC West title lost after falling to Denver

Michael Gehlken  
U-T San Diego  
November 18, 2012

DENVER — Philip Rivers has seen the magic.

He's seen the Chargers fall three games behind the Broncos with three to go. He's seen them close the gap, winning out while Denver lost out.

They were bailed out once.

Not even Rivers, the eternal competitor and optimist, can see that happening again.

Any hopes San Diego had to win its first AFC West title since 2009 essentially ended Sunday, as it couldn't slow a Broncos team that continues to roll. The Chargers fell 30-23 and must now make up four games in six weeks.

Hope has not been lost for the season.

That much was clear in a post-game visitor's room where locker by locker a different player was assuring this mess of five losses in the past six games can be salvaged.

But to close the gap on these Broncos, who've won five straight, would require a collapse similar to the 2008 version.

"They ain't gonna stumble," Rivers said. "...We can't hang our hat on Denver doing anything from a collapsing standpoint. We got to hang our hat on us controlling what we can control and try to win one at a time and chip away at it and see if nine or 10 (wins) ends up being enough. Six games to go, they're not losing four of six; I can guarantee you that.

"That's not going to make us try any less harder, but we got to go out and control what we can control, and that's trying to win a game against the Baltimore Ravens (this Sunday). I think at this point, to talk playoffs is not appropriate, really. We just got to try and win a game, see if we can get win No. 5."

This was a complete loss.

The offense was shut out in the first half, which ended with Mike Scifres having nearly as many punts — seven — as Rivers had completions — nine — behind an overpowered offensive line and a receiving corps that struggled to find space.

The first-half running game also faltered with 11 carries for 8 yards.

San Diego's defense and special teams allowed big plays between them, including a second-quarter blocked punt that led to a touchdown on the next play.

The Chargers did Sunday as they tend and now hope to do.

They made things interesting.

It started in the third quarter when the offense awoke.

Rivers began the game 9-for-20 for 60 yards and an interception. The offense's first 12 drives, with 10 punts and two turnovers, produced zero points.

He finished by completing 15 of 20 passes for 198 yards and two touchdowns with a pick.

The turnaround began on a 12-play, 80-yard drive in which he was 7-for-9 for 67 yards, including an 8-yard touchdown to wide receiver Danario Alexander. That cut the Chargers' deficit to 24-16 with 58 seconds left in the third.

Denver made field goals on its next two drives.

Down by 13, Rivers led his second 80-yard touchdown drive. Alexander caught four passes for 65 yards, capped by a 21-yard touchdown with 89 seconds left in regulation.

An onside kick attempt failed, and that was it.

San Diego would get the ball again with 30 seconds to travel 83 yards. Broncos defensive end Elvis Dumervil sacked Rivers on second down.

That ended the game.

It didn't end the season, tight end Randy McMichael said.

"Our season is not over," McMichael said. "We know that. We still have a lot of football left. But we can't lose anymore. We can't lose another game — can't. We've got to go out and continue to fight. We fought our ass off until the end, but we didn't get done what we needed to get done.

"Our season is far from over. We just can't lose anymore."

# Manning proves to Chargers he has plenty left

Jay Paris  
U-T San Diego  
November 18, 2012

DENVER -- Peyton Manning, ugh.

That's the reaction from Chargers fans, and why not? His Broncos beat the Chargers, 30-23, to complete a season sweep, plopping the Chargers so far behind division-leading Denver they need binoculars to see its gaudy blue and orange work duds.

Well there's that, and Peyton's last name.

But the Chargers have bigger problems than Peyton, Eli or even Archie Manning. They're playing like Jugheads, and that's an issue.

But in the Broncos' locker room, it's all smiles and back slaps. When the sun set Sunday over the Rockies, Manning had toasted another victory, which came with a milestone: his 148th triumph ties his boss, John Elway, for second-most in NFL history.

"All those wins are team wins, and every player probably has that record," Manning said.

Wonder what Chargers general manager A. J. Smith thought of Manning? Hard to say as he wasn't spotted near the team bus. But in May, he told the U-T:

"The Broncos are led by one of the greatest quarterbacks in NFL history," he said, and the wily guy is known to have a sarcastic twist. "I just hope the Broncos don't run away with the division and leave the rest of us behind in the dust."

Manning was the Broncos' front man, throwing for three touchdowns and 270 yards in directing Denver to its fifth consecutive victory. The Chargers' ticket is punched the opposite direction, losers of two straight and five of six.

But Manning and coach John Fox weren't anticipating a confetti shower, despite their three-game lead over the Chargers becoming four with the tiebreaker.

"In this league, you're two games away from disaster," Fox said. "All that we're doing is looking one week at a time and if we continue to win, when the season's over, we'll know."

There's no mystery that Manning has been Manning. He's performing like the four-time MVP he is, and not the 36-year-old with as many neck surgeries (four) as the Chargers have wins.

"This is the first time I've played a part of this division rivalry, but it's a healthy rivalry," he said. "There are no easy wins. It's tough to beat a good football team."

The Chargers take the compliment, knowing that and \$2 gets a cup of coffee. But not much more Sunday, with Manning scanning the field and seldom not locating the right receiver. Nine different Broncos had catches, and that's no accident.

"That is what it is all about -- Peyton finding every guy," said Denver's Eric Decker, who had a touchdown reception. "That is what he has done all season and it is fun when everyone is involved and the team wins."

Although the locals were grumbling when the Broncos punted on their first series. They've been spoiled watching Manning torture defenses, and haven't we seen that before?

"I guess it's a good thing when a three-and-out is shocking or surprising to y'all," he said. "It means we're doing something well, but this was a good defense we were playing against."

"So we were prepared -- it was going to be a four-quarter, 60-minute game, and those guys have a lot of pride over there."

And Manning has plenty left, proving it by the Broncos giving the Chargers the season-series broom for the first time since 2005.

Manning also swept past Dan Marino with his first-quarter scoring pass to Demaryius Thomas; Manning is No. 2 all-time at 423.

He's No. 1 among Broncos for a single-season record, with three touchdown passes in six games.

Just maybe the woeful Chargers are deep-six, too. If so, Manning helped shovel the dirt on them.

# Krasovic: Instant analysis of Broncos win over Chargers

Tom Krasovic  
U-T San Diego  
November 18, 2012

The Chargers had too many leaks in their offensive line. Philip Rivers seldom looked comfortable and had three turnovers. Another blocked punt added to the mile-high headache for San Diego, which lost to the Broncos 30-23 on Sunday.

Denver won its fifth consecutive game and appears to be running away with the AFC West.

**It was over when:** Broncos safety Jim Leonhard intercepted a desperate pass by Rivers at Denver's 29 with nine minutes left. The Chargers trailed 27-16 when Wesley Woodyard, knocking Ronnie Brown backward, harried Rivers into the 4th-and-9 misfire.

**Game ball goes to:** Broncos edge rusher Von Miller, who had three sacks and a key forced fumble. He set up 14 points. One big play came after right tackle Jeromey Clary slanted away from Miller to assist rookie guard David Molk, filling in for Louis Vasquez. Miller ran in free and sacked Rivers for a 14-yard loss. Miller later beat Clary to force a fumble that led to a third-quarter touchdown.

**Stat of the game:** In the first half, the Chargers' offense was 0-for-8 on third downs and gained only 54 yards.

**What it means:** The Chargers (4-6) will not win the AFC West unless something very strange happens. Losers of five of their last six games, they are effectively four games behind the Broncos (7-3) because Denver holds the head-to-head tiebreaker over them.

**Second guessing:** The Chargers didn't fix the right side of their punt protection, which allowed a blocked punt for the second straight game. Both led to touchdowns.

**Second guessing, part II:** In recent drafts, A.J. Smith should've taken an offensive lineman or two in the upper rounds. The Chargers were fortunate to get several years out of left tackle Marcus McNeill, who fell to them in the draft because of concerns about his neck. A neglected offensive line has become a liability.

**Unsung hero:** Darrell Stuckey, Chargers special team player. Stuckey recovered Nick Novak's onside kick to open the second half. In the first quarter, he ripped the ball from punt returner Trindon Holliday but Denver recovered.

**Next Sunday:** The Baltimore Ravens will be at Qualcomm Stadium, where they lost 34-14 last December. The Ravens will be coming off a Sunday night game against the rival Steelers.

# Broncos beat Chargers, quarter by quarter

Tom Krasovic  
U-T San Diego  
November 18, 2012

## First quarter

Chargers 7, Broncos 0

**Key play:** Eric Weddle returned an interception 23 yards for a touchdown, giving the Chargers a 7-0 lead. Nickelback Marcus Gilchrist deflected Peyton Manning's pass upward, allowing Weddle to gather it.

**Key stat:** The Broncos had four possessions that started and ended within the quarter -- none starting beyond their 20 -- but no points against John Pagano's active defense.

**Not in the box score:** Mike Scifres had consecutive net punts of 51 and 67 yards to push the Broncos to their 15 and 12. Chargers end Vaughn Martin broke into the backfield, wrecking Denver's 3rd-and-1 run attempt by back Lance Moore.

## Second quarter

Broncos 17, Chargers 7

**Key play:** Broncos linebacker Wesley Woodyard intercepted a Philip Rivers pass and ran it 25 yards to Denver's 8, setting up Matt Prater's go-ahead field goal. Rivers, aiming for Danario Alexander, didn't appear to see Woodyard, who made a rapid retreat and snag.

**Key stat:** In nine first-half possessions, San Diego's offense had no points, two first downs, one turnover and 54 total yards.

**Not in the boxscore:** The Broncos' Nate Irving was unblocked, leading to a block of a Scifres punt for the second game in a row. Willis McGahee (Broncos) and Quentin Jammer left the game. Jammer's back-up, Shareece Wright, fared well until he was fooled by Peyton Manning's pump fake, enabling Brandon Stokley's 31-yard TD catch. Guards Louis Vasquez and Tyronne Green were sidelined when Von Miller -- unblocked -- sacked Rivers for a 14-yard loss.

## Third quarter

Broncos 24, Chargers 16

**Key play:** Shaun Phillips sacked Peyton Manning for a safety, two plays after a Scifres punt nailed Denver to its 2. Phillips blew past tight end Virgil Green for his team-high sixth sack, pulling the Chargers to 17-9.

**Key stat:** An 80-yard scoring drive capped by Danario Alexander exceeded the Chargers' first-half output by 26 yards.

**Not in the boxscore:** To open the half, Darrell Stuckey recovered Nick Novak's onside kick – but the Broncos forced a punt. Vazquez returned and his backup, Rex Hadnot, moved from right guard to left guard.

#### **Fourth quarter**

Broncos 30, Chargers 23

**Key play:** Continuing his strong game, the speedy Woodyard pressured Rivers into a 4th-and-9 desperate throw that safety Jim Leonhard intercepted, giving Denver possession with a 27-16 lead at its 29 with 9:16 left.

**Key stat:** Leonhard's interception was the third turnover charged to Rivers, one off a fumble.

**Not in the boxscore:** Chargers rookie Kendall Reyes had two sacks. Alexander continued to overpower defensive backs as part of a seven-catch game. Broncos Tight end Jacob Tamme, converting on 3rd-and-18, got behind Takeo Spikes to haul in a 31-yard pass.

# Denver Downs Chargers in Key AFC West Clash

Ricky Henne

Chargers.com

November 18, 2012

There was a lot at stake as the Chargers visited Sports Authority Field at Mile High to take on the AFC West leading Denver Broncos. Unfortunately, the Bolts couldn't come away with a win as they were defeated 30-23.

The Chargers and Broncos exchanged punts three times to start the game before the Chargers defense came up with a big play. On a first down, Marcus Gilchrist batted a Peyton Manning ball straight up into the air that Eric Weddle grabbed and ran 23-yards for the pick six. The Broncos drove the ball down the field but the Chargers defense managed to hold Denver to a long 55-yard field goal attempt that bounced off the left upright. At the end of the first quarter, the Chargers led 7-0.

Unfortunately, things took a dramatic swing in the second quarter as the Broncos scored 17 points to take a 17-7 lead. A couple of big blunders by the Bolts proved to be their undoing as Philip Rivers [▶](#) threw an interception deep in the Chargers own territory while the team also gave up a blocked punt for the second straight game.

Manning and the Broncos were supposed to receive the ball to start the second half, but the Chargers made a gutsy call going for an onside kick. Nick Novak hit the ball straight up the middle and Darrell Stuckey came up with the loose ball. After another three-and-out, Mike Scifres hit a perfect punt to back the Broncos up at their own two-yard line. Two plays later, Shaun Phillips came up with a big play, sacking Manning in the end zone for a safety. With the score now 17-9, both teams exchanged three-and-outs. Ryan Mathews broke out a couple strong runs and the team seemed to be building a rhythm when Von Miller had another strip sack of Rivers. The Broncos recovered the ball and returned it to the San Diego 25-yard line. The home team capitalized three plays later as Eric Decker had a 20-yard touchdown grab and run to extend the lead to 24-9. The Chargers responded with their best drive of the game, methodically moving the ball down field culminating with an eight-yard touchdown pass from Rivers to Danario Alexander. Heading into the fourth quarter, the Bolts trailed 24-16.

Denver drove the ball down for a 30-yard field goal to kick off the final 15 minutes, extending their lead to 27-16. The Chargers got the ball across mid-field, but on

4<sup>th</sup>-and-14, Rivers threw a desperation ball as he was being brought down that was intercepted by Jim Leonhard. The Broncos took five minutes off the clock as they marched down field for another field goal, extending the lead to 30-16. In hurry up mode, Rivers marched the team down the field and hit Alexander for 21 yards and his second touchdown of the game. Down by just a touchdown, the team went for an onside kick but were unable to recover it as the Broncos went on to win 30-23.

### **Turning Point**

San Diego trailed by just three points, 10-7, when Mike Scifres dropped back to punt with 2:00 to go in the first half. Then, for the second time in two games, the Chargers allowed a blocked punt as the Broncos' Nate Irving bust throughout the middle. Denver took over at the 31-yard line, and on the very first play from scrimmage, Peyton Manning hit Brandon Stokely in the end zone for a 17-7 lead. With the Chargers offense struggling all day, San Diego was never able to recover as they went on to drop the game, 30-23.

### **It Was Over When...**

It was desperation mode for the Chargers after they managed to pull within seven points with 1:24 remaining in the game. Forced to go for an onside kick, the Bolts were unable to recover as the ball went straight into the arms of the Broncos' Virgil Green. The Chargers would eventually get the ball back with 24 seconds in the game, but it wasn't enough time to drive the length of the field.

### **Play of the Game**

Peyton Manning made a quick throw on a 1<sup>st</sup>-and-10 that Marcus Gilchrist read the whole way. Gilchrist tipped it straight in the air and Eric Weddle came down with it. The All-Pro safety raced and weaved his way 23 yards for a touchdown and an early 7-0 lead.

### **Stat of the Game**

The Chargers second ranked run defense allowed an uncharacteristic 133 yards on the ground, compared to just 53 rushed for by their own offense.

### **Bolt Quotebook**

*"Denver I think is an outstanding football team. I think they're probably as complete a team as we've played in terms of all three phases." – Head Coach Norv Turner*

*"It's tough. We treat them all like they are must win, but we knew what was at stake this week. They're a good team." – Quarterback Philip Rivers*

*"I don't know why we started out like we did. For myself, I felt real slow in the first half and I picked it up in the second half. They threw some different things at us that kind of twisted our game plan up. We responded in the second half but it wasn't enough." – Wide Receiver Malcom Floyd*

*"Today, we weren't the San Diego Chargers that we normally could be. We've been struggling the past couple of weeks. Fortunately, we still have the right guys in this locker room and the right coaching staff to get it done. And we definitely believe it." –Tight End Antonio Gates*

### **Odds and Ends**

Danario Alexander scored for the second straight game, this time catching two touchdowns from Philip Rivers.

The Broncos converted 21 first downs compared to 13 by San Diego.

The Chargers allowed a blocked punt for the second game in a row.

Denver outgained San Diego 386 to 277.

There were two changes to the starting lineup: Mike Harris at left tackle for Jared Gaither and Cam Thomas for Aubrayo Franklin

The inactives today included Seyi Ajitutu, Brandon Taylor, Chris Carr, Gaither, Franklin, Jonas Mouton and Dante Rosario.

# Defense Steps Up but Offense Can't Capitalize

Ricky Henne  
Chargers.com  
November 18, 2012

The Chargers defense didn't play a flawless game, but they did more than enough to put the team in a position to win.

Unfortunately, the offense wasn't able to get itself in rhythm until it was too late as San Diego lost 30-23.

"I thought defensively our guys did an awfully good job giving us a chance and keeping us in the game," head coach Norv Turner said to open his postgame press conference. "Defensively, plays we made gave us a chance to stay in the game. We just didn't make enough plays offensively to win the game."

The defense made their presence felt immediately. After forcing a punt on the Broncos' first possession, the unit put points on the board on the second. Peyton Manning attempted a quick pass to his left, but Marcus Gilchrist read it all the way. The second-year cornerback tipped it straight up in the air, and Eric Weddle cradled it in and returned it 23-yards for a touchdown.

The offense, however, struggled mightily for the first 30 minutes of the game. They were only able to muster two first downs and had to punt the ball eight times.

"Our defense really played well the whole game, but especially early," said Philip Rivers. "(Offensively) we couldn't get anything going in the first half. It was rough, and they had a lot to do with it. That's a heck of a defense. We finally got going in the second half but we couldn't get quite caught up."

Rivers lamented the team's inability to capitalize on the defense's strong play, especially early in the match.

"What's hard and what's frustrating is that the defense was playing so well," he said. "We got a touchdown and then we got the ball back on the missed field goal there almost at midfield. We had opportunities to make it 10-0 or 14-0 and we couldn't get anything going. We didn't execute great during those drives, but they had a lot to do with it. Again, that's a good defense."

After the game, the offense repeatedly praised the job the defense did to keep them in the game.

"They played phenomenal," said Antonio Gates. "I can't say enough about our defense. Just the way they were able to get after Peyton Manning and control the line of scrimmage from a defensive standpoint, they definitely deserve their due. They did a wonderful job of trying to keep us in the game, and we tried to fight back. I think that shows the character of our team, especially our defense, that they constantly go out and give it all they had (for us) to still have an opportunity at the end."

Nick Hardwick was another member of the offense who couldn't say enough about the defense's performance.

"The defense was an animal," he said. "They gave us good field position, and unfortunately in the first half we just didn't use that field position. They were as tough as could be and did a great job."

Still, the defense wasn't satisfied with their performance, pointing out their shortcomings rather than focusing on the positives.

"Did you see how many yards we gave up?" asked Donald Butler. "That's not doing your job. We kept them out of the end zones a bunch, yeah, but in the end it wasn't good enough. To say we did or job, that's just not accurate in my opinion."

# Three Plays in a Row Turn Tide Against Chargers

Ricky Henne

Chargers.com

November 18, 2012

The Chargers were down by just three points, 10-7, just before the two minute warning to end the first half. They faced a 3<sup>rd</sup>-and-4, and that's where the game took a turn for the worst.

Philip Rivers was sacked for a loss of 13 yards. Then, Mike Scifres punt was blocked by Nate Irving, giving Denver the ball at the Chargers' 31-yard line. On the very next play, Peyton Manning found Brandon Stokley in the back of the end zone to give the Broncos a 17-7 lead heading into halftime.

"That was rough," said Rivers. "Those were game changing plays."

With the offense struggling to get any momentum, the tide turning series of events proved to be the turning point of the game. Afterwards, Antonio Gates expressed how those same mistakes keep occurring for the Bolts, leading to similar results week after week.

"It was tough," he said of the trio of plays. "Just being here, we know that it's definitely a tough place to get a win. Just putting them in a position where they have a lead and they have an edge and change of field position, that's all part of winning football games. We allowed them to change field position. We allowed them to have sack-fumbles. We turned the ball over. And I'm saying the same thing every week. It's so cliché about turning the football over, but it still holds to be true since I started playing sports in general. If you turn the football over, it's a strong possibility you may not win the game."

Head coach Norv Turner admitted the series of events played a large role in the team's undoing, especially the blocked punt.

"That's really hard for me because we've improved so much (on special teams), and it just shows you, you don't take anything for granted," he said. "Look at the plays we had against us. We've blocked it many times. For some reason, the last two weeks we've come up short. We've got to fix it and fix it fast."

Special teams captain Darrell Stuckey addressed the blocked punt in the locker room, and he too explained how it was a momentum turning blunder.

"It's never positive to have a mistake, and something like that is never good regardless of when it comes in the game," he said. "When you have something like that happen, it's never a good thing. It was a bad time for that to happen. It's one of those things where we can't let little things like that to creep in because it puts the team in bad situations. It put our backs against the wall."

# CHAMP'S CHOICE

## *John Elway's first real save came two years ago*

Chris Bianchi  
Mile High Sports  
November 18, 2012

Two years ago, Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey was preparing himself to leave the team he'd spent the previous six-and-a-half years playing for. Playing in the final year of a seven-year deal that he signed after he was acquired from the Redskins back in 2004, Bailey and the Broncos abruptly broke off contract extension talks in October 2010, and the chances of the future Hall of Famer returning for year No. 8 looked slim to none.

But then, John Elway stepped in and saved the day.

"The reason I didn't re-sign was Josh (McDaniels) didn't want to re-sign me during the season," Bailey told me earlier this week. "So, I didn't know what to expect. I was preparing myself to leave, but once (John) Elway took over, the first thing that came out of his mouth was that he wanted to re-sign me. That's when my hopes became to grow again. I began to prepare myself for the worst, but it worked out."

These days, the Broncos are busy leading the AFC West and can all but lock up the divisional crown with a win later today over the Chargers at Mile High. Most will point to Elway's more recent stroke of magic, convincing Peyton Manning to sign up with the Broncos back in March. And sure, the Broncos wouldn't be anywhere near 6-3 without the remarkable Manning leading the charge. But without Elway's first order of business, getting Bailey to re-sign on a four-year deal in February 2011, the Broncos wouldn't have the sixth-ranked defense in the NFL (in yards allowed) and the 11th ranked passing defense heading into today's game.

"It's funny because I talked to guys around the league during that time period and they all thought I should chase a ring somewhere; I was like, 'What's wrong with Denver?'" Bailey said. "At the time, of course, everything was wrong with Denver, but things turn around so fast. It's about the right guys being in the program, and once (John) Elway took over, I knew we'd get the right guys. I wasn't even worried."

Hurricane McDaniels blew apart first-round picks, drafts altogether, and alienated a respected defensive coordinator (Mike Nolan) and several of the team's veteran

players during his 23 months in charge between 2009 and 2010. Ultimately, he lost his locker room just weeks into the disastrous 4-12 2010 campaign. But perhaps chief (and most overlooked) amongst his laundry list of blunders, McDaniels managed to alienate the heart and soul of his defense by pulling a contract extension off of Bailey's table in October 2010.

So it's no wonder that Bailey almost certainly wouldn't have come back had McDaniels stuck around as Chief Dictator.

"I highly doubt it," Bailey said when asked if he would have returned had McDaniels remained coach. "Who knows?"

Fortunately for Bailey, who said all along that he wanted to stay in Denver even with McDaniels leading the way, the Broncos cut the cord with McDaniels in early December 2010. And less than a month later, Elway was hired as the team's new vice president of football operations, and Bailey's return was tops on the priority list.

"It wasn't in my hands, so to speak. It was, but it wasn't," Bailey said. "I wanted to be here. It was about making sure that the contract situation was taken care of, and I really didn't have a chance to talk to any other teams. I didn't know what was out there. They finally came with a good offer, and here I am."

And these days, with the Broncos 6-3 and eyeing a Super Bowl run, Bailey is as excited about this Broncos team as any he's been a part of.

"I think when you look at our quarterback situation, it's no comparison really (to 2005, when the Broncos went 13-3 and lost to the Steelers in the AFC Championship Game)," Bailey said. "I mean, no offense to Jake (Plummer), looking at Peyton, and Peyton probably stands out as the best to have ever played, and he's still playing that way."

In the end, Champ and the Broncos both made the right choice.

# San Diego Sweep

Gray Caldwell  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 18, 2012

The Broncos won their fifth straight game on Sunday, finishing off a season sweep of the San Diego Chargers, 30-23, at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

**DENVER** -- Five weeks ago, the San Diego Chargers were 30 minutes away from a two-game lead in the AFC West.

Instead, the Broncos used a 35-point second half to take the first matchup of the season. On Sunday at Sports Authority Field at Mile High, Denver held off a Chargers comeback to complete the season sweep with a 30-23 win.

"I've got to give the whole team a lot of credit -- we fought our butts off," cornerback **Champ Bailey** said of the team's fifth consecutive win. "We knew we had a team coming in here wanting to get a win. It took 60 minutes to get it done."

With the victory, the Broncos took a big step toward a second consecutive AFC West title. With six games left in the regular season, Denver (7-3) now holds a three-game lead over the second-place Chargers (4-6), plus the tiebreaker courtesy of the club's first sweep of the season series since 2005.

"We wanted it," said wide receiver **Eric Decker**, who on Sunday became the third player in team history to catch at least eight touchdowns in back-to-back seasons. "We made sure we fought until the end, pulled out the victory. Now having a nice lead is comfortable, but we need to get back at it and get better every week because we have bigger goals ahead of us."

The game got off to a decidedly pro-Chargers start, as quarterback **Peyton Manning**'s pass was tipped at the line, intercepted and returned for a touchdown on the Broncos' second drive.

The early San Diego lead might have momentarily conjured visions of the 24-0 halftime deficit Denver faced the last time it squared off with San Diego. But the Denver offense -- and defense -- responded quickly.

Running back **Willis McGahee** -- who left the game in the second quarter with a knee injury -- helped power a six-play drive that spanned the first and second quarters, which Manning capped with a 13-yard, game-tying touchdown strike to wide receiver **Demaryius Thomas**.

It was the first of 17 unanswered points by the Broncos, uninterrupted in part due to the defense's remarkable streak of 26 consecutive third-down stops. The Denver defense didn't allow Cincinnati to convert on its final three third-down conversions in Week 9, then held Carolina without a third-down conversion on 12 attempts last week. On Sunday, San Diego started 0-for-11 in the category, ultimately finishing 3-for-16.

"It starts back in the secondary," said linebacker **Von Miller**, who notched three sacks and two forced fumbles in the game. "We've got guys that can cover and we're able to get off the field."

An interception by **Wesley Woodyard** -- his third of the season -- on the ensuing drive gave the Broncos the ball at the 8-yard line, but the offense settled for a 19-yard field goal and a 10-7 lead.

It was another big defensive play -- and an even bigger special-teams play -- that helped give the Broncos some breathing room.

Following two San Diego three-and-outs, the Chargers were threatening on their next drive with a third-and-4 at midfield. But Miller had other ideas, sacking quarterback Philip Rivers for a 14-yard loss. On the next play, linebacker **Nate Irving** raced into the backfield to block Mike Scifres' punt, giving Denver the ball at the San Diego 31-yard line.

"They made the game-changing plays," Rivers said.

It took Manning just one play to find paydirt, hooking up with wide receiver **Brandon Stokley** for a 31-yard touchdown and a 17-7 lead at halftime.

The pass, Manning said, was a "complementary play" off of a screen pass that the team had run a number of times earlier in the game. Manning froze the secondary with a pump-fake before finding Stokley in the end zone.

"It was well-executed and Brandon did a good job selling the screen, like he was going to block, and then going down the sideline," Manning said.

After halftime, the Chargers executed a surprise onside kick that they recovered, looking to jump back in the game. Though the drive resulted in a three-and-out -- thanks to a sack and forced fumble by Miller -- Scifres' punt was downed at the 2-yard line, pinning the Broncos in the shadow of their own end zone.

Two plays later, Manning was sacked by linebacker Shaun Phillips for a safety, and the Chargers were within eight.

But the defense continued its strong play, and another sack-fumble by Miller and a recovery by Woodyard gave Denver the ball back at the San Diego 25-yard line.

"Denver is an outstanding football team," Chargers Head Coach Norv Turner said. "They are probably as complete a team as we've played in terms of all three phases."

After an offsides penalty on San Diego, Manning dropped back to pass on third-and-5 from the 20-yard line. Running back **Lance Ball** made a key block in blitz pickup, buying Manning time to find Decker for a 20-yard catch-and-run touchdown and a 24-9 lead.

But the Broncos knew from their own experience five weeks ago not to count a team out.

"We were prepared — it was going to be a four-quarter, 60-minute game, and those guys have a lot of pride over there," Manning said.

San Diego pulled to within seven points late in the fourth quarter, but two fourth-quarter Prater field goals and a Broncos recovery of an onside kick left the Chargers with their backs against the wall, needing to drive 87 yards in 23 seconds to tie the game. Mirroring Denver's Week 6 win in San Diego, a sack-fumble courtesy of defensive end **Elvis Dumervil** ended the Chargers' final drive and sealed the win for Denver.

"It's a team thing," cornerback **Chris Harris** said. "As long as the offense keeps putting up points and we can get quarterbacks off the field and continue to force turnovers, the sky is the limit."

Though they now have a "comfortable lead" in the division, as Decker put it, the Broncos aren't ready to scoreboard watch quite yet.

Bailey said the team simply needs to worry about getting better every week. Anything else is just "a distraction."

With a trip to hostile Arrowhead Stadium against the Kansas City Chiefs coming up next Sunday, Denver is sticking to its one-game-at-a-time philosophy.

"I think this team that we have right now has the best chemistry and fire," said linebacker **D.J. Williams**, who saw his first game action since returning from a suspension. "It's still early in the season. It means nothing if you drop the ball late in the season, so we'll keep grinding."

# Linebackers Light Up Chargers

Sam Davis  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 18, 2012

The Broncos linebacking corps wreaked havoc on Philip Rivers and the Chargers offense in Denver's 30-23 win.

**DENVER** -- In the center of a Denver defense that has disturbed, disrupted and dismantled opposing offenses this season is a linebacking corps that just keeps making plays.

For **Wesley Woodyard, Von Miller** and company, Sports Authority Field at Mile High was their playground on Sunday.

"Not a lot of teams have four good linebackers like us," cornerback **Chris Harris** said. "For those guys to continue to make an impact in the game, forcing fumbles and getting interceptions, that's huge."

Veterans **Keith Brooking** and **D.J. Williams** round out a group that has been a crucial contributor in the Broncos five-game winning streak, creating chaos and momentum at pivotal moments.

In Sunday's 30-23 defeat of the San Diego Chargers, the four linebackers amassed four tackles for loss, an interception, three forced fumbles, a pass deflection, a fumble recovery and three sacks.

Miller had all three sacks, vaulting him into the NFL lead in that category with 13. The second-year linebacker also leads the league in tackles for loss. In the last three games, he has recorded nine tackles in the backfield -- including seven quarterback sacks -- and forced three fumbles.

Because of the talent around him, teams have attempted to block him with just one person -- a bad situation for the opponent to be in.

"The way we have it, teams are going one-on-one with him," Harris said. "You cannot block him one-on-one. You cannot block him."

But Miller and the unit refuse to allow the recent success to affect the way they prepare.

"Guys in the position room, Wesley Woodyard, Keith Brooking, we don't even think about it," said Miller, the leading Pro Bowl vote-getter among all linebackers in the

AFC. "We're taking it one play at a time, one game at a time. We're starting to play technique-sound defense, and that's what's working for us."

Behind Miller, Woodyard is second in Pro Bowl votes among AFC linebackers. With his second-quarter interception, the fifth-year linebacker is the only player in the NFL with at least three interceptions and three sacks in 2012. He is also just the fifth player in Broncos history to accomplish that feat in a single season.

In addition to the interception, which was returned 25 yards to the San Diego 8-yard line, Woodyard tied for the team lead with eight tackles and pounced on one of Miller's two forced fumbles.

"Three picks this year, a couple fumbles and interceptions, he's balling," defensive tackle **Kevin Vickerson** said of the team's leading tackler.

While his teammates notice Woodyard's production -- Miller called him a "superstar" after a 13-tackle performance against New Orleans - cornerback **Champ Bailey** thinks he needs more recognition for the work he has put in.

"He doesn't get a lot of praise for what he does, but I think he should," Bailey said. "The guy is a tremendous team player."

Most importantly, the efforts of Miller and Woodyard often go hand-in-hand to yield production and turnovers at key spots.

In the third quarter of Sunday's game, the Chargers had cut the lead to one possession after a safety. Near midfield, with San Diego driving to tie the game, Miller sacked Rivers and knocked the ball loose. Right there for the scoop was Woodyard, who returned it to the San Diego 25-yard line. Three plays later, Denver made it 24-9 with a touchdown.

It was a crucial play in determining the outcome -- a season sweep of the Chargers and a three-game lead in the AFC West. That's the only tally worth keeping track of for Miller, who said he wasn't even sure of what his league-leading sack total was.

"I know we're three games ahead in the division," Miller said. "That's all that really matters to me."

# Notebook: Williams Glad to be Back

Tyler Everett  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 18, 2012

Linebacker D.J. Williams returns from his suspension, cornerback Chris Harris slows down Antonio Gates and the third-down defense remains stifling.

**DENVER** – For linebacker **D.J. Williams**, there's a big difference between merely being around the game and strapping on the helmet and shoulder pads for live action.

"It's 100 percent better," Williams said. "When you're just in the locker room, one of the guys, you kind of feel like you don't deserve things until you get out there and actually produce and help your team win."

After serving a nine-game suspension to open the season, Sunday night's win over the Chargers marked Williams' first taste of the gridiron since Jan. 14, the final game of the Broncos' 2011 campaign. Head Coach John Fox said Williams' effort to stay in shape throughout the suspension paid dividends.

"I thought he had a great week of preparation," Fox said. "The guy obviously worked diligently while he was away from us so we were very happy to have him back. He made a mistake, paid his dues and without looking at the tape, I know he made a good play on a run through over toward their bench."

Williams said the best part of suiting up again was the familiar feeling of sharing the field with his teammates.

"It feels great," Williams said. "I've been playing football 17 years of my life, it's basically all I know. It feels great to be in the locker room, the camaraderie with the guys, just go out there, go to war and go to battle and come home with the victory."

Despite the long break from the game at a position as physical as linebacker, Williams did not feel any ill effects of his time away in his return, saying that if anything, he would have liked to absorb a few more hits.

"I feel good," Williams said. "I feel like I could do a little bit more, but that's up to the coaches. They're working me in slowly. The way it is here, we have to earn the play. So just keep grinding in practice and hopefully I can get out there more."

Veteran cornerback **Champ Bailey**, who is tied with Williams as the longest-

tenured Bronco, said it's hard to get back up to speed after extended time away. But from what Bailey saw, Williams looked anything but rusty.

"Working him in the mix today, that was beautiful for us," Bailey said. "You don't know what to expect, really, because he's been out so long. But, he did exactly what I kind of expected. Nobody else knew it, but I know what type of person he is and how much he wants it. I'm just happy for him, we got it done and hopefully we can expand his role."

## **HARRIS QUIETS GATES**

Coming into Sunday's game, one of Denver's biggest priorities was stopping San Diego tight end Antonio Gates.

The tight end led his team in receiving in the Week 6 Broncos-Chargers matchup, hauling in six passes for 81 yards and two touchdowns.

"Think about the first game," cornerback **Chris Harris** said. "He was the one that was killing us."

It was that performance that made covering No. 85 a point of emphasis for the Broncos this week. But unlike many Chargers opponents who cover Gates with multiple defenders, Denver looked to Harris alone to take on Gates, often without any help.

"Most of the time, it was me and him," Harris said. "A lot of times, we'd disguise it and have a little help on the inside. But other than that, I'm pretty much on him 1-on-1."

Harris rose to the challenge, limiting Gates to just 17 yards receiving on two receptions.

"My responsibility this game was to hold Gates down and I felt like I contained Gates today," Harris said.

With Gates quiet, Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers and the San Diego offense struggled to get going, starting the game 0-for-11 on third down conversions. Rivers and the Chargers offense were unable to find the end zone until the final minute of the third quarter.

## **THIRD-DOWN DOMINANCE**

At this point, it's hard to believe that Denver started the year with third-down defense as an area of concern.

The season opener, when the Broncos allowed the Steelers to convert 11-of-19 third down conversions, now seems like a distant memory.

With 11 straight unsuccessful third-down attempts by San Diego to start the game, Denver had forced opponents into 26 consecutive failed third-down conversions, dating back to the team's Week 9 win over the Cincinnati Bengals. After closing the win over the Bengals by getting off the field on Cincinnati's last three third-down plays, Denver shut out Carolina on the Panthers' 12 third down attempts last week. Those performances, combined with the stingy start against the Chargers, marked the NFL's longest streak without allowing a conversion in the last 10 years.

"Wow, I didn't know that," defensive tackle **Kevin Vickerson** said. "That was impressive."

For many defensive players, third down is a favorable situation because it allows defenders to focus on putting pressure on the quarterback. But those circumstances only arise when strong run defense on the early downs puts offenses in predictable situations on third down. By limiting San Diego to just 53 yards rushing on 23 carries, that's exactly what Denver was able to do to the Chargers offense.

"Especially at home, the crowd noise, we're all looking at the ball, no more snap-count advantage," defensive end **Elvis Dumervil** said of rushing the passer on third down. "I think we're built for that. We get excited for that situation."

Also helping the Broncos' third down defense was solid play from the secondary, which gave the team's pass rushers time to shed blocks and get to the quarterback.

"I think it all starts in the secondary," said linebacker **Von Miller**, who recorded three sacks. "I don't think our guys in the background get too much credit. We've got Champ Bailey out there locking down guys. Chris Harris. (Safety) **Rahim Moore** has been having a great season. I think that's where it starts. We've got great guys that can rush the passer, but if you don't have any time, you can't get back there."

## **INJURY UPDATE**

Running back **Willis McGahee** appeared to be well on his way to a big night before a knee injury forced him to the sideline.

In limited action, McGahee picked up 55 yards on seven carries and added one reception for 18 yards. But he did not return after the injury as a safety precaution.

"It kind of swelled up so we're just going to be precautionary," Fox said. "We didn't

put him back in. We'll evaluate him more moving forward. I won't know any more than I do right now."

In McGahee's absence, running back **Ronnie Hillman** picked up 43 yards on 12 carries, with **Lance Ball** chipping in another 35 yards on just six carries. The running back by committee attack helped the Broncos pile up 133 yards as a team.

"Lance Ball stepped in," Fox said. "Ronnie Hillman did a good job. We were shorthanded there. We even had emergency scenarios in case something happened to one of those guys. That's what happens in football games – Willis goes down and both of those guys did very good jobs."

While Fox is hopeful that McGahee will make a quick recovery, he's confident that the team's other backs can step up and contribute if necessary.

"We're concerned about everything," Fox said. "This is a week-to-week business and profession. We've got nothing but a tough division game in Kansas City. We've got (running back) **Knowshon Moreno** that wasn't active today. We've got (running back) **Jeremiah Johnson** on the practice squad. We've got guys that we feel good about. We'd love to have Willis and it's going to be a blow if we don't, but we feel good about the running back position."

Cornerback **Omar Bolden** also left the game with a concussion and did not return.

# Broncos vs. Chargers: Key Plays

Stuart Zaas

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

**Third-and-9 from the San Diego 35:** After San Diego started their first possession with a first down on the second play from scrimmage, the Broncos ended the drive before it could gain momentum when linebacker Wesley Woodyard hit Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers as he released a third-down pass, forcing it to fall harmlessly incomplete.

**Third-and-1 from the Denver 46:** San Diego had good field position after a missed Matt Prater 55-yard field goal attempt. That didn't matter for the Broncos defense as it forced a three-and-out capped by Woodyard's 1-yard tackle for a loss on third-and-one.

**Third-and-5 from the San Diego 36:** With the Denver offense still looking for its first points, quarterback Peyton Manning found an open Matthew Willis and the receiver turned upfield for a 10-yard gain that extended the drive. Two plays later Manning hit wide receiver Demaryius Thomas for a 13-yard touchdown to tie the score 7-7.

**First-and-10 from the San Diego 20:** On the first play of the ensuing Chargers drive, Woodyard stepped in front of a Rivers pass for his third interception of the season. The linebacker returned the pick 25 yards to the San Diego 8-yard line to set up a Matt Prater field goal.

**Third-and-12 from the San Diego 49:** After San Diego started the second half with an onside kick recovery, the Denver defense stood its ground and forced a three-and-out. On third down, Von Miller broke into the backfield and dropped Rivers for a 6-yard loss and forced a fumble that the Chargers recovered.

**Third-and-4 from the San Diego 46:** Miller struck again on third down, sacking Rivers and forcing a fumble for a second time in the third quarter. Woodyard recovered and returned it to the San Diego 25. Three plays later, the Broncos found the end zone on Manning's 20-yard pass to wide receiver Eric Decker to put the team ahead 24-9.

**Kickoff from the San Diego 35:** The second Chargers onside kick attempt of the half wasn't a surprise and wasn't successful as tight end Virgil Green fell on the loose ball to give Denver a chance to run out the clock. Denver was held to a three-and-out, turning the ball back to San Diego with 30 seconds to play.

**2nd-and-6 from the San Diego 17:** Just like the Chargers' last snap of the team's previous matchup in Week 6, Elvis Dumervil ended the game by strip-sacking Rivers. The sack came with 17 seconds left on the clock and despite Rivers' recovery of the fumble, time ran out to give Denver the win.

# **Broncos Beat Chargers 30-23**

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

The Broncos beat the San Diego Chargers 30-23 on Sunday afternoon, completing their first season sweep of the divisional foe since 2005.

The Chargers struck first with an interception return for a touchdown in the first quarter, but the Broncos scored the next 17 points of the game to enter halftime with a 10-point lead, holding San Diego to just 54 first-half yards.

A San Diego safety on quarterback Peyton Manning brought the Chargers to within 8 points early in the second half, and the two teams then traded touchdowns to make it 24-16 late in the third quarter.

A pair of fourth-quarter drives that took up more than 10 minutes of game clock and resulted in two field goals helped the Broncos gain separation, but San Diego was still able to make it interesting.

Inside the five-minute mark in the fourth quarter, San Diego drove 80 yards for a touchdown to bring the score to 30-23, which would end up as the final score as defensive end Elvis Dumervil sacked quarterback Philip Rivers on the final play of the game.

Quarterback Peyton Manning finished with 270 yards and three touchdowns and one interception on 25-of-42 passing.

Linebacker Von Miller led the way for the defense with three sacks, two forced fumbles and a tackle for loss.

# Chargers Score Late, Broncos Recover Onside Kick

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

Trailing by 14 points with 4:14 remaining, the Chargers drove 80 yards on eight plays, scoring a touchdown on a 21-yard pass to Danario Alexander 1:24 remaining in the game.

It was Alexander's fourth catch of the drive, totaling 65 yards.

Running back Ryan Mathews made the biggest play of the series with a 24-yard reception that moved San Diego across midfield.

With two timeouts remaining, the Chargers attempted an onside kick that tight end Virgil Green recovered for the Broncos.

# Prater's Field Goal Makes it 30-16

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

The Broncos offense continued the momentum from Jim Leonhard's interception with a 57-yard drive that yielded 3 points.

Running back Ronnie Hillman moved the chains first and brought Denver out to the 42-yard line with a 12-yard reception, and Lance Ball followed that up with a run of 11 yards across midfield.

After two consecutive plays for negative yardage, the Broncos faced third-and-16 from the San Diego 45. Manning then found tight end Jacob Tamme in between two defenders, as the tight end leaped in the air and secured the catch as he was hit.

But Denver would only gain 1 more yard, settling for a 32-yard field goal to bring the score to 30-16 with 4:14 remaining.

# Fourth Down INT Gives Broncos Ball

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

Needing a score to get within one possession, the Chargers started off their first fourth-quarter possession with a big play. Quarterback Philip Rivers was hit upon release, but still completed a 38-yard pass to wide receiver Malcom Floyd, crossing midfield to the Denver 42-yard line.

After a run of no gain, two incompletions and a delay-of-game penalty, San Diego faced fourth-and-14 near midfield and decided to go for it.

Rivers dropped back and faced pressure once again, barely getting a desperation pass away. Safety Jim Leonhard intercepted it at the 29-yard line, giving the Broncos possession with 9:10 left in the game. It was Leonhard's second pick of the year, tying his career high.

# Prater Extends Lead

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

Following the Chargers' touchdown, running back Ronnie Hillman got the Broncos offense moving with a 19-yard rush out to the Denver 40-yard line.

A short run by Lance Ball followed, bringing an end to the third quarter.

To begin the fourth, quarterback Peyton Manning hit tight end Jacob Tamme for 6 yards and then Ball took it across midfield with a 14-yard rush and a first down.

Next, Manning hit his other tight end, Joel Dreessen, who shrugged off a tackle near the sideline, stayed in bounds and gained an addition 5 yards after contact to move the chains.

The next series brought up a third-and-13. Needing to reach the 11-yard line, Manning stepped up in the pocket and fired a pass to Brandon Stokley, who made the catch and was immediately tackled 1 yard shy of the sticks.

Kicker Matt Prater came on and converted a 30-yard field goal to increase the lead to two possessions, at 27-16.

The Broncos answered the Chargers' long drive by taking off 5:15 of game clock on 10 plays while covering 67 yards.

# Chargers Respond to Decker Score

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

After the Broncos forced a Philip Rivers fumble that led to a touchdown, the Chargers responded with a score of their own.

Rivers completed passes to five different receivers on the drive, including two first-down connections with both Malcom Floyd and Danario Alexander.

He finished the drive with an 8-yard touchdown pass to Alexander to bring the lead back to one possession at 24-16.

The drive covered 80 yards on 12 plays and took 6:25 of clock, giving the Broncos the ball with 0:58 remaining in the third quarter.

# Decker Extends Lead, Reaches Milestones

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

With 10 minutes remaining in the third quarter, San Diego began its drive at their own 24-yard line.

Running back Ryan Mathews ran the ball four straight times, moving the chains once and setting up a third-and-4 from near midfield.

As Philip Rivers dropped back to pass for the first time of the possession, linebacker Von Miller came speeding off edge, sacking Rivers and forcing a fumble. It was Miller's third sack of the game, tying a career high that he set two weeks ago at Cincinnati, and his 13th of the season, which leads the NFL.

Fellow linebacker Wesley Woodyard recovered the fumble and returned it 12 yards to the San Diego 25-yard line.

Two plays after the turnover, the Broncos faced a third-and-5 on their own 20-yard line. Manning dropped back to pass and didn't see a receiver initially. Running back Lance Ball provided additional time with a blitz pickup as Manning dodged additional defenders, looking for somewhere to throw.

After stepping up into the pocket, Manning hit wideout Eric Decker on a short pass in the middle of the field, and Decker did the rest of the work, diving over the goal line for a 20-yard touchdown.

The reception was the 100th of Decker's career, and it also set a single-season career high in receiving yards, surpassing his 612-yard total from 2011.

Additionally, Decker is now the third player in team history with at least eight touchdown catches in back-to-back seasons.

The touchdown gave the Broncos a 24-9 lead with 7:23 left in the third quarter.

# San Diego Safety Shortens Lead

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

The Chargers recovered an onside kick attempt to begin the second half, gaining possession at the Broncos 49-yard line.

Needing a strong series to keep San Diego from getting points, the Denver defense forced its seventh three-and-out of the game.

Linebacker D.J. Williams brought down running back Ryan Mathews in the backfield for a 2-yard loss and linebacker Von Miller sacked Philip Rivers, his second of the game, forcing a fumble that San Diego recovered.

San Diego punter Mike Scifres then pinned the Broncos offense at its own 2-yard line. After running back Ronnie Hillman ran for no gain on first down, the Chargers defense brought heat, and linebacker Sean Phillips sacked Peyton Manning in the end zone for a safety.

The safety made the score 17-9, and the Chargers then regained possession on the ensuing punt at their own 36-yard line, where the Broncos defense turned in another three-and-out.

# **Broncos End Half with 10-point Lead**

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

The Broncos entered halftime with a 17-7 lead over the San Diego Chargers at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Quarterback Peyton Manning threw two touchdowns — one to Demaryius Thomas and one to Brandon Stokley — and the Denver defense enjoyed a stellar first-half performance. It allowed San Diego to gain just 54 total yards to the Broncos' 216 and held the Chargers rushing attack to 8 yards on an average of 0.7 yards per carry.

Overall, San Diego gained just 1.9 yards per play.

The Denver defense forced Philip Rivers and the Chargers offense to go 0-for-8 on third downs, marking 23 straight third-down stops dating back to Week 9 at Cincinnati.

# Sack and Blocked Punt Lead to Touchdown Pass

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

With 4:52 remaining in the first half, San Diego gained possession at its own 30-yard line following a Denver punt.

The Chargers moved the chains once with a defensive holding penalty, but the Denver defense came up with another third-down stop – their 22nd straight, dating back to Week 9 – on a 14-yard sack by linebacker Von Miller.

The sack brought up a fourth-and-18 for San Diego and made Miller the fourth player since 1982 to record at least 11 sacks in each of his first two seasons.

Miller's sack led to a greater momentum swing in Denver's favor, as linebacker Nate Irving blocked the San Diego punt attempt and the Broncos took over at the Chargers 31-yard line.

On the very first play of the possession, Manning pump-faked once and then connected with a wide open Brandon Stokley in the back right corner of the end zone for a 31-yard touchdown.

The score, Stokley's fifth of the year, gave the Broncos a 17-7 advantage with 1:44 left in the first half.

# Woodyard Interception Leads to Field Goal

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

On the first play of the Chargers possession that followed Demaryius Thomas' touchdown, linebacker Wesley Woodyard jumped in front of a Philip Rivers pass and made his team-leading third interception of the season.

Woodyard caught the pick at the Chargers' 35-yard line and returned it to the 8-yard line. He and cornerback Chris Harris are two of the three players in the league with multiple interceptions and multiple sacks through Week 10.

Quarterback Peyton Manning hit running back Lance Ball for a 6-yard gain down to the 1-yard line on third down, so the Broncos had to settle for a 19-yard Matt Prater field goal.

The kick gave the Broncos a 3-point lead at 10-7 with 11:37 remaining in the half.

# Thomas' Touchdown Ties Game

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

Safety Rahim Moore made a second-down run stop and cornerback Chris Harris deflected a third-down pass attempt to force the Chargers' third straight three-and-out.

San Diego punter Mike Scifres sent it 40 yards and Denver took over at their own 44-yard line, trailing 7-0.

Running back Willis McGahee gained the first 20 yards of the possession with a pair of rushes for 15 and 5 yards.

Wide receiver Matthew Willis then gained 10 yards on a screen pass followed by an 8-yard carry from McGahee that picked up a first down and brought Denver to down to the 13-yard line. McGahee and Chargers cornerback Quentin Jammer – the tackler — were helped off the field by trainers after the play.

On the next play, quarterback Peyton Manning threw it to wideout Demaryius Thomas in the back left corner of the end zone. Thomas caught the pass but was initially ruled out of bounds. The Broncos challenged the ruling and it was overturned, as officials determined that Thomas touched both feet in bounds with possession.

Matt Prater converted the extra point attempt and the Broncos tied the game at 7-7 with 12:57 remaining in the first half.

The touchdown pass gave Manning sole possession of second place in NFL history with 421 career touchdown passes. He passed Dan Marino and now trails only Brett Favre.

The touchdown catch was Thomas' fifth of the year.

The drive covered 56 yards on six plays and took 2:17 off the clock.

[Click here for the audio highlight of the touchdown.](#)

# Broncos vs. Chargers: Injury Updates

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

Cornerback Omar Bolden suffered a concussion in the first quarter and will not return today.

Running back Willis McGahee was helped off the field in the second quarter with a knee injury. His return is questionable. He left with 72 all-purpose yards on seven carries and one reception.

**UPDATE:** McGahee has been ruled OUT.

Chargers linebacker Larry English suffered a leg injury in the second quarter and will not return.

Chargers cornerback Quentin Jammer injured his calf in the second quarter and is questionable to return.

Defensive end Derek Wolfe suffered a thigh injury in the third quarter. His return is questionable.

Check back to this blog for updates on any further injuries.

# Chargers Strike First

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

The Broncos started their second drive of the game on their own 12-yard line after a 66-yard San Diego punt.

Quarterback Peyton Manning started the drive with two consecutive completions to his tight ends, first to Jacob Tamme for 8 and then to Joel Dreessen for 5.

On the next play, Manning tried to hit wide receiver Matthew Willis on a short pass to his left, but linebacker Demorrio Williams deflected it up into the air. Safety Eric Weddle caught the deflection and returned it 23 yards for the touchdown.

The extra point made it 7-0, as the Broncos regain possession with seven minutes remaining in the first quarter.

# Broncos Win Coin Toss

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 18, 2012

The Broncos won the coin toss and deferred their choice to the second half, so they will start the game on defense.

Representing the team at midfield were the captains: quarterback Peyton Manning, defensive end Elvis Dumervil, cornerback Champ Bailey, linebacker Wesley Woodyard, and today's game captain, cornerback Chris Harris.

Kicker Matt Prater put the Chargers at their own 20-yard line after sending the opening kick through the end zone for a touchback.

On defense, the Broncos come out with four down linemen – defensive end Elvis Dumervil, tackles Kevin Vickerson and Justin Bannan, and defensive end Derek Wolfe.

Von Miller, Wesley Woodyard and Keith Brooking start as the linebackers.

Champ Bailey and Harris start at the corners with Rahim Moore and Mike Adams at the safety positions.

Following a Chargers punt, the Broncos offense comes out on the field.

The starters on the offensive line, from left to right, are tackle Ryan Clady, guard Zane Beadles, center Dan Koppen, guard Manny Ramirez and tackle Orlando Franklin.

Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker start at each wide receiver position with Joel Dreessen at tight end and Brandon Stokley in the slot.

Manning is under center with Willis McGahee in the backfield.