

Peyton Manning's foundation serving thousands of holiday meals

Mike Klis
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As families across the Front Range gather around their tables filled with basted turkeys, moist dressing and sweet cranberries, let us pause and give thanks for Peyton Manning.

For whether the people here bleed orange and blue, or have hearts attached to teams of a different color, Manning has restored national relevance to this region while energizing the conversation at the local coffee shops. The Broncos are good again, real good, and seemingly have the potential to become the very best thanks in no small part to their new quarterback.

Is Von Miller thankful for Peyton Manning?

"Everybody is thankful for him," the Broncos' star linebacker said as he walked through a hallway outside the team's dressing room.

Just then, the Broncos' owner walked down the same hallway and overheard the conversation.

"Me too," Pat Bowlen said.

Know too that Manning also is thankful for the good people of Colorado. Before he ever put on a Broncos uniform, he had attended a Rockies game at Coors Field. He and his wife, Ashley, bought a home here, where they are raising their young twin children. He established business roots here by purchasing 21 local pizza franchises. And his Payback Foundation — which previously donated \$4.3 million to youth organizations in Indiana (first 14 NFL seasons with the Indianapolis Colts), Tennessee (four years of college) and Louisiana (home state) — has since added Colorado to its cause.

Working alongside King Soopers grocery stores, Manning's foundation will provide 500 families with ties to the Boys and Girls Clubs of Metro Denver with a Thanksgiving meal Thursday. Each meal, consisting of a 10- to 13-pound precooked turkey, stuffing, dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy, dinner rolls and pumpkin pie, can feed six to eight.

Counting the people Manning will help in Indianapolis, where his foundation is more established, the quarterback will be responsible for feeding upward of 10,000 people.

"Everybody ought to be able to eat a Thanksgiving meal," Manning said Wednesday. "The whole thing about community service is doing it with the right intention.

"I think it's part of your duty to give back. The Bible says don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. So don't stand on the corner and call attention to what you are doing. But people find out about it, and if it encourages others to share or give back, that's how I've always approached it. We've got a lot of players who have given their time and energy to help people."

Playing, living in Colorado

Since Peyton and Ashley were married in 2001, they have hosted new players at their home for Thanksgiving.

"This year, we're new," Manning said. "So we're going someplace else."

There is a price to pay for everything, even for a Manning family that has been performing, and starring, at the highest level of the most popular sport in America. Archie Manning was an NFL quarterback. His middle son, Peyton, is an NFL quarterback who has played in two Super Bowls. His youngest son, Eli, is an NFL quarterback who has won two Super Bowls.

But for Archie and his wife Olivia, they haven't had their entire family together for Thanksgiving at their home in New Orleans since 1991, the year before their oldest son, Cooper, went off to college. Peyton hasn't been back home for Thanksgiving since he went off to college at Tennessee in 1994.

And so what happens is the family becomes extended.

For Peyton, he has been all in with Colorado, more specifically the Denver area, since he signed with the Broncos as a free agent on March 20.

"You don't rush things," he said. "You try to get acclimated, but there are things you are supposed to do when you play for an NFL team and I believe one of them is you are supposed to live there.

"You are supposed to be part of the community and you are supposed to give back. It's not a part-time job. You don't play somewhere for six months, go someplace else and come back.

"My dad was my teacher there. My dad was from Mississippi and I'm sure he always thought he was going to live in Mississippi all his life. When he got drafted by the Saints, he said this is where I work, this is where I'm going to live. He's lived in New Orleans since 1971."

Unheralded compassion

This hasn't been the easiest year for Coloradans to give thanks. Just as the wildfires that burned a large portion of the state were extinguished, a person opened fire in an Aurora movie theater.

But Colorado learned that through grief comes remarkable compassion, and Manning shared these feelings with this community.

Upon hearing about the theater shooting, Manning was the first to call the Broncos' media relations department the next morning and ask, "What can I do?"

Without the media listening in, or cameras rolling, he spoke with the wounded and families of the victims in local emergency rooms and hospital beds.

But where Manning has perhaps done the most good is through his job. America may be a tad warped in the value it places on sports, but the truth is nothing stirs civic pride quite like the success of the local NFL team.

For a couple of months this summer, when the Denver area was mentioned to the people of Minnesota, Florida or Washington, their first thought might have been of the theater tragedy.

But mention Denver to those people today and their first response may well be: "How 'bout that Peyton Manning?"

"I remember when all the hurricanes happened and they hit your hometown, when you are in the community where the tragedies occurred, whether you're from that community or you've been there one month, you can't help but be part of it and have it affect you," Manning said. "I think I do have the right priority with football, but if someone tells you that watching a football game helps take his mind off the nightmare he's going through, that's a good thing."

Broncos put Willis McGahee on IR, not available until AFC championship game

Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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After looking at some fairly well-known running backs from years past as a possible replacement for the injured Willis McGahee, the Broncos ultimately looked no further than their own locker room.

See how that uniform fits, Knowshon Moreno. Keep plugging away, Lance Ball. Stay on the outside, Ronnie Hillman.

The Broncos could eventually sign free-agent running back Jacob Hester, who worked out with the team Wednesday. But neither Hester nor Steve Slaton, who worked out for the team Tuesday, nor any other new player will be with the Broncos when they play Sunday at Kansas City.

"For this week, I think we feel very comfortable with who we have," said Denver coach John Fox.

The Broncos cleared roster space Wednesday by placing McGahee on injured reserve with a designation that he could return in time for the AFC championship game — providing they get that far.

The Broncos take a 7-3 record and a large AFC West lead into their game at Arrowhead Stadium against the Chiefs, who are 1-9.

McGahee suffered a torn medial collateral ligament and compression fracture of his right knee early in the second quarter of the Broncos' 30-23 victory last weekend against the San Diego Chargers in Denver.

Other than opening a roster slot, little changed with McGahee going on injured reserve.

Fox said Monday that McGahee would be sidelined six to eight weeks. The IR designation means McGahee will be sidelined six weeks before he can return to practice Dec. 31, which would be the first day of the post-season.

Injured reserve designation rules would allow McGahee to play in a game in eight weeks — which would be the week of the AFC championship game. This is a common sense, procedural move that enables the Broncos to not waste a roster slot the next eight weeks.

Losing McGahee is a blow to the Broncos and to his career. Denver's offense features a systematic passing game directed by quarterback Peyton Manning, but the running game has been a significant component because McGahee has proven to be an effective alternative to keep defenses honest.

McGahee has run especially well against nickel packages, which in turn has helped freeze defenders a split second during Manning's play-action pass attempts.

The Broncos don't have another tailback like McGahee. Hillman is an outside, speed runner. Ball is a solid back, but he doesn't match the authority McGahee has running between the tackles.

When last seen, Moreno was a high-effort runner. But he hasn't been active in the Broncos' past eight games. He goes from two months without getting a game-day uniform to competing with Ball this week for the starting job.

"It's a great opportunity for Knowshon," Manning said. "He hasn't played, but he will be a part of it. It's going to be a three-man committee. Hey, this is the NFL. You are kind of used to where it doesn't matter what year you are or how old you are. If you're on an NFL roster, you're expected to go in there and contribute and do your job."

A knee injury is tough on any NFL running back, but especially for McGahee, who turned 31 last month. He has two years left on his contract with the Broncos, but no more money beyond this year is guaranteed.

The Broncos could promote running back Jeremiah Johnson from their practice squad this week. Or they could fill McGahee's roster slot with a practice-squad player from another position.

The team worked out Slaton, a former 1,200-yard rusher for the Houston Texans, and Hester, a former Charger, this week, but both left Dove Valley without a contract.

"We'll pull from guys that we have that know our (offensive) system," Fox said. "It's hard for me to predict the future. We'll be day to day as far as that decision-making process goes."

Broncos work out Jacob Hester as replacement for Willis McGahee

Mike Klis
The Denver Broncos
November 21, 2012

The Broncos worked out former San Diego Chargers running back Jacob Hester on Wednesday after putting Willis McGahee on injured reserve with a torn MCL and compression fracture.

The team is likely to sign a free-agent running back this week, although it will go with a tailback committee of Ronnie Hillman, Lance Ball and Knowshon Moreno when it plays at Kansas City on Sunday.

A third-round draft pick out of LSU in 2008, Hester played four seasons with the Chargers, including 16 games last year when he rushed for 90 yards on 28 carries. He was released by the Chargers in training camp and has not caught on since.

The Broncos also worked out Steve Slaton on Tuesday. But Hester would give the Broncos a bigger back whom they lost with McGahee's injury. Both Hester and McGahee are 235 pounds; Slaton is listed at 208 pounds.

Hester has averaged only 24 carries and 80 yards a season. So if he joins the Broncos, he figures to be used only in short-yardage and pass-protection situations.

AFC West: Denver Broncos' success has division scrambling

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
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It's now about the math for the Broncos which means it's now about solving the problems for the rest of the AFC West. Denver took control of the division this past Sunday as the Broncos completed a season sweep of the Chargers.

At 7-3, the Broncos have created an enormous gap between themselves and the rest of the division and they have also created plenty of unrest in the wake of that.

Things are to the boiling point in Kansas City and San Diego with Oakland Raiders managing general partner Mark Davis having also made it clear he's not happy with his team's performance in the first year of their own rebuilding project.

So, after a look at the video and conversations with scouts and personnel executives around the league, here is a look at the AFC West:

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

The lowdown:Run your finger down the list of the league's leading receivers and it takes until you get to No. 26 in yards receiving (626) and you will go No. 23 for catches (49) before you find the name of a Chiefs player.

They have the 28th- and 38th-ranked quarterbacks in the league in Matt Cassel and Brady Quinn. They have three starting offensive linemen who are injured at the moment — left tackle Branden Albert (back), center/guard Ryan Lilja (knee) and guard Jon Asomoah (thumb).

And they have thrown more interceptions (15) and lost more fumbles (16) than any team in the league.

So it's no real surprise the Chiefs are now the lowest scoring offense in the NFL at just over 15 points a game.

But this isn't a new problem. They were 31st in scoring last season (13.3 points per game) and were 31st in 2007 (14.1).

It's a far cry from the offense that scored 58 touchdowns in 2004, the same year current Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning threw 49 touchdown passes for the Colts. But the steady erosion of talent is staggering from a team that had three 55-catch receivers and three 500-yard rushers less than a decade ago.

And simply running Matt Cassel out of town won't fix it. NFL personnel people questioned the Chiefs depth chart before the season started, many privately chuckling at so many public predictions of a playoff team.

Those criticisms have proven true and the team's recent injuries and lack of quality replacements on the two-deep have only made it even more glaring.

Good to know: Cornerback Stanford Routt was released by both the Raiders and the Chiefs in a 10-month span, with Kansas City having sent him on his way earlier this month.

But Routt, who hasn't played in the last two games since his Nov. 5 release, is still tied for the team lead in interceptions with two. Brandon Flowers also has two.

A good read: The Chiefs' disconnect with their angry fan base grows deeper. Sam Mellinger on the continued, and growing, divide between the team and its fans.

OAKLAND RAIDERS

The lowdown: Having seen the Raiders up close last season as the Broncos defensive coordinator Dennis Allen had to know what he was getting into when he accepted the Raiders job this past offseason.

But Allen's defense is struggling as the Raiders have surrendered 135 points in the current three-game losing streak — 42 to Tampa Bay, 55 to Baltimore and 38 to the Saints this past Sunday.

They don't have the depth chart in the secondary to play all of the coverages Allen would like to and as is always the case with teams headed down the standings instead of up, Allen has to find a way to keep his locker room engaged so he can show some kind of progress when all is said and done this season.

To that end Allen reached out to another name from the Broncos' past in recent days — former head coach Dan Reeves.

Reeves, who took Denver to three Super Bowls with current Broncos executive vice president of football operations John Elway at quarterback and was 110-73-1 in his time with the Broncos as well as 7-6 in the postseason, was Falcons coach in 2002 when he hired Allen as a quality control assistant.

It was Allen's first NFL job, just after he has spent two years at Tulsa as the team's secondary coach.

Allen spent two seasons with Reeves — 2002 and most of 2003, when Reeves was replaced by Wade Phillips to close out the season.

Reeves didn't have many seasons like the one Allen is headed for with 12 winning seasons as a head coach with the Broncos, Giants and Falcons. Reeves did have 5-11 and 4-12 finishes in back-to-back seasons in Atlanta (1999 and 2000) and was 3-10 in 2003 when he was replaced.

Good to know: The Raiders are last in the league in sacks, with 11, as Richard Seymour leads the team with three.

Last season, with Allen calling the shots on defense, the Broncos were tied for 10th in the league in sacks with 41.

A good read:Raiders' latest debacle leaves Al Davis' son fuming about the team he now owns. Monte Poole on Mark Davis channeling his father.

SAN DIEGO CHARGERS

The lowdown:In need of help in the interior of their defensive line, the Broncos gave Connecticut defensive tackle Kendall Reyes a long look before last April's draft. So, they can't say they were all that surprised when the now Chargers defensive lineman had the first two sacks of his NFL career this past Sunday when he dragged down Peyton Manning twice.

The Broncos had Reyes on the short list, given they liked his athleticism and his flexibility in that he had played both end and tackle for the Huskies. And more than one scout in the league had seen the well-worn YouTube clip of Reyes' backflip during his senior season at Connecticut.

Reyes had 31 ½ tackles for loss in his 42 college starts and earned high marks having pushed around many the nation's best offensive linemen during the Senior Bowl.

In the end the Broncos traded down twice to get out of the first round and selected Derek Wolfe with the 36th pick. Wolfe has started every game for the Broncos this season and played on 83.5 percent of the team's defensive snaps.

Thirteen picks later the Chargers took Reyes with the 49th pick overall and after a slow-and-steady start, Reyes had his best outing in the team's loss to the Broncos. Facing a bit of a defensive re-build in whatever comes in the offseason, Reyes could also be a key part of the Chargers' plans up front in their defense.

Against the Broncos the Chargers used him largely in the nickel package, when the Broncos went to a three-wide receiver look. Both of Reyes' sacks came with the Broncos in a three-wide set.

Good to know:Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers now leads the NFL in interceptions with 14 and is on pace for his second consecutive 20-interception season.

He tied for third in the league — with Rex Grossman — with 20 interceptions in 2011.

A good read:Chargers fans not amused by team's 15% off sale. Eric Wolff on the Black Friday sale at the Chargers' team store.

John Fox wants Broncos to ignore Chiefs' 1-9 record

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
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Broncos coach John Fox really has tried to throw the records out the window. In fact, he will spend much of this week trying to avoid any stumbles in Arrowhead Stadium because the Broncos got too caught up in the Chiefs' 1-9 record or injury woes.

"I've said it many times," Fox said. "We don't look at records; we look at tape."

The Chiefs' running game — Kansas City is fourth in the league in rushing at 145.4 yards per game — has been receiving particular attention. There also is a little matter of history for the Broncos veterans in that the Chiefs have rushed for at least 185 yards in four of their past five victories over the Broncos.

"The tape is different," said defensive tackle Justin Bannan. "I see them running on teams that have stout running defenses. I see them moving the ball up and down the field. I just think sometimes they're having a lot of unlucky turnovers, and that's probably been the case of their season."

"These guys are smart enough," Fox said. "They turn on the tape. They've been in there all day looking at the Kansas City Chiefs' offense, their run game, and they can tell (Jamaal Charles is) pretty good."

Or as safety Mike Adams put it: "I was on a losing team. I was with Cleveland. Guys tried to look past us and we ended up winning a game sometimes or making it closer than it should be."

Passing grade. After his return from back-to-back suspensions that totaled nine games, Broncos linebacker D.J. Williams played 22 snaps on defense in Sunday's victory over the Chargers.

Defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio graded Williams' day as "solid," and said the Broncos would continue to give Williams situational work in the defense. Williams played in the team's nickel (five defensive backs) package for the most part.

"(It's) good to have him back in the mix," Del Rio said. "Got him a handful of plays, and he was able to do some good things for us and some things we'll need him to do better but, again, as far as being able to play different combinations of people, we'll continue to do that."

Irish eyes are smiling. Former Notre Dame quarterback Brady Quinn has kept an eye on his alma mater.

Asked if he thought the Irish will win the national championship, he said: "I hope so. It seems a little bit like destiny things are working out in their favor."

Asked if Notre Dame linebacker Manti Te'o should win the Heisman Trophy, he added: "He's got my vote, but I'm not voting."

Injuries. The Broncos held cornerback Omar Bolden (concussion) out of practice Wednesday. Defensive tackle Derek Wolfe (thigh), tight end Virgil Green (hamstring) and wide receiver Demaryius Thomas (knee) were limited.

Guard Chris Kuper (ankle), cornerback Tracy Porter (illness) and running back Ronnie Hillman (hamstring) also were on the team's injury report, but participated fully.

For the Chiefs, tackle Branden Albert (back) and guard/center Ryan Lilja (knee) did not practice.

Footnotes. Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey was on the field for practice, but did not take part. He was given a day off by the coaches and will practice for the remainder of the week. ... Bailey on Quinn's two-year run as Broncos backup quarterback: "You had (Kyle) Orton, who was obviously playing better than everybody in practice, and here's (Tim) Tebow waiting, and he's possibly the future of the franchise, so you want to see what he has, and Brady just kind of got caught in the middle of that. He didn't really get a fair shot."

Thursday's NFL games: Three games on tap for Thanksgiving

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
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Thursday's games

Texans (9-1) at Lions (4-6) 10:30 a.m.

The skinny:Despite their defensive bobbles last weekend against the Jaguars, the Texans have the No. 2-ranked defense in the AFC. Because of their close call with the one-win Jaguars, coach Gary Kubiak has had the Texans' attention all week. Houston and Detroit have met only twice, in 2004 and 2008. This the Lions' 73rd game on Thanksgiving.

The difference will be:If the Lions' battered secondary can slow the Texans' play-action passing game. Quarterbacks have completed 66.5 percent of their passes against the Lions and thrown 16 touchdown passes. Texans QB Matt Schaub is 13-1 in his last 14 starts, with 23 touchdown passes, nine interceptions and a 99.7 passer rating. He threw two touchdown passes in his only start against the Lions, in October 2008.

The call:Texans 31-24.

Redskins (4-6) at Cowboys (5-5) 2:15 p.m.

The skinny:Just weeks after some accused Washington coach Mike Shanahan of saying the season was a lost cause, the Redskins could return to the division race with a holiday victory. The Cowboys have won six of their past seven games against the Redskins. Jason Garrett is 3-0 against the Redskins as Dallas' coach.

The difference will be:If the Cowboys can pressure Redskins QB Robert Griffin III into mistakes. The rookie is coming off a four-touchdown game against the Eagles. He has three TD passes of at least 60 yards this season and a TD run of at least 60 yards, making him the first quarterback in NFL history with that combination of big plays. Cowboys QB Tony Romo is 5-0 in Thanksgiving starts.

The call:Cowboys 28-23.

Patriots (7-3) at Jets (4-6) 6:20 p.m.

The skinny:When Rex Ryan was hired as coach of the Jets, he said he didn't intend to kiss the Patriots' championship rings. Well, he hasn't beaten them that often either. The Patriots have won 15 of their last 19 meetings with the Jets. Ryan is 3-5 in the series, including a 29-26 overtime loss this season. The Patriots have won their past two games on Thanksgiving and coach Bill Belichick is 9-3 on the road against the Jets.

The difference will be:If the Jets can slow the pedal-to-the-metal offense of the Patriots. Playing fast on offense doesn't allow the defense to change personnel with ease. Even though they're playing at the Meadowlands, where crowd noise is a factor, the Patriots won't allow the Jets much time to get set defensively. Tom Brady is 17-5 against the Jets.

The call:Patriots 30-20.

QB Brady Quinn still searching for chance he didn't get with Broncos

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
November 22, 2012

Brady Quinn never started a regular-season game for the Broncos. No, in two years of practices and offseason workouts in Denver, Quinn never felt the reward of a regular-season pass for the team.

But Sunday he will start, and throw regular-season passes, against the Broncos as the Chiefs' next-in-line starting quarterback. Denver's coaches certainly have plenty of "intel" on Quinn, what he likes on certain throws, as well as the things that bother him.

And now, against a team he says is filled "with great people," six years into his NFL career, Quinn is still looking to convince one team he still has room on his developmental curve to be a starting quarterback in the NFL.

The Broncos never thought so, or at least their actions said they didn't think so.

Josh McDaniels traded for Quinn, surrendering running back Peyton Hillis and a draft pick in the deal. Weeks later, McDaniels then selected Tim Tebow in the draft.

Then last season when Quinn had clearly outplayed Tebow in training camp and was one of the team's most improved players, the Broncos moved Tebow by him after Kyle Orton faltered, a move rooted at the time in both marketing and football.

But it also showed what many personnel people in the league believe. That Quinn has quality work ethic, that he's a quality person, with a quality skill-set, but is just missing something when it's time to play in a game.

Scouting reports can be unforgiving in the league, and Quinn's is at times, despite of the way he conducts himself, which no one in the league has ever questioned.

And for the Broncos, his performance in the 2011 preseason finale in Arizona may have impacted the eventual decision here as much as Tebow's potential box-office draw, long before Tebow had helped construct a six-game winning streak when he was put in the lineup.

Surrounded by backups, against a smattering of the Cardinals' defensive starters, Quinn went 4-of-12 for 26 yards with an interception in that last look of the preseason.

To be a starter, and the clock is ticking loudly for Quinn, Quinn has to find a way to shake that perception, that he is, in the dialect of the league just good enough to get you beat.

Yet few, if any, players around the Broncos showed more character in the drama-filled swirl that was the Broncos season in '11. When Tebow's move into the starting lineup alienated Orton and was a simmering issue in the locker room, it was Quinn who helped Tebow after practice, it was Quinn who provided advice as a resource to Tebow beyond the coaches.

"I've got great respect for Brady," is how Broncos coach John Fox put it this week. "He worked hard. He was a great teammate while he was here. I've got nothing but great praises for him. I didn't get a chance to see him play a lot for us. Not necessarily by design — that's just the way it worked out."

"I tried to be the best teammate I could," Quinn said.

Now, as much as Quinn wants to play, Sunday's game may not be the best situation to show what he can do. The Broncos lead the league in sacks (35). The Chiefs are last in the league in scoring. And Kansas City could be missing as many as three starters in the offensive line for the game.

The Chiefs also have injuries at receiver to Dwayne Bowe and Jonathan Baldwin.

And the Broncos will be looking to rattle Quinn some along the way. But no matter how things go Sunday, Quinn is still looking for the opportunity he couldn't get from the team that will be across from him.

"It's not my regret, it wasn't my decision," Quinn said. "As a player you take whatever opportunity is given to you, but I really didn't get my opportunity."

Broncos would prefer defenders knock it down on fourth down

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
November 22, 2012

Today's question about the Broncos comes from Jerry Gates in Anchorage, Alaska. To submit a question for consideration, send an e-mail to The Denver Post's Jeff Legwold.

Q: Twice this season, the Broncos defense has intercepted a pass on fourth down — most recently against San Diego. Why not just knock the pass down? Is it the opportunity to run it back, some type of other incentive, or what?

A: Jerry, the Broncos defense does have two of its 12 interceptions this season on fourth-down plays.

Both have come from similar spots on the field in what were eventually victories.

The first came Oct. 28 against the Saints in the Broncos' 34-14 victory. New Orleans had a fourth-and-2 from the Broncos' 47-yard line in the second quarter. Saints quarterback Drew Brees tried to squeeze a pass in to tight end Jimmy Graham, but it was intercepted by linebacker Wesley Woodyard at the Broncos' 36-yard line.

Woodyard returned it eight yards, and the Broncos took over on their own 44-yard line.

Had Woodyard simply knocked the ball down, the Broncos would have had the ball, on downs, at their own 47. In the end, it was a difference of just three yards.

The second came this past Sunday in the 30-23 victory over the Chargers.

With just over nine minutes left in the game, on a fourth-and-14 from the Broncos' 46-yard line, Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers was trying to avoid a rush by linebacker Von Miller in the middle of the formation. As he moved, he then tried to hit Malcolm Floyd over the middle, an errant throw intercepted by Broncos safety Jim Leonhard at the Broncos' 29-yard line.

Leonhard had no return on the play. It was a diving catch to make the interception, so the Broncos took over on their own 29, a difference of 17 yards from where they would have gotten the ball on downs. The Broncos then drove the ball 57 yards on 11 plays, a drive that concluded with a 32-yard field goal by Matt Prater.

The Broncos did get points, but it is the kind of field-position change teams routinely track as "lost yardage" each week on those kinds of plays, or by special teams penalties, poor punts or poor decisions in the return game.

The preference in those situations is that the players knock the ball down, that they understand the down and distance, and have the offense take over on downs from where the play started.

It's a tough call sometimes for a defender who has been drilled all week, every week, to force turnovers at every turn and "get the ball back for our offense." It would also be difficult for a defender along the sideline who could see nothing but open spaces in front of him to knock a potential interception down as well.

But it is a case of awareness, and the Broncos want their guys to play the percentages as well. A lost fumble on either of those plays by either Leonhard or Woodyard would have altered some things in each of those games.

So, I asked Broncos coach John Fox earlier this week what his philosophy was, in general, on those types of plays.

His response was essentially that he likes the effort as well as the interceptions, but would prefer to see the knockdown as much as possible.

He said: "You're always looking at team first. Sometimes, whether it's Hail Marys or do you ever believe in lateralling? It's like everything. If it turns out good, you like it. If it doesn't, you don't."

Broncos have yet to announce replacement for Willis McGahee on roster

Tom Kensler
The Denver Post
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Broncos running back Willis McGahee was placed on the injured reserve-designated for return list but, the organization has not announced a roster transaction to replace him.

For Sunday's game, the Broncos appear set to go with the trio of running backs that is already on the team: rookie Ronnie Hillman, fourth-year pro Lance Ball and former first-round pick Knowshon Moreno, who has been inactive for the past eight weeks although he has been healthy.

"For this week, we feel very comfortable with who we have," Broncos coach John Fox said Wednesday after practice. "That can change. It's fair to say, we'll pull from the guys we have and that know our system.

Each season, NFL teams can list one player on IR as designated for return. That allows the Broncos to fill McGahee's spot on the active roster until he returns. Under the rule, McGahee can return to the roster as early as in six weeks and no later than in eight weeks. All others placed on IR are officially done for the season.

While being tackled during the second quarter of last weekend's home victory over San Diego, McGahee tore a knee ligament (MCL) and suffered a compression fracture.

Surgery is not required, and according to the medical staff he is expected to be out six to eight weeks.

"The good thing is, those three guys (Hillman, Ball and Moreno) played plenty," offensive coordinator Mike McCoy said Wednesday. "Knowshon was playing early in the year. They're all familiar with the system and they have to pick up their game."

One possibility to replace McGahee is running back Jeremiah Johnson, who is on the Broncos' practice squad.

"We're evaluating what we might do," Fox said.

Denver worked out former Houston Texans running back Steve Slaton on Tuesday and Jacob Hester on Wednesday.

In other news, Broncos cornerback Omar Bolden (concussion vs. Chargers) did some stretching but did not participate in drills.

Defensive end Derek Wolfe (thigh vs. Chargers) practiced on a limited basis, Fox said.

Peyton Manning says Broncos can overcome Willis McGahee's absence

Adrian Dater
The Denver Post
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Peyton Manning said the Broncos will undoubtedly miss injured running back Willis McGahee, but said he believes others can do a good job filling the void.

"We have that 'next man up' philosophy around here. Other teams have it and coach (John) Fox certainly has it," Manning said after practice at Dove Valley. "We've had other players get injured and other players have stepped up, whether it was Chris Kuper or Tracy Porter or whoever it was."

McGahee, sidelined with a torn MCL, "certainly will be missed, he's that good of a player."

"Knowshon (Moreno) and Lance (Ball) and Ronnie (Hillman), and (they) all have to step up, and everybody else has to step their game up too, when you're missing one of your top players. And those guys will step up and do a good job."

The 7-3 Broncos , who play at Kansas City this weekend, will practice Thanksgiving morning.

"I think it's important that a good football team can still have a good practice in a holiday situation," Manning said. "And we can still realize what a special day it is, with family and friends, and be thankful for our blessings. We have a lot to be thankful for."

Manning said nobody should take the Chiefs lightly, despite their poor season.

"They're good defensively. They can put a lot of pressure on the quarterback and it's always tough playing at Arrowhead," Manning said.

Von Miller named AFC Defensive Player of the Week

Mike Klis
The Denver Post
November 21, 2012

Hard to believe but Von Miller had never previously won an AFC Defensive Player of the Week award this year.

He has now.

Miller received the honor this week because one, San Francisco's Aldon Smith plays in the NFC, and two, the Broncos' pass-rushing linebacker dominated the San Diego Chargers on Sunday with three sacks and two forced fumbles.

Miller momentarily became the NFL's sack leader with 13, but Smith had 5 1/2 sacks against the pathetic Chicago Bears' offensive tackles on Monday night to take the lead with 15 sacks overall.

Miller is the third Broncos' player to receive the weekly AFC defensive honor, following cornerback Tracy Porter in Week 1 and Wesley Woodyard in week 8.

Just 5-10, 190 pounds, Broncos' Hillman doesn't mind running inside

Tom Kensler
The Denver Post
November 21, 2012

Broncos coaches must be impressed, if not surprised, by the fearless runs of rookie Ronnie Hillman up the middle.

Hillman is listed at 5-foot-10 and 190 pounds. The former San Diego State standout may get the first call Sunday at Kansas City as a replacement for injured running back Willis McGahee.

"It takes instincts," Hillman told reporters Wednesday after practice.

"You know you're going to get hit hard. But you try not to think about that. Just run."

Broncos safety Mike Adams thankful to be with winner

Tom Kensler
The Denver Post
November 21, 2012

Mike Adams, the Broncos' starting strong safety, played the past five seasons in Cleveland, so it's not difficult to guess one of things he is thankful for on the eve of Thanksgiving Day.

"You want to see me do a backflip?" Adams said to reporters following Wednesday's practice.

A nine-year pro, Adams has yet to experience a playoff game. He played his first three seasons on struggling San Francisco 49ers squads.

"I'm thrilled (to be a Bronco)," he said. "Not to look ahead, but that's what this game is all about — winning. Not to experience that in the past, I'm happy to be on the other side.

"There's nothing like winning, nothing like it."

Broncos' Champ Bailey: It won't seem like Kansas City without Bowe

Tom Kensler
The Denver Post
November 21, 2012

Speaking with reporters Wednesday, Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey said he hopes veteran Chiefs receiver Dwayne Bowe will be healthy and ready for Sunday's game in Kansas City.

A sixth-year pro, Bowe (6-foot-2, 221 pounds) did not catch a pass last week due to a neck problem. Bailey and Bowe have had some legendary battles.

"He's tough, man," Bailey said. "One thing about him, from the first snap to the last, you're going to get everything you can from him.

"Whatever record they have, whatever they are, he's going to play hard. I've always had a lot of respect for him, going about his business like that.

"During his career, I wish I had given him pointers," Bailey added. "I wish I would have never done that. He's grown up a lot. He's a great pro. I expect his best shot."

Brady Quinn on starting vs. Broncos: "That's how life works out sometimes"

Tom Kensler
The Denver Post
November 21, 2012

Speaking Wednesday via teleconference to reporters covering the Broncos, newly named Kansas City starting quarterback Brady Quinn said his two seasons in Denver were "tough."

The Broncos play at Kansas City Sunday.

"It was tough," Quinn said. "But I think it's always tougher when things aren't going well."

"When a team makes the playoffs (2011) and wins a game in the playoffs, you're doing the best you can just to be supportive always. When you're winning, for whatever reason, I think it's a little bit easier to deal with than when things aren't going as well.

"Anytime you get to start in the National Football League, you're blessed," he said about the 11 a.m. matchup Sunday. "It was unfortunate (in Denver). But that's how life works out sometimes. Sometimes God has a different plan for you, and you've got to try to learn the best you can, regardless of the circumstance or situation, and then take what you can and move forward."

Denver Broncos put Willis McGahee on IR

Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
November 21, 2012

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — The Denver Broncos will have to make a deep run in the playoffs to get Willis McGahee any more carries this season.

The Broncos put their 31-year-old running back on recallable injured reserve Wednesday, meaning he can return to practice after missing the final six regular-season games and play in a game after Jan. 18.

That would bring Denver up to the AFC title game.

McGahee tore the medical collateral ligament in his right knee Sunday when he was tackled low by San Diego cornerback Quentin Jammer. Coach John Fox said McGahee won't need surgery, but he decided to put him on IR to give the Broncos some roster flexibility.

McGahee will be replaced by rookie Ronnie Hillman, Lance Ball and former first-round pick Knowshon Moreno, who have combined for 297 yards and two TDs on 82 carries so far, when the AFC West-leading Broncos (7-3) visit the Kansas City Chiefs (1-9) on Sunday.

"We're certainly going to miss Willis," quarterback Peyton Manning said. "To say we're not going to miss Willis would be not telling the truth because he's that good of a player. ... So, Knowshon and Ronnie and Lance have to step up. Everybody else has to step their game up, too, when you're missing one of your top players."

McGahee ranks fifth among AFC rushers with 731 yards and a 4.4-yard average. He also had 26 catches for 221 yards — just 10 yards shy of his career high set in 2007 in Baltimore — and his 33 career 100-yard games are more than any other active running back.

Denver's offense is built around Manning's pinpoint passing, but McGahee's success despite a career-high five fumbles provided the Broncos with a toughness between the tackles and kept opponents from teeing off on Manning and his receivers.

"The good thing is all three guys have played plenty early in the year. So, they're all familiar with the system and they've all got to pick up their game," offensive coordinator Mike McCoy said. "Every back, every player, has a different style. So, they'll do their thing. We have all the confidence in the world those guys can do that."

Of the three, Hillman has had the most work — 49 carries for 188 yards — but he's a smaller, shiftier tailback in the mold of Darren Sproles and the Broncos will watch his workload closely.

"Willis has had the most game repetitions, but Lance and Knowshon are veteran players and Ronnie's probably had as much experience as any rookie running back right now," Manning said. "Those guys will step up and do a good job."

Ball and Moreno have more experience in pass protection, and that's priority No. 1 for any running back in Denver, as evidenced by Ball's beautiful blitz pickup last week when he slid from the left side to the right, sparing Manning a vicious hit and allowing him to throw a 20-yard touchdown pass to Eric Decker.

"That was a huge block," said Manning, who expects those kinds of plays from whoever's in the backfield with him.

Hillman said the prospect of carrying a larger load now means "you've got to protect Peyton a lot longer. I've been in there a lot, but if I do get an extended role, then it's a little more pressure, being able to do everything right every play that I'm there."

The Broncos are keeping their options open as far as filling McGahee's spot on the roster. They could promote running back Jeremiah Johnson from their practice squad or sign a free agent. On Tuesday, they worked out former Houston running back Steve Slaton, who rushed for 1,282 yards and caught 50 passes as a rookie in 2008 before injuries and inconsistency took hold.

Fox, however, indicated he wasn't planning on adding another running back before Sunday's game.

"For this week, I think we feel very comfortable with who we have," Fox said. "And that can change based on anything we might do, but I think it's fair to say and pretty obvious that we'll pull from the guys we have that know our system."

Hillman was listed as a full participant at practice with a hamstring injury, but he told The Associated Press it wasn't an issue and that he hadn't aggravated the hamstring pull that set him back during training camp.

Notes: CB Omar Bolden (concussion) didn't participate in practice. DL Derek Wolfe (thigh), TE Virgil Green (hamstring) and WR Demaryius Thomas (right knee) were limited. RG Chris Kuper (left ankle) and CB Tracy Porter (illness) and DE Robert Ayers (groin) were full participants. ... Chiefs QB Brady Quinn is the first of Denver's trio of 2011 QBs to get a start for his new team. ... Perennial Pro Bowl CB Champ Bailey said flags for helmet-to-helmet hits like the one that cost Ravens S Ed Reed \$50,000 should be immediately reviewable on replay like fumbles or TDs. He said it's impossible for a fast-closing defender to avoid hits like this one when the ball-handler ducks a split-second before impact like Pittsburgh WR Emmanuel

Sanders did. The league originally suspended Reed for a game, which Bailey suggested was orchestrated: "Lift the suspension and make it a fine. It kind of lightens the load of a \$50,000 fine, right?" Bailey said. "It's still excessive. I know Ed personally and he's not a dirty player." ... LB Von Miller won his second career Defensive Player of the Week award for his three-sack, two-forced fumble performance against the Chargers.

Adams gives back to rough hometown

Eddie Pells
Associated Press
November 21, 2012

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — Mike Adams remembers feeling the pit in his stomach when, instead of going to the supermarket, his mom, his aunt and a few of his six siblings walked around the corner to the church to pick up Thanksgiving dinner.

The volunteers put the cranberry sauce, the turkey, the mashed potatoes and the rest into a shopping cart and little Mike, not even 10 at the time, followed everyone back home to get ready for the holiday.

"I was embarrassed," Adams said. "I think about it now and it was like, damn, we really didn't have much."

That was life growing up poor in Paterson, N.J. — a life the Broncos safety has left behind but has by no means forgotten.

Yes, there are hundreds of NFL players doing all kinds of charity work this Thanksgiving — and every week. Adams and his charity, the Rising Stars Foundation, have taken on an even more special meaning this year because his community, in addition to having a poverty rate about 11 percent over the national average, has been dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, as well.

"It was a tough place to grow up, and a tough place to live," Adams said.

This year, instead of giving away food, Rising Stars' main Thanksgiving project is a coat giveaway. Adams wants to find at least 100 kids who don't have coats and make sure they aren't shivering during their trips from home to school. He runs a football camp in the summer, a back-to-school drive in the fall where he gives out book bags and free haircuts for boys and hair-dos for girls. After Sandy hit, he sent a \$100,000 check to his foundation to help ease some of the suffering back home.

"It's a whole lot of things I try to do so people there can see a different side of me and see me as much as possible," Adams said. "I want them to know that regardless of the circumstances, the environment, all the things you see, you can still find a way out of that."

Though his inspiring NFL story — undrafted rookie makes a team, then spends nine years in the league — is not unheard of, it takes on extra weight when he's telling it to the hundreds of kids who make up his audience when he runs the camps, or heads home for other charity events.

"I beat the odds," he said. "When I go back home, kids see that and know I wasn't drafted. They know there's more than one chance, and that's all you need, is an opportunity. It's why I always wanted to give, give, give. Take every paycheck as a blessing. Every down."

Adams started his career in San Francisco, picked up by the Niners as a college free agent out of Delaware. In 2007, he signed with the Browns, where he played five seasons. Last offseason, the Broncos signed him. He has started all 10 games in Denver, broken up eight passes, recovered two fumbles, made one sack for a safety and has been a steady, veteran presence on a defense ranked sixth in the league in yards allowed.

The real stats, in the safety's book, are the number of kids he can influence back home.

Adams started the foundation in 2006 with another Paterson native, Gerald Hayes, who was playing linebacker with the Arizona Cardinals at the time.

Adams, 31, has a daughter, Maya, and says he can't imagine not being a presence in her life. But he knows it's not something to take for granted.

He was raised by his mother and grandmother in Paterson, about 20 miles from downtown Manhattan, where "the liquor stores stay open 'til 2:30, 3 in the morning, everybody's outside, hustling drugs.

"You see so much and are exposed to so much as a kid that you really shouldn't see," he said.

He concedes he got caught up in some bad stuff, as well.

"You kind of don't know any better," he said. "It's hard to find role models around there."

The first time Adams met his father was five years ago at a funeral. A friend of his pointed across the room to a man Adams had never seen. That man, the friend said, was his dad.

"Weird. Awkward," Adams called his first, and only, meeting with his dad.

But also a key moment for him.

"It strengthened me to do more in the community," he said. "My mother and my grandmother raised me. The kids around there, they don't see a lot of positives. My goal, as I see it, is to try to give them something new to see."

Denver at Kansas City

Associated Press
November 21, 2012

The Denver Broncos are comfortably atop the AFC West, but now they'll have to replace a key offensive contributor.

A dominant defense led by Von Miller should help soothe any concerns.

With Willis McGahee out, Miller and the defense could be poised for yet another dominant performance Sunday against the lowly Kansas City Chiefs.

Denver (7-3) opened a three-game lead in the West with a 30-23 victory over San Diego last Sunday, sweeping the season series.

The Broncos are on the cusp of matching their win total from last season thanks to a five-game winning streak, but they'll have to go forward without McGahee. The team leader with 731 rushing yards, McGahee was placed on injured reserve after tearing the medial collateral ligament in his right knee when he was tackled low against the Chargers.

McGahee will be replaced by rookie Ronnie Hillman, Lance Ball and former first-round pick Knowshon Moreno, who have combined for 297 yards and two TDs on 82 carries this season.

"We're certainly going to miss Willis," quarterback Peyton Manning said. "To say we're not going to miss Willis would be not telling the truth because he's that good of a player. ... So, Knowshon and Ronnie and Lance have to step up. Everybody else has to step their game up, too, when you're missing one of your top players."

Manning doesn't have to worry about his defense, which ranks among the NFL's best allowing 312.8 yards per game, including 93.8 on the ground.

Denver's defense also leads the league with 35 sacks, with Miller recording seven of his 13 in the last three games. He had three against San Diego and is second in the league in that category.

"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 24 1/2 sacks are the most by a Bronco in his first two seasons since the stat became official in 1982.

He figures to be in the Chiefs' backfield fairly often since they've allowed 10 sacks in four games after Brady Quinn was taken down three times and Matt Cassel once in last weekend's 28-6 home loss to Cincinnati.

Kansas City (1-9) is averaging 12.0 points during a seven-game losing streak, mustering just 166.0 passing yards over the last five contests.

"We know we have to fight. We have to do everything in our power to be the best we can be, to be perfect," coach Romeo Crennel said. "That's what I told them, we have to be perfect because that's the only way we have a chance."

The Chiefs, losers of all five home games, were far from perfect last weekend, converting only one third down and totaling just 284 yards of offense. That's partly why Crennel is going back to Quinn.

"I like his leadership qualities and he's had experience with a couple of different teams and he's seen a couple of different things," Crennel said of his former first-round pick, who has yet to break through as an NFL starter. "I think that will bode well for him."

Crennel may feel more comfortable with Quinn over Cassel since he spent the past two seasons as a backup with Denver, never appearing in an official game.

"I know I really enjoyed the teammates I had there. I tried to get better every day, and I think I got better," Quinn said. "I can't really speak about what did or didn't happen."

He's completed 24 of 42 passes for 181 yards with three interceptions in two starts this year.

Unlike the Chiefs, there's no doubt who will be under center for Denver.

Manning is looking for an improved effort after struggling by his standards last week. He completed 25 of 42 for 270 yards with three touchdowns and one interception, while getting sacked three times.

Protecting Manning will be even more important with McGahee out, and it's unclear if Hillman can contribute due to his size.

The rookie, noted for his speed, has 188 yards and a touchdown on 49 carries.

"You've got to protect Peyton a lot longer. I've been in there a lot, but if I do get an extended role, then it's a little more pressure, being able to do everything right every play that I'm there."

Manning threw five TDs in his last visit to Kansas City, leading Indianapolis to a 45-35 win on Oct. 31, 2004.

NFL Capsule: Broncos at Chiefs

Associated Press
November 21, 2012

DENVER (7-3) At KANSAS CITY (1-9)

Sunday, 1 p.m., CBS

OPENING LINE - Broncos by 10

RECORD VS. SPREAD - Denver 6-4; Kansas City 3-7

SERIES RECORD - Chiefs lead 56-48

AP PRO32 RANKING - Broncos No. 4; Chiefs No. 32

LAST MEETING - Chiefs defeated Broncos 7-3, Jan. 1, 2012

LAST WEEK - Broncos beat Chargers 30-23; Chiefs lost to Bengals 28-6

BRONCOS OFFENSE - OVERALL (3), RUSH (19), PASS (5)

BRONCOS DEFENSE - OVERALL (6), RUSH (5), PASS (12)

CHIEFS OFFENSE - OVERALL (19), RUSH (4), PASS (28)

CHIEFS DEFENSE - OVERALL (15), RUSH (25), PASS (9)

STREAKS, STATS AND NOTES - Chiefs lost to Denver 17-10 last season at Arrowhead Stadium when then-Broncos QB Tim Tebow completed only two passes, one a TD. ... Broncos QB Peyton Manning tied with former Broncos QB John Elway with 148 wins, second-most by starter in league history. His winning percentage of 67.9 better than Elway and first-place Brett Favre, who has 186 wins. ... Kansas City has lost seven straight. Its lone victory required a franchise-record 18-point comeback to win at New Orleans. ... Broncos have won five straight since losing at New England. ... Broncos LB Von Miller has 24 1/2 sacks through first 25 games, including 13 this season. He had three last week against San Diego. ... Denver without leading rusher Willis McGahee, who tore MCL and sustained compression fracture in right knee last week. ... Chiefs RB Jamaal Charles fourth in AFC with 82.1 yards rushing and 101 yards from scrimmage per game. ... QB Brady Quinn will start for Chiefs in place of Matt Cassel, who was starter earlier this season. Quinn sustained concussion last month against Oakland, returned for first time last week when Cassel was ineffective.

Broncos make move on Willis McGahee

Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

November 21, 2012

In a procedural move, the Denver Broncos are placing starting running back Willis McGahee on injured reserve with the ability to bring him back for the AFC championship game if the team makes it that far.

This move is essentially a move to add a player to the roster. McGahee suffered a torn MCL in his knee Sunday against San Diego and the team doesn't think he will be ready to come back for about two months.

The Broncos could add a running back to the roster. Candidates include Jeremiah Johnson from the practice squad and Steve Slaton, who worked out for the team Tuesday.

Monday, we looked at what McGahee's loss will mean to the team.

NFL honors Broncos LB Von Miller

Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

November 21, 2012

Von Miller is on a roll and the NFL is noticing.

The Denver second-year linebacker was named the AFC Defensive Player of the Week. Miller dominated in a 30-23 win over San Diego on Sunday.

He had three sacks and he forced two fumbles in the game. His three sacks in one game tied a career high for the No. 2 overall pick in the 2011 draft. His two forced fumbles were a career high. Miller has 13 sacks this season, which is second in the NFL behind San Francisco's Aldon Smith. He has 15 sacks.

Miller debuts on Mike Sando's MVP Watch this week. He is No. 9. Denver quarterback Peyton Manning remains No. 1 on the list.

By the numbers: Best in West

Bill Williamson
ESPN.com
November 21, 2012

Here is a look at the division leaders in some key statistical categories after Week 11:

Passing yards

Player: Carson Palmer, Oakland

Yards: 3,035

Comment: The yards are piling up for the Raiders as Palmer is forced into passing situations because Oakland is often behind in games.

Rushing yards

Player: Jamaal Charles, Kansas City

Yards: 821

Comment: Charles is one of the few bright spots for the Chiefs.

Receptions

Player: Demaryius Thomas, Denver

Yards: 933

Comment: Thomas is closing in on his first 1,000-yard season.

Tackles

Player: Wesley Woodyard, Denver

Total: 88

Comment: Woodyard's solid season continues.

Sacks

Player: Von Miller, Denver

Sacks: 13

Comment: Miller has to be watched on every play. He takes over games.

Interceptions

Player: Eric Weddle, San Diego, Woodyard

Interceptions: 3

Comment: Both players had picks in Denver on Sunday.

AFC West Stock Watch

Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

November 21, 2012

FALLING

Robert Meachem, San Diego, receiver: Meachem was signed to a lucrative deal in free agency to make up for the loss of Vincent Jackson. It hasn't worked. Meachem has produced very little all season and his playing time has dwindled. The only reason he will likely be in San Diego next year is because of a guaranteed deal.

Fan support in Kansas City: Planes have flown over Arrowhead Stadium imploring for general manager Scott Pioli to be fired. Fans now routinely wear black to games. Now this: The team has been blamed for a death of a fan in an obituary.

Defense in Oakland: The biggest ding on first-year Oakland coach Dennis Allen is he is a defensive specialist and was brought in to fix a leaky D. The Raiders have allowed 135 points in the past three games and have allowed a league-high 322 points this season. This is an indictment on Allen.

RISING

Denver's playoff chances: Denver collapsed in 2008 and 2009 and it could always do it again. But the Broncos (7-3) are in great shape with six games to go. They have a three-game lead over San Diego, but it's really a four-game lead because they own the tiebreaker. Denver has one less win than the other three teams in the AFC West have combined.

The chances of leadership changes in three AFC West cities: The odds were already high leadership changes would occur in Kansas City and in San Diego. Those chances have now increased in Oakland as well after owner Mark Davis expressed frustration Sunday. It is a long shot, but anytime an owner pops off, it is worth monitoring.

Ronnie Hillman's playing time: The Denver rookie will get more work now that starting running back Willis McGahee is out for at least six weeks with a knee injury. Hillman is an explosive outside runner, but he hasn't shown he can run inside.

Mike Sando's MVP Watch

Mike Sando

ESPN.com

November 21, 2012

No defensive player has won MVP honors in the NFL since Lawrence Taylor following the 1986 season.

The 2011 draft is doing its part to change the trend. That draft has produced the top three sack leaders in the NFL through Week 11.

J.J. Watt, who has been on our MVP Watch list nine times in 12 weeks, trails only Aldon Smith and Von Miller among NFL sack leaders to this point in the season. Denver made Miller the second overall choice in 2011. San Francisco made Smith the seventh pick. Houston took Watt 11th.

That is a great pass-rushing draft.

Smith has a league-leading 15 sacks after setting a "Monday Night Football" record with 5.5 against Chicago. Miller ranks second with 13 sacks after collecting three for Denver against San Diego.

I've added Smith and Miller to the MVP Watch list heading into Week 12. They have combined with Watt for 39.5 sacks this season. It's still unlikely any of them will taken down the top quarterbacks in the MVP race, but they are doing their best on the field.

1. PEYTON MANNING

Quarterback | Denver Broncos ... Next Game: 11/25 at KC ... Last Poll: 1

Another week, another victory for Manning and the Broncos. The team has won five in a row and still has two games remaining against Kansas City, including one in Week 12. Manning posted an oddly low (for him) Total QBR score of 31.7 against San Diego last week. I wasn't sure why when looking at the numbers. He completed 9 of 13 passes for 109 yards and a touchdown on third down. He appeared efficient on first down as well. But his second-down numbers were strikingly bad: 6-of-13 passing for 50 yards with no touchdowns, three sacks and a 3.1 QBR score (down from in the 90s on second down over the previous two weeks). We call that an aberration. Manning had lit up the Chargers on second down earlier this season, completing 10 of 13 passes for 144 yards and two scores.

Week 11 vs. SD

CMP	ATT	YDS	CMP%	YPA	LNG	TD	INT	QBR
25	42	270	59.5	6.43	31	3	1	31.7

2. AARON RODGERS

Quarterback | Green Bay Packers ... Next Game: 11/25 at NYG ... Last Poll: 2

Rodgers has 20 touchdown passes with three interceptions since Week 5. He leads the NFL in touchdown-to-interception differential during that span (Drew Brees is second with an 18-4 differential). Rodgers' 24 touchdown passes since Week 4 also lead the league. With the New York Giants next on Green Bay's schedule, ESPN Stats & Information provided this note from the team's Week 13 meeting last season: Rodgers went 21-of-25 with 264 yards and three touchdowns on throws outside the painted numbers. The numbers dropped to 11-of-23 passing with 114 yards and no scores on those throws when the teams met in the playoffs.

Week 11 at DET

CMP	ATT	YDS	CMP%	YPA	LNG	TD	INT	QBR
19	27	236	70.4	8.74	40	2	1	35.5

3. TOM BRADY

Quarterback | New England Patriots ... Next Game: 11/22 at NYJ ... Last Poll: 3

Brady has 11 touchdowns with no interceptions during the Patriots' ongoing four-game winning streak. He has overtaken Manning as the Total QBR leader for the season. Brady has 21 touchdowns with only three interceptions all season. Arizona and Seattle were the best defensive teams Brady has faced. He had three touchdowns and three interceptions against those teams, going 0-2. The Cardinals and Seahawks have allowed 19 touchdowns with 20 picks to everyone else. Brady has 18 touchdowns and no picks against Tennessee, Baltimore, Buffalo (twice), Denver, the New York Jets, St. Louis and Indianapolis. Those seven teams have allowed 92 touchdowns with 60 interceptions to opponents other than New England.

Week 11 vs. IND

CMP	ATT	YDS	CMP%	YPA	LNG	TD	INT	QBR
24	35	331	68.6	9.46	36	3	0	93.9

4. ADRIAN PETERSON

Running Back | Minnesota Vikings ... Next Game: 11/25 at CHI ... Last Poll: 4

Peterson continues to lead the NFL in rushing with 1,128 yards following the Vikings' bye week. He has 544 yards after contact, easily most in the NFL. There are only 22 players with more than 544 yards before and after contact. ESPN Stats & Information instructs its game charters to define contact this way: "Contact will be different than just touching the ball carrier. Contact for our purposes must slow the ball carrier down, or it must be a play in which the defender had a legitimate chance at tackling the ball carrier but is unable to due to a juke move or stiff arm."

Week 10 vs. DET

ATT	YDS	AVG	LNG	TD	REC	YDS	AVG	LNG	TD
27	171	6.3	61	1	3	5	1.7	6	0

5. MARSHAWN LYNCH

Running Back | Seattle Seahawks ... Next Game: 11/25 at MIA ... Last Poll: 7

Lynch still ranks second in rushing yards following the Seahawks' bye week. He now faces a Miami Dolphins defense that has ceded 132.2 yards rushing per game and 4.7 per carry over its past five games. That is up from 61.4 yards per game and 2.7 per carry over the first five games. Doug Martin recently passed Lynch for second in yards after contact. Miami has given up 366 yards after contact, the eighth-fewest in the NFL.

Week 10 vs. NYJ

ATT	YDS	AVG	LNG	TD	REC	YDS	AVG	LNG	TD
27	124	4.6	18	1	1	27	27.0	27	0

6. J.J. WATT

Defensive End | Houston Texans ... Next Game: 11/22 at DET ... Last Poll: 6

Watt ranks third among NFL players in sacks with 11.5. He has 11 passes defended, one off the NFL lead, and the most for a defensive lineman. Brian Robison is the only other player in the NFL with at least six passes defended and more than three sacks. Watt dropped slightly on the list only because the Texans gave up 37 points while barely holding off Jacksonville in Week 11.

Week 11 vs. JAC

TACK	SOLO	AST	SACK	FF	PD
8	6	2	1.0	0	1

7. DREW BREES

Quarterback | New Orleans Saints ... Next Game: 11/25 vs. SF ... Last Poll: NR

Brees makes his third MVP Watch appearance of the season and his first since Sept. 12, when he was sixth. Brees has been producing all along, but the Saints' record wasn't good enough to generate much MVP discussion. New Orleans is back to .500 and can take a giant step forward with a victory against San Francisco in Week 12. The Saints then play road games against the Atlanta Falcons and New York Giants. We'll know by then where the Saints stand. That will tell us where Brees stands in the MVP conversation.

Week 11 vs. OAK

CMP	ATT	YDS	CMP%	YPA	LNG	TD	INT	QBR
20	27	219	74.1	8.11	38	3	0	95.6

8. ALDON SMITH

Linebacker | San Francisco 49ers ... Next Game: 11/25 at NOR ... Last Poll: NR

The Bears had no answer for the player San Francisco drafted seventh overall in 2011. Smith has benefited greatly from playing off teammate Justin Smith, often combining with Smith on pass-rush twists. Aldon Smith put his bull-rush to use against the Bears. That was one key to his 5.5-sack performance. Sacks sometimes come in bunches, but this was ridiculous. The highlight for Smith, I thought, was when he tossed Bears tackle Gabe Carimi over backward on his way to quarterback Jason Campbell. The safety Smith collected capped off a night to remember.

Week 11 vs. CHI

TACK	SOLO	AST	SACK	FF	PD
7	6	1	5.5	2	0

9. VON MILLER

Linebacker | Denver Broncos ... Next Game: 11/25 at KC ... Last Poll: NR

A three-sack performance against San Diego gives Miller 24.5 sacks through 25 career games. Only Derrick Thomas had more to that point in a career since the NFL began tracking sacks officially in 1982. Miller ranks second to the 49ers' Smith in sacks with 13 this season. He also has 13 tackles for loss, according to ESPN Stats & Information.

Week 11 vs. SD

TACK	SOLO	AST	SACK	FF	PD
6	6	0	3.0	2	0

10. MATT SCHAUB

Quarterback | Houston Texans ... Next Game: 11/22 at DET ... Last Poll: NR

Schaub is back on the MVP Watch list for the first time since peaking at No. 5 on Oct. 2. His 527-yard, five-touchdown game against Jacksonville came one week after Schaub passed for 95 yards with two picks while grinding out a bad-weather victory at Chicago. He has 10 touchdown passes during a four-game streak of victories against Baltimore, Buffalo, Chicago and Jacksonville. The Texans have played four of their past five games at home. They play their next three on the road, capped by a Monday night date with New England on Dec. 10.

Week 11 vs. JAC

CMP	ATT	YDS	CMP%	YPA	LNG	TD	INT	QBR
43	55	527	78.2	9.58	48	5	2	87.0

Broncos place Willis McGahee on designated injured reserve

Will Brinson
CBSSports.com
November 21, 2012

Just when the Broncos started to look like they might have a claim to the mostly worthless "best team in the NFL" throne, they suffered a big blow with Willis McGahee tearing his MCL and breaking his leg in Week 11.

His regular season is now over.

CBSSports.com's Mike Freeman confirms the Broncos will place McGahee on injured reserve. The news was first reported by Jay Glazer of Fox Sports. Lindsay Jones of *USA Today* reports that McGahee's IR status is the new designated-to-return kind, with McGahee being able to practice in six weeks.

It's quite possible the team simply wants to beef up its running-back depth. CBS Sports NFL Insider Jason La Canfora reported Tuesday that Steve Slaton had a "good workout" with the Broncos and could be signed if McGahee went to IR.

Jason La Canfora
@JasonLaCanfora

RB Steve Salton had impressive workout w/DEN today. Have 3 RBs so no room on 53 right now but if McGahee goes to IR he'd be signed

20 Nov 12

McGahee was having another resurgent season in Denver, rushing for 731 yards on 167 carries after nearly topping 1,200 yards last season. He was also posting impressive receiving stats, catching 26 passes for 221 yards, just 10 yards shy of his career high.

It was believed initially McGahee would end up missing somewhere between four and eight weeks.

Ronnie Hillman, Lance Ball and Knowshon Moreno are expected to fill the void in McGahee's absence. As CBSSports.com's Andrew Mason wrote earlier this week, Moreno in particular will get a chance to shed the bust label currently attached to his name.

Though Hillman's considered the primary backup to McGahee, it's possible Moreno and Ball could get more carries as the primary backs. Both John Fox and John

Elway, in separate radio appearances, surprisingly hinted that Moreno could see a lot of action with McGahee down.

So that's worth monitoring. Perhaps more than anything else, though, the guy who will end up seeing the most reps is the guy who can protect for Peyton Manning the best.

Running the ball is important for Denver, but not nearly as important as ensuring Manning doesn't take too many shots and stays healthy.

Willis McGahee headed to injured reserve; Broncos need short-yardage answer

Andrew Mason
CBSSports.com
November 21, 2012

The Broncos' decision to place RB Willis McGahee on recallable injured reserve comes as no surprise, even though coach John Fox indicated Monday that McGahee could work through the injury without a stint on injured reserve.

McGahee not only has a torn medial collateral ligament, but a fracture in his knee. The combination of those two injuries makes it impossible for him to return before the playoffs -- and would even make the first two rounds of the postseason a stretch for the 31-year-old back.

Replacing McGahee is likely to be a collaborative effort among Knowshon Moreno, Ronnie Hillman, Lance Ball and perhaps one more running back. The Broncos had ex-Texans RB Steve Slaton in for a tryout on Tuesday, but he did not sign a contract. Jeremiah Johnson, who averaged 5.5 yards a carry in limited duty last year, could also be promoted from the practice squad, but if he plays in one more game, he loses his practice-squad eligibility.

Any of them should be able to pick up yardage in most situations. But where McGahee might be irreplaceable is on third- or fourth-and-short. He picked up nine yards on a third-and-1 play last Sunday and even when he doesn't get the football, the threat of a McGahee handoff opens up passing lanes for Peyton Manning in short-yardage scenarios.

Short-yardage running has never been a strength of Moreno, and the 190-pound rookie Hillman has only been effective bouncing outside the tackles -- which he did on 21- and 19-yard carries against San Diego last Sunday. The Broncos used Ball on a third-and-1 in the first quarter of the 30-23 win, but he was stuffed.

With two fourth-and-1 plays after McGahee was injured, the Broncos settled for field-goal attempts -- much to the consternation of many fans. But after Ball was stuffed on the earlier third-and-1, they could hardly be blamed for caution, and against San Diego, they were able to get by.

That might not be the case in future games, leaving the Broncos needing someone to step forward to keep defenses honest when yardage is toughest to find.

Broncos Notebook: Remembering the Brady Quinn era

Andrew Mason
CBSSports.com
November 21, 2012

QB Brady Quinn left the Broncos for the Chiefs as an unrestricted free agent in March with no regrets -- for good reason. The 2007 first-round pick never had the opportunity to throw a regular-season pass in two seasons in Denver.

"You take the opportunity when it's given to you. I didn't really get that opportunity," Quinn said Wednesday as he prepares to start against his former team.

"It was unfortunate, but that's how life works out sometimes," he added. "Sometimes God has a different plan for you, and you've got to try to learn the best you can, regardless of the circumstance or situation, and then take what you can and move forward."

Quinn had opportunities to move up the depth chart -- and specifically, move ahead of Tim Tebow during his two years with the Broncos. The best chance he had was in the 2011 preseason finale, when he started ahead of Tebow and appeared to have the inside track on the No. 2 position behind Kyle Orton -- but stumbled badly, finishing his half of work with a 7.6 quarterback rating.

A week later, Quinn and Tebow were named co-No. 2 quarterbacks, but that designation was a mirage, and after Orton collapsed completely by Week 5, Tebow became the starter and began the Broncos' wacky ride from a 1-4 start to an 8-8, division-title finish.

Some Broncos nevertheless believed that Quinn got a raw deal, including CB Champ Bailey .

"I think a little, because you had Orton, who was obviously playing better than everybody in practice, and here's Tebow waiting and he's possibly the future of the franchise so you want to see what he has and Brady just kind of got caught in the middle of that," Bailey said. "He didn't really get a fair shot but he has his chance now, and I'm sure he's going to try to make the most of it."

Of course, that chance comes against a Broncos defense that has 16 sacks in the past three weeks and has a league-leading 35 this season.

"Everyone's talented, everyone's got speed," said Quinn. "It's an extremely tough defense playing lights out right now."

Injury update: RG Chris Kuper fully participated in practice for the first time since spraining his left ankle Nov. 4 at Cincinnati. ... CB Tracy Porter also fully took part in practice for the first time since Nov. 1. Porter has been struggling with seizure symptoms since Oct. 14, before the Broncos' departure for San Diego. He hasn't played in a game since then. ... CB Omar Bolden (concussion) did not practice. ... TE Virgil Green (hamstring), WR Demaryius Thomas(knee) and DE/DT Derek Wolfe (quadriceps) were limited. ...CB Bailey was held out of practice for reasons not related to injury but was on hand for the session.

AFC West in midst of dismal 2012 run

Peter Schrager

FoxSports.com

November 21, 2012

I know this dates me, but I actually remember when the AFC West was a somewhat respectable NFL division.

Amazingly, the division that's responsible for the league's only powder blue uniforms, the Black Hole, Hank Stram's legendary sports jacket and this incredible John Elway poster was once — I know, this sounds crazy, NFL fans under the age of 30 — among the league's finest.

It has since been reduced to rubble. The 2012 version of the AFC West is a complete and utter embarrassment.

Peyton Manning must have known what he was doing when he signed with Denver last offseason. He'll play 10 games against real NFL opponents this season. He'll have seven bye weeks — the one the league gives him and the six games against his divisional opponents.

Oakland, Kansas City and San Diego are a combined 4-17 since Week 4. Only one of those wins — a 26-23 Raiders overtime win over 1-9 Jacksonville — came against an opponent outside the division.

The Chiefs have lost seven straight games. They're 0-5 at home. The Raiders, meanwhile, have given up 135 points in their past three contests. The Chargers? Phil Rivers summed up the season best when he — with the chance to still toss a final Hail Mary pass against the Broncos with a few seconds left on the clock in a seven-point game — briskly jogged off the field and shook Denver coach John Fox's hand on the sideline instead of taking another snap. Denver forced San Diego into 10 straight three-and-outs at one point on Sunday. The Chargers defense played well. It was all for naught.

Again.

San Diego's gone from being a 3-1 team in September to one of the worst squads in all of football. The epic collapse at home versus the Broncos gets all the attention, but were they frauds all along? Better yet, does it even matter?

The Raiders haven't had a winning season since 2002, so failure's nothing new to their long-suffering fan base. But how sad is it that an entire generation of young Oakland fans have never seen a playoff game? Mark Davis mentioned "the Raiders way" in his postgame comments after Sunday's embarrassing 38-17 loss to the Saints. What does that even mean anymore? A 30-year-old Raiders fan spent his 20s watching the following poo-poo (not a typo) platter of quarterbacks: Rick Mirer, Marques Tuiasosopo, Kerry Collins, Andrew Walter, Aaron Brooks, Josh

McCown, Daunte Culpepper, Jamarcus Russell, Charlie Frye, Bruce Gradkowski, Jason Campbell, Kyle Boller and Carson Palmer.

Charlie Frye!

To put this in perspective, the New England Patriots have started just two quarterbacks — Tom Brady and Matt Cassel — in that same decade's worth of games.

Oakland's quarterback situation isn't what's ailing them, though. Carson Palmer is by no means lighting it up, but he has no help. Across the field, there's a dearth of talent on Oakland's roster. With Darren McFadden and Richard Seymour currently out of the lineup with injuries, you could make a legitimate case that the Raiders do not have a top-10 talent at any position on the field outside of punter and kicker. This is not an acceptable NFL roster.

But it's not just the players.

When first-year GM Reggie McKenzie hired Dennis Allen as the team's head coach this offseason, defensive expertise was the reason why. If you had to subtly nod your head and do a quick Google search for "Dennis Allen" when he got the gig, you're not alone. There was some head-scratching around the league with the hire of the Denver Broncos defensive backs coach.

Eleven weeks in, you can't blame the fans if their patience is wearing thin. The Raiders have been the league's worst second-half team. The third quarter — the time when a team is supposed to react to halftime adjustments and the things coaches spot on film — has been a nightmare for Oakland. They've given up 56 points in the third quarter of the last three games alone. On the year, they've been outscored in the third quarter by more points than any other team in any quarter this season. Having watched a lot of Carolina Panthers fourth-quarter collapses this year, that's saying something.

And then there are the Chiefs.

I can take a stab at detailing their 2012 woes in a tight paragraph or two, but it'd pale in comparison to anything Bill Reiter or Jason Whitlock have written on the team over the past three months. Scott Pioli needs to go. Romeo Crennel needs to go. The quarterbacks both have to go. It's Thanksgiving and the season's already been over for two months.

It's late November, and Denver's already got the division wrapped up. Signed. Sealed. Delivered. Manning knew what he was doing signing there. Looking at their opponents, I have no doubt that this team could have won the AFC West with Tim Tebow at the helm this year.

Hell, they could have done it with Charlie Frye.

Or Marques Tuiasosopo.

Or ... well, you get the point.

This Thanksgiving weekend, take a moment to remember the AFC West, a once-proud division that's fallen on very hard times.

I'd love to say it'll be back soon enough, but I really can't do that with any sort of confidence.

Week 11 record: 8-6

2012 overall record: 91-68-1

WEEK 12 CHEAT SHEET TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Though it wasn't pretty, the Falcons beat the Cardinals in Atlanta on Sunday. Matt Ryan improved to 30-4 all-time at home. In the Super Bowl era (1970-now), four other quarterbacks have won 30 of their first 35 games at home. Who are they?

See below for answer

Week 12 Fantasy Football Waiver Wire Pickup: T.Y. Hilton, Indianapolis, WR

THANKSGIVING DAY GAMES:

Houston at Detroit: Heading into Week 11 with a 4-5 record and playoff hopes hanging in the balance, Detroit squandered an early lead and let a Packers team playing without starters Clay Matthews, Charles Woodson, Bryan Bulaga and Greg Jennings beat them in their own building. That's all I needed to see from the 2012 Detroit Lions. I have no reason to believe they'll suddenly shake off the rust and beat a sound Houston team. Calvin Johnson may be the best wide receiver in football, but Andre Johnson is awfully dangerous when he's 100 percent healthy. Look for the latter to steal the show from the former on Thursday.

The Pick: Texans 34, Lions 20

Washington at Dallas: Coming off a week in which he completed 93.3 percent of his passes (the highest percentage by a QB with four passing touchdowns since 1994), Robert Griffin III is making his first home start in his home state of Texas in front of a national television audience on Thursday afternoon. Knowing the way RG3 has risen to the occasion when the bright lights have been on him in the past (See: 2011 Alamo Bowl), it's awfully tempting to take Washington. But even with the hideous win over the Browns still fresh in my memory, I'm riding this Cowboys train I boarded last week ... and I'm riding it until the very end. At 5-0 all-time in Thanksgiving games, give me Tony Romo over the kid in all of the adorable Subway ads.

The Pick: Cowboys 33, Redskins 21

New England at New York Jets: Watching the all-22 film this week of their 59-24 win over the Colts last Sunday, I'm pretty sure the 2012 Patriots are New England's best team since the 18-1 squad of 2007. The Jets' home crowd will be nice and

loose — in a Brad Keselowski kind of way — on Thursday. Expect the boo birds to come out in full force if this one gets out of hand early. The Pats D is significantly better now than it was when these two teams played in October. They made red-hot Andrew Luck look average last week. What will they do to Mark Sanchez?

The Pick: Patriots 38, Jets 20

SUNDAY, 1 P.M. ET:

Minnesota at Chicago: The Bears were 7-3 last season when Jay Cutler went down with an injured wrist. They finished the year 1-5 in their final six games without him, missed the playoffs by one win, and wondered about what could have been. Rinse and repeat in 2012? It appears that might be the case. I thought Jason Campbell was a significant upgrade from Caleb Hanie. I was wrong. If anything, the past two seasons should shed some light on just how terrific a quarterback Cutler really is. The fact that Chicago — with that offensive line — has two wins, let alone seven, is incredible.

The Pick: Vikings 20, Bears 17

Oakland at Cincinnati: The Carson Palmer Bowl! I was tempted to write the Bengals off after losing four straight games to AFC opponents to close out the first half of their season. Naturally, they've since rattled off two straight wins and have games against Oakland, San Diego and Philadelphia in three of their next four weeks. Looking for your second wild-card team in the AFC? The Bengals are screaming, "Me! Me! Me!" An above-average junior varsity high school squad might be able to put up 30 on this Raiders defense. Cincy should have no problem doubling them up.

The Pick: Bengals 41, Raiders 17

Pittsburgh at Cleveland: I woke up Monday and read Charlie Batch was starting for Pittsburgh and they were working out Plaxico Burress. I immediately went to Google and searched the names Amos Zereoue, Willie Parker and Duce Staley to see which mid-2000's Steelers contributor was next to join the party. Charlie Batch, Tommy Maddox or Kordell Stewart — I don't care who's playing quarterback for the Steelers on Sunday — I'll always take a Mike Tomlin-coached team over a Pat Shurmur one. Always.

The Pick: Steelers 19, Browns 10

Buffalo at Indianapolis: Watch out for Buffalo. The high-priced defense — absent for most of the season — showed us some life against Miami last week, they've had 10 days to prepare for a young Indianapolis squad, and they've got a very manageable schedule from here on out. Buffalo's next six games are at Indianapolis, vs. Jacksonville, vs. St. Louis, vs. Seattle, at Miami and at New York Jets. Did I just advise you to pencil the Bengals in for that second AFC wild-card spot a second ago? Grab your eraser. Switch that to Buffalo.

The Pick: Buffalo 27, Indianapolis 21

Denver at Kansas City: Hahahahahaha. Oh, you're serious? You really need me to pick this one? C'mon. One fun stat to think about while watching this blowout on Sunday: Von Miller has 13 sacks with six games left to go. Michael Strahan's all-time single-season sack record is 22.5. Miller had three sacks last week against the Chargers. I'm not saying it'll be easy, but I'm saying there's a chance ...

The Pick: Broncos 34, Chiefs 14

Seattle at Miami: Seattle's 5-0 at home, but just 1-4 on the road. That'd usually be a giant red flag. Not in this case. Whatever Ryan Tannehill had going on in the season's first half, defensive coordinators have identified his weaknesses and adjusted to them. He's been downright awful in Miami's last two games. The uber-talented Seattle defense — coming off a bye week to prepare and scheme for the rookie QB — will be foaming at the mouth come Sunday at 1 p.m. ET. Sorry, Ryan.

The Pick: Seahawks 23, Dolphins 9

Atlanta at Tampa Bay: Has there ever been a 9-1 team with less positive buzz surrounding them than the 2012 Atlanta Falcons? With Sunday's "meh" 23-19 win over Arizona, the Falcons have now been very fortunate to escape scares at home from the lowly Raiders, Panthers and Cardinals — three teams with a combined road record of 3-11; a trio that certainly won't be confused for the '85 Bears, '76 Steelers, and '99 Rams anytime soon. Once in a while, a young squad comes along that just has a magic glow. The Bucs had no right even being within a score of the Panthers late in the fourth quarter of Sunday's game in Carolina, and of course, they found a way to not only tie the game at the end of regulation, but win in overtime. Gut pick, here. Give me Tampa Bay. I'm not sure how, but they'll find a way.

The Pick: Buccaneers 30, Falcons 27 (OT)

Tennessee at Jacksonville: It's amazing what having a real NFL quarterback can do for a receiver, isn't it? Labeled a "draft bust" all season long, Justin Blackmon erupted for seven catches, 236 yards and a touchdown once Chad Henne entered last Sunday's shootout with the Texans. He had 250 receiving yards combined in the nine games prior. Tennessee shouldn't lose this one, but I'm feeling an upset. Who needs Montana to Rice when you've got Henne to Blackmon?!

The Pick: Jaguars 27, Titans 23

SUNDAY, 4:05 P.M. ET:

Baltimore at San Diego: Ed Reed's suspension appeal was a success on Tuesday, but the \$50,000 hit to the wallet still isn't exactly chump change. The Ravens will have their star safety in the lineup this weekend, but it probably wouldn't have mattered much if he wasn't, anyway. Baltimore could trot out a bunch of second- and third-stringers against this anemic Chargers offense and be just fine. In the past five years, the Chargers have opted not to re-sign Michael Turner, LaDainian Tomlinson, Darren Sproles and Vincent Jackson. Philip Rivers could use every single one of them now.

The Pick: Ravens 27, Chargers 16

San Francisco at New Orleans: Minimize the Excel spreadsheet on your computer right now. Kick back. Put your feet up on your desk. Grab a cold soft drink. And enjoy this montage of Aldon Smith's 49ers/0ap2000000098143/All-hail-Aldon?campaign=Twitter_atl">5.5-sack night from Week 11. Awesome. As for the suddenly fascinating quarterback situation in San Francisco? I'm biased. I thought Colin Kaepernick was worthy of a first-round pick in 2011 and had him rated higher than Andy Dalton, Christian Ponder and Jake Locker on my draft board that April. I would have started him as a rookie *last* year. The dude's the real deal. Alex Smith, I fear, still has the tendency to be "just a guy." Ride the hot hand. Fear the ostrich! Whether it's Smith or Kaepernick under center come Sunday, I like the 49ers to get the best of the Saints in New Orleans.

The Pick: 49ers 31, Saints 27

St. Louis at Arizona: No one ever questions Ken Whisenhunt, but I was baffled by his handling of Arizona's quarterbacks on Sunday. Coming off a bye week, Coach Wiz benched starter John Skelton after just seven pass attempts and replaced him with rookie Ryan Lindley early in the first half. I have no problem benching Skelton if he's not playing well, but why not just start Lindley? Name him the starter after Week 9, give him an entire bye week to walk around the facility as the team's starter, and let him be the man from the get go. I don't know. I just feel bad for Larry Fitzgerald. He deserves better than this, whatever "this" is.

The Pick: Rams 20, Cardinals 17

SUNDAY NIGHT:

Green Bay Packers at New York Giants: After two straight weeks of listening to the "Is Eli elite?" debate all over again on New York's sports TV and radio stations — I'm thrilled there's actual football to discuss this Sunday. Aaron Rodgers' running backs, tight ends and receivers dropped eight passes in last year's divisional round loss to the Giants. I'm sure he's watched the tape of that one a few times since the loss and I'm sure he wants this one. It hasn't been as pretty as his 2011 campaign, but Rodgers is certainly in a bit of a groove right now. He'll hand the Giants their third straight loss, complicating things in the NFC East quite a bit, on Sunday night.

The Pick: Packers 34, Giants 21

MONDAY NIGHT:

Carolina at Philadelphia: I have just one word to describe this game: Gross. Has there ever been a worse fourth-quarter team than the 2012 Carolina Panthers? Besides the 2011 Carolina Panthers? This one should just be named the Jon Gruden Bowl. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on who you ask), he'll be calling it. If Cam Newton can do half of what Robert Griffin III did against this Philly defense, this shouldn't be a problem for Carolina.

The Pick: Panthers 31, Eagles 16

OH, AND BY THE WAY...

1. Saw "Argo" over the weekend. Loved that the actors who played Eric Taylor ("Friday Night Lights") and Henry Francis ("Mad Men") were both in it. Yep, that was my big takeaway. There's a reason I get a vote for the Heisman and not the Academy Awards.

2. Every time I read a 5,000-word puff piece on Chip Kelly's "unstoppable" offense, a college defense steps right up and shuts it down. Auburn did it two years ago in the BCS Championship Game. Les Miles did it last season. Stanford did it last weekend in Eugene. This is not a very popular sentiment in league circles, but I'm just as intrigued by Stanford head coach David Shaw as I am with Kelly in terms of NFL head coaching gigs.

3. I attended my first Brooklyn Nets game last Thursday night. Fun experience. Only complaint? A little too much "Dance Cam" for my liking. I can't spend an entire game scared that I'll be on a Jumbotron every time there's a stoppage of play. The cameras came way too close to my torso way too many times.

4. Basketball writer and noted ATLien Lang Whitaker had the line of the week in regards to the Steelers' throwback uniforms: "More NFL teams should wear khaki pants." Couldn't agree more.

5. Oh, and Gronk shouldn't have been in the game.

Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!

Break It Down: Why Von Miller and Aldon Smith are dominating

Chris Burke
Sports Illustrated
November 21, 2012

The NFL's single-season sack record, held by Michael Strahan, currently stands at 22.5. With six weeks left in the 2012 regular season, San Francisco's Aldon Smith has tallied 15 sacks, Denver's Von Miller 13.

In other words, it's possible that Strahan's record falls. That's especially true if Smith and Miller somehow maintain their paces from Week 11 — Miller dropped Philip Rivers three times, while Smith recorded an absurd 5.5 sacks against the Bears and Jason Campbell.

San Diego and Chicago tried and failed miserably to block Miller and Smith, respectively, using one-on-one approaches. But what makes the defensive dynamos even more difficult to play against is that they're capable of wrecking havoc in a number of different ways, from varying spots on the field.

The Broncos technically operate out of a base 4-3 defense, while the 49ers use a 3-4 starting point. However, the two teams adjust those looks frequently, with one of the main goals being to create pressure on the QB.

How did Miller and Smith thrive in Week 11? Let's Break It Down ...

Miller's first sack Sunday came with him lined up opposite San Diego right tackle Jeromey Clary. This was more of a 4-3 look from the Broncos' front, but they also had a dime package (six DBs) on the field.

Regardless, with Ronnie Brown (No. 30 in white) releasing and tight end Antonio Gates split out wide, the Chargers did not have any extra help on Miller. So, this wound up being a Clary-vs.-Miller matchup.

Suffice it to say, that's not a great matchup for the Chargers.

With the Broncos showing that 4-3 look, right guard Louis Vasquez (65) had to deal with the defender lined up over him. You can see Miller here using a wicked swim move to blow by Clary and, once that happened, Rivers was a sitting duck.

San Diego had a similar issue on a passing play later — which wound up being the second time Miller knocked the ball from Rivers' grasp. This time around, the Broncos had a nickel package (5 DBs) on the field and lined up in more of a 3-4 look, with a tackle over the center and Miller wider.

Right end Elvis Dumervil dropped into coverage, helping to pick up Brown out of the backfield. Linebacker Wesley Woodyard, meanwhile, blitzed.

The result was four Denver pass rushers wrapped from the center to Rivers' extreme right. Rivers' primary target here was tight end Antonio Gates, so he quickly locked his eyes on No. 85.

Unfortunately for Rivers, outside of his peripheral vision was Miller, one-on-one again with Clary, using that swim move to blow past the Chargers' tackle.

That swim move looks familiar ... where else have we seen that?

Oh, right.

See ya, Gabe Carimi.

That was Smith's fourth sack of Monday night against the Bears, and it was more or less a carbon copy of those two Miller sacks from above — Smith wide to the QB's right, one-on-one against the tackle, with the running back releasing and no tight end help. It's really asking too much for a tackle to handle that situation his own against a pass rusher of Smith's ilk.

Just as the Broncos switched up their defensive looks, so too did the 49ers. On that sack, the 49ers had only two linemen on the field, Justin Smith and Ray McDonald, then rushed linebackers Aldon Smith and Ahmad Brooks.

That's an approach the 49ers use often, and put to work again late in the game, when Campbell was taken down and fumbled on a play that eventually resulted in a safety. There, San Francisco lined McDonald up over the center, with Justin Smith out to McDonald's right and Aldon Smith to the left.

This time, the Bears had two players in position on Aldon Smith: Carimi and Lance Louis. But ...

There's that swim move again. Unstoppable, though on this play, Louis should have been over faster to help — a three-man rush should not physically dominate a five-man line.

Oh, and speaking of physical domination ...

That swim move is all well and good, but it's only a part of Smith's repertoire. He's also abnormally strong, especially for a player with the type of quickness and athleticism he has.

Multiple times en route to his 5.5 sacks on Monday, he straight up overpowered a blocker. Here, it's left tackle J'Marcus Webb:

Then, later, Smith came up with one of the most impressive individual efforts you'll see along the defensive line. The play in question started with Smith lined up wide right along San Francisco's front. Next to him, tucked in front of NaVorro Bowman (53) was Justin Smith. Again, the 49ers had only Justin Smith and McDonald on the field as traditional D-linemen, with Aldon Smith and Brooks standing up on the ends.

Aldon Smith stunted inside, with Justin Smith rolling outside.

For once, it looked like the Bears had Aldon Smith taken care of once that occurred. Even with no tight end help and a releasing running back, two Bears' linemen converged on Aldon Smith as Justin Smith swung wide, with another blocker doubling back to take him.

Instead, Aldon Smith plowed his way through the double-team, driving both blockers back into Campbell.

That stunt move can be a killer, because Aldon Smith is quick enough to get inside before the bigger, slower offensive linemen have time to react. Pair that with those same linemen having to account for Justin Smith, and you wind up with situations like this:

That's Aldon Smith circled — he looped around Justin Smith on this play, while both Webb and left guard Chilo Rachal stay home. The other element in play there comes from the blitz San Francisco showed up the middle. By doing that, it forced Chicago center Roberto Garza to hesitate in case he had to pick up a linebacker.

That hesitation left the door wide open for Aldon Smith.

Good luck with that, Jason Campbell.

Miller is equally as tough for linemen to account for, because not only do the Broncos shift him to opposite ends of the line, but he also does drop in coverage on a regular basis. Here, he lined up over Antonio Gates, with the Broncos in a 4-3, then dropped to cover Gates one-on-one.

Later, though, with Miller lined up in the same spot — over Gates on the right side of Denver's line — and the Broncos in a 3-4 look, Miller took a couple of steps back in coverage, then reversed field.

The brief jam Miller employed on Gates knocked him out of his route, and by delaying before diving inside of teammate Derek Wolfe, Miller was able to create an opening along the interior.

Miller's pass rush resulted in an incompleteness, with Woodyard and Chris Harris both in the vicinity of Gates as Rivers spiked a ball at his feet. Even when Miller isn't coming up with sacks, his versatility causes major headaches for opposing offenses.

Miller shares that trait with Aldon Smith — and with all of the NFL's great pass rushers.

Both Miller and Smith are enjoying sensational years, and both were thoroughly dominant in Week 11. So, how do you block them? The scary part for offensive coordinators is that, because of how Miller and Smith are used, there may not be an obvious answer.

Awards Watch: Week 11

Jim Trotter
Sports Illustrated
November 21, 2012

MVP

1. Adrian Peterson, Vikings (last week: 1). The veteran running back had a bye last week, but let's not forget what he has done. Less than a year removed from reconstructive knee surgery, he has gone over 100 yards in four straight games and leads the league in rushing with 1,128 yards. More noteworthy, he has done it despite a Vikings passing game that has been held to 63 yards or fewer in two of its last four games.

2. Drew Brees, Saints (NR). He leads the league with 28 touchdown passes and has thrown for at least one score in a league-record 53 consecutive games. He also is just 6 yards off the lead for yards passing. But most impressive is that he has rallied New Orleans from an 0-4 start to playoff relevancy.

3. Peyton Manning, Broncos (3). The veteran QB is No. 2 in passer rating, No. 3 in touchdowns and No. 6 in yards. He also has his team with a three-game lead in the AFC West and looking like it won't lose another game before the playoffs.

Offensive Player of the Year

1. Aaron Rodgers, Packers (1). The reigning MVP continues to carry his team. With no consistent run game, the load is almost entirely on his shoulders and he simply responds, week after week, ranking No. 1 in rating and No. 2 in touchdown passes. The late-game drive against the Lions last week was MVP worthy.

2. Ben Roethlisberger, Steelers (2). Yeah, I know he's out injured, but look at what Pittsburgh was doing with him in the lineup: It had won four consecutive games and five of six overall. And he had 17 touchdown passes and only four picks.

3. A.J. Green, Bengals (NR). The second-year pro leads all receivers with 10 touchdown catches despite not having a credible complement on the other side. His five catches of at least 40 yards also are tied for the league lead.

Defensive Player of the Year

1. Aldon Smith, 49ers (NR). The outside linebacker has at least one sack in all but three games -- including five in which he had multiple sacks -- and leads the league overall with 15. His 5.5-sack outing Monday against the Bears was almost laughable, he made it look so easy. He also has three forced fumbles.

2. Von Miller, Broncos (NR). The second-year outside linebacker is second in the league with 13 sacks and also has at least one in all but three games. He has multiple sacks in four games, along with four forced fumbles.

3. Charles Tillman, Bears (2). He did not have a great outing Monday night against the 49ers, but that should not take away from his body of work over the course of the season.

Offensive Rookie of the Year

1. Doug Martin, Bucs (3). He leads the league in yards from scrimmage, has rushed for more than 100 yards in three of his last four games, and is drawing so much attention from defenses that it's creating opportunities in the pass game, like on the two-point conversion from Josh Freeman to Vincent Jackson to force overtime on Sunday.

2. Andrew Luck, Colts (1). He's coming off a tough week, but the former Cardinal is going to be a force for years to come.

3. Robert Griffin III, Redskins (2). The Baylor standout has a 4:1 touchdown to interception ratio, along with the mobility to escape pressure. Along with Luck, Griffin will be a force for the next decade and beyond.

Defensive Rookie of the Year

1. Bobby Wagner, Seahawks (2). The first-year linebacker has started nine games and is averaging 10 tackles over the last three games. He also has two sacks and has been a steady performer on one of the league's top defenses.

2. Bruce Irvin, Seahawks (3). If the end could play all his games at home, he might challenge for Player of the Year for all defensive players. Irvin has at least a half sack in every home game but one and overall leads all rookies with seven sacks to go with one forced fumble.

3. Lavonte David, Bucs (1). The most impressive thing about him is not that he has been a starter since Week 1, but that he also makes all the defensive calls and consistently shows up when big plays need to be made. David also is tied for second among all rookies with 90 tackles.

Coach of the Year

1. Gary Kubiak, Texans (1). It wasn't pretty on Sunday against Jacksonville, but Houston avoided the hangover from a big win at Chicago the previous week.

2. John Harbaugh, Ravens (NR). He tends to get overshadowed by his brother, but he continues to keep Baltimore among the league's best despite injuries (and an upcoming suspension to Ed Reed).

3. Joe Vitt, Saints (NR). Maybe this is a sentimental pick considering all the Saints have been through, but Vitt has provided the team with a sense of calm since returning from his suspension. New Orleans has now won three in a row with a big game against San Francisco looming.

NFL POWER RANKINGS

Don Banks
Sports Illustrated
November 21, 2012

Can't imagine Thanksgiving without pro football on TV? Me either. This will already be our seventh year with the current Thanksgiving triple-header format, but it's really not a novel concept. As recently as 1967-69, there were four games played on the holiday, with the traditional Detroit and Dallas games holding up the NFL banner, and the soon-to-be-extinct AFL playing a pair of games as well (one in Kansas City each year, and one rotating host). All were televised, although not in four separate time slots. You had to use the clicker.

But even that's not the record when it comes to a Thanksgiving football feast. The NFL played six games on the holiday in both 1920 and 1926, and had five-game schedules in 1922-24. Those were the formative stages of pro football, of course, the pre-TV partners era. Shoot, Pat Summerall didn't even know which end of a mic to speak into yet.

There's more to the marriage of pro football and Thanksgiving Day than you might recall. I'm old enough to remember the two years in the '70s when Dallas didn't get the host duties for the late afternoon game. The St. Louis Cardinals in their exciting Don Coryell era were tabbed, but got clobbered by the Bills in 1975 and the Dolphins in 1977 (the game in which a newly bespectacled Bob Griese threw six touchdown passes in three quarters).

And there's plenty more Thanksgiving NFL memories to rummage through every year at this time. Like Clint Longley's 1974 comeback against Washington in Dallas, O.J. Simpson's 273-yard rushing day in Detroit in 1976, Dave Williams' 95-yard walk-off overtime kickoff return touchdown for the Bears against the Lions in 1980, Leon Lett in the snow in Dallas in 1993, and rookie Randy Moss' three-touchdown destruction of Dallas in 1998. Even Phil Lockett's coin toss flub in Detroit earlier on that same day in '98 deserves to be in there somewhere, in the slapstick department.

Thankfully, Thanksgiving and pro football just work together, helping to make the holiday part of what it has become over the years. Food, family, and football on the fourth Thursday in November. They really are inseparable at this point. Now on to this week's rankings...

NFL Power Rankings

1 Houston Texans (9-1)

Last

Week: Every AFC Super Bowl contender had to take heart from seeing the vaunted
1 Texans defense lit up by the likes of Chad Henne and the previously woeful

Jaguars offense last Sunday. If the road to the Super Bowl in the AFC does go through Reliant Stadium, it's not as intimidating a visiting venue as it once seemed this season. Houston now heads off for a three-game road trip that includes a pair of nationally televised spotlight games: at Detroit on Thursday and at New England on Monday night in Week 1.

Atlanta Falcons (9-1)

2
Last
Week:
2

The loss in New Orleans was less concerning than the butt-ugly win over Arizona. The Falcons finding a way to win a game in which Matt Ryan throws five interceptions and no touchdowns is resourceful, I suppose. But if Atlanta doesn't put together a strong showing at Tampa Bay this week, questions about whether the Falcons have already played their best football this season will surface. And that kind of talk can spoil the holidays.

Green Bay Packers (7-3)

3
Last
Week:
3

The Packers' re-shuffled offensive line got manhandled at times by Detroit's defensive front, and that's not the development you're looking for if you're Aaron Rodgers and heading into the Meadowlands to take on the Giants. New York's pass rush has been streaky this season, but Rodgers no doubt remembers the four sacks and constant pressure he endured in the Giants divisional-round playoff upset in Lambeau last January. Keeping No. 12 clean is Green Bay's top priority. That's why the Packers might want to consider signing a new blocker this week, a guy by the name of Max Protect.

San Francisco 49ers (7-2-1)

4
Last
Week:
5

Alex Smith has a new headache to contend with this week, and it has nothing to do with the concussion he suffered against the Rams. If you're Smith, Colin Kaepernick's boffo starting debut opened up an annoying new topic of conversation in San Francisco, and even 49ers head coach Jim Harbaugh waded right into the QB controversy that could complicate his team's Super Bowl plans. But there's no putting the Genie back in the bottle now. The Smith versus Kaepernick debate is on.

Denver Broncos (7-3)

5
Last
Week:
6

Broncos linebacker Von Miller, last year's defensive rookie of the year, hasn't experienced anything like the sophomore slump issues endured by Carolina quarterback Cam Newton, last year's offensive rookie of the year. With 13 sacks in 10 games (second only to the 49ers Aldon Smith), the consistently disruptive Miller might just add the NFL's Defensive Player of the Year award to his trophy case in his second season. Not to mention make it 2 for 2 in terms of reaching the playoffs.

New England Patriots (7-3)

6
Last
Week:
7

The loss of Rob Gronkowski for at least a month won't be devastating unless he's limited and not his typical productive self in the playoffs. But let's not overlook the ridiculously versatile weapon that Julian Edelman emerged as in the blowout against the Colts, returning two punts for 117 yards and a touchdown, catching five passes for 58 yards and a touchdown and rushing once on a reverse that went for 47 yards and a near touchdown. His 222 all-purpose yards make a strong argument the Patriots will be able to survive quite nicely until Gronk returns to form.

Baltimore Ravens (8-2)

7
Last
Week:
8

Winning in Pittsburgh is getting to be old hat for Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco, even if two of his three straight victories at Heinz Field came without Ben Roethlisberger in the Steelers lineup. Baltimore's feat of 12 consecutive AFC North victories is an impressive two years' worth, but now let's see if John Harbaugh's team can handle a West Coast trip to San Diego, where the Ravens got blown out last December.

Chicago Bears (7-3)

8
Last
Week:
4

Yes, the Bears' last six quarters of play vividly shows us all again how much Jay Cutler means to Chicago's chances of winning. But let's not discount the possibility the Bears' 7-1 start was a bit of a mirage, too. Chicago has beaten just one team that currently has a winning record, and that came in Week 1 against the Colts, before Indy started to look like a playoff contender. Cutler is clearly missed, but I'm not sure he would have made much of a difference in the shellacking in San Francisco.

Seattle Seahawks (6-4)

9
Last
Week:
12

The Seahawks, just 1-4 away from home, desperately need to get past their road issues and rack up a victory this week at Miami, building their first three-game winning streak of the season. It's the mother of NFL road trips in terms of the continental USA, from Seattle to Miami, but the Dolphins look ripe for the taking. They've lost three in a row, are just 2-2 at home this season, and Ryan Tannehill is looking much more like a rookie quarterback of late than the Seahawks' Russell Wilson.

Tampa Bay Buccaneers (6-4)

10
Last
Week:
13

No matter what happens the rest of the way, the Bucs are ahead of schedule under rookie head coach Greg Schiano. It's probably going to take 10 wins to make the playoffs in the deep NFC this season, and Tampa Bay might fall just short at 9-7. But if the Bucs can steal a road win at either Denver, New Orleans or Atlanta in the final five weeks, it says here they'll find their way into the postseason for the first time since 2007.

Pittsburgh Steelers (6-4)

11

Last Week: Strange days in Pittsburgh, and for once we're not talking about those ridiculous throwback uniforms. Plaxico Burress is back in black and gold, and Charlie Batch is back in the starting lineup. It could all but double as old-timers day for the Steelers in Cleveland this week.

New York Giants (6-4)

12

Last Week: Eli Manning says he has some zip back in his arm after the bye week, and that's a roundabout way of admitting something was amiss with his moneymaker during his recent mini-slump. It's a good thing, too, because the Giants are going to need an accurate and effective Manning to keep up with Aaron Rodgers and the Packers' high-octane passing game Sunday night at MetLife.

Indianapolis Colts (6-4)

13

Last Week: Steady, Colts fans. This overachieving team wasn't quite ready to go into New England and beat Tom Brady and Co. But that doesn't mean the playoffs aren't happening. Indy has Buffalo at home this week, followed by a trip to Detroit and a home game against Tennessee. Even with two games against Houston remaining, 10 wins and a wild-card trip are not a far-fetched dream.

New Orleans Saints (5-5)

14

Last Week: I'm convinced the Saints can win their three remaining home games against San Francisco, Tampa Bay and Carolina. But they'll probably still need to capture at least two of their road games, at Atlanta, at the Giants and at Dallas, in order to make the playoffs. In the end, that's probably one hurdle too many, and that's why their Week 3 overtime loss at home to Kansas City was the kill shot that could not quite be overcome.

Minnesota Vikings (6-4)

15

Last Week: The Vikings being in the NFC playoff hunt on Thanksgiving weekend was predicted by absolutely no one, so it's all gravy (and a side of mash potatoes) in that respect. But, alas, the party is almost over in Minnesota.

14

Two games against the Bears, two games against the Packers and a challenging trip to Houston in Week 16 means the Vikings might top out at 8-8 in their 2012 incarnation. No shame there.

Dallas Cowboys (5-5)

16

Last Week: Even when they win, the Cowboys are a calamity. But I will say Dez Bryant is starting to show up and be the clutch playmaker Dallas so desperately

needs, since every one of its games seems to go down to the wire. If the Cowboys ever needed to develop a true homefield advantage in their whiz-bang four-year-old stadium, it would be in the next two games against the 4-6 Redskins and 3-7 Eagles.

Cincinnati Bengals (5-5)

17
Last
Week:
19

The return of Carson Palmer to Cincinnati this week should bring out the best in the Bengals against visiting Oakland. You know Marvin Lewis wants this one. To say nothing of Mike Brown. Since Palmer checked out on the Bengals, they're 14-13, including a playoff trip. The Raiders since Palmer got to town? Just a measly 7-13, with no sign of the postseason in sight.

Washington Redskins (4-6)

18
Last
Week:
25

Forget the 4-6 record. The Redskins have to focus like a laser on the fact they're just two games out of first place with six to play. Here's the bottom line: That's closer to first place than 11 teams are in the AFC, and seven more in the NFC. And with four division games remaining, Washington is not out of the NFC East picture whatsoever. An 8-8 first-place tiebreaker could easily wind up deciding this division.

Tennessee Titans (4-6)

19
Last
Week:
22

The Titans aren't on anyone's radar screen in the AFC playoff race, but with four division games left, including a pair against the last-place Jaguars, Tennessee could still make some noise in the AFC South and at the very least finish on an upswing heading into 2013. Mike Munchak's further employment may well depend upon just that scenario.

Detroit Lions (4-6)

20
Last
Week:
17

I remember how much grief I took last year from Lions fans when I named Ndamukong Suh to my midseason all-underachievement team. I may have been a bit ahead of the curve on that call, but others have since come around to concur with my assessment. Since his monster rookie season of 2010, Suh has not been the same dominant and disruptive player. No matter how much the Lions coaching staff attempts to cover for him.

Miami Dolphins (4-6)

21
Last
Week:
18

The Dolphins at least have something to build on with that defense. Miami is allowing just 20.5 points per game this season, and only two AFC teams (Houston and Pittsburgh) have surrendered fewer. The problem is, only two AFC teams have scored less than the Dolphins' 18.7 points per game (Jacksonville and Kansas City). Miami needs to hang the "playmakers needed" sign on their door come January, and leave it there all offseason.

New York Jets (4-6)

22 That wacky Bart Scott, he had the second-worst idea to originate in the
Last Jets organization all year with his lame postgame media boycott of sorts in
Week: St. Louis. Anyone want to guess what the worst idea in the Jets
27 organization was in 2012? Here's a hint: It arrived with great fanfare, but
has since been relegated to mostly standing around and waiting for the
punt team to take the field.

Buffalo Bills (4-6)

I'm not predicting it mind you, but if the Bills can find a way to win this
23 week at Indianapolis, they could make things a bit interesting for
Last themselves down the stretch in the AFC wild-card race. Buffalo plays four of
Week: its last five games at home, against some beatable opponents in the
26 Jaguars, Rams, Seahawks and Jets. Throw a Week 16 trip to Miami in there
and it at least has the makings of a seven-game season-ending winning
streak and maybe, just maybe, that long-awaited return to the playoffs.
Wouldn't that be something after the way 2012 was going in Buffalo?

San Diego Chargers (4-6)

24 The Chargers' strong start in 2011 (4-1) was washed away by a six-game
Last midseason losing streak. The Chargers' strong start in 2012 (3-1) was
Week: negated by losing five out of six in midseason. And that's the only
21 difference San Diego ownership realized by deciding to bring back both
Norv Turner and A.J. Smith for another year on the job. Was that Week 9
home win against Kansas City really worth it?

Arizona Cardinals (4-6)

25 Could there be something to the idea of the Curse of Kevin Kolb? I think I
just made it up, but you have to admit, there might be some fertile ground
Last here to explore. Since the Eagles and Cardinals swung their big deal in late
Week: July 2011, the franchises are a combined 23-29, haven't sniffed a winning
23 season, and can't seem to find and field a productive or healthy
quarterback for the life of them. Be it Michael Vick, Vince Young, Nick Foles
in Philly, or Kolb, John Skelton or Ryan Lindley in Arizona, the quarterback
position has bedeviled the Eagles and Cardinals in 2011-12. It's a case of
killing two birds with one big trade. Not to mention perhaps getting two
head coaches canned in the process.

St. Louis Rams (3-6-1)

26 The Rams defense has turned into the anti-Bears, going five games now
Last without forcing a turnover. In a related development, the Rams are 0-4-1
Week: in that span. St. Louis has been trying to punch out of its weight class for a
20 while now, but getting back into NFC West play this week (where they are

2-0-1 this season) at Arizona should help snap Jeff Fisher's team out of its stupor.

Philadelphia Eagles (3-7)

27 I always find it bemusing to hear players who talk so passionately about
Last how much admiration and loyalty they feel for their embattled head coach,
Week: but then go out on game day and all but mail in another feeble effort on his
24 behalf. That's the actions-speak-louder-than-words stage we're at in Philly,
where everyone knows Andy Reid is as good as gone, but nobody's doing
anything about it.

Cleveland Browns (2-8)

28 Almost doesn't count in the NFL, but Cleveland isn't too far away from
Last being a pretty decent team. The Browns had both the Ravens and Cowboys
Week: beat in their past two games, and somehow found a way to lose. If
28 Cleveland can get after the 53-year-old Charlie Batch in the pass rush the
way it did Tony Romo (seven sacks and a ton of pressures), an upset of the
Steelers on Sunday could be in the offing.

Carolina Panthers (2-8)

29 The Panthers have become absolute masters of the late-game meltdown,
Last losing fourth-quarter leads in five of their past six losses. The Bucs made
Week: Carolina's defense look like it was at a walk-through practice on the
30 overtime-inducing drive, going 80 yards in seven plays in 50 seconds,
without a timeout. For a defensive-oriented head coach like Ron Rivera,
that kind of collapse could prove to be the final nail in the coffin in terms of
his shaky job security.

Oakland Raiders (3-7)

30 At least at one point in the past two seasons, in 2010's 8-8 under Tom
Last Cable and in 2011's 8-8 under Hue Jackson, the Raiders have had reason to
Week: dream about the playoffs becoming a reality. There has been no such
29 flirtation this year under rookie head coach Dennis Allen. But Oakland has
to get that defense fixed, and it has to find a quarterback who can give it a
chance to win. Carson Palmer has become that guy who's just good enough
to get you beat.

Jacksonville Jaguars (1-9)

31 Good call, Mike Mularkey, naming Chad Henne as the team's starting
Last quarterback for this week's game against Tennessee. But talk about your
Week: no-brainers. It's a move that's probably six or seven weeks late. And don't
32 tell me the Jaguars should play Blaine Gabbert if he's healthy, because they
have to find out if he's their franchise quarterback or not. They may not

admit it, but I think they already know the answer to that one.

Kansas City Chiefs (1-9)

32

Last A seven-game losing streak. Frustrated fans dressed in black as a protest.

Week: A plane towing a banner calling for his dismissal. I don't know how Scott

31 Pioli survives the level of frothing discontent that prevails in Kansas City these days. Does he even want to? If not, I can understand why.

Broncos could get Willis McGahee back late in postseason

Lindsay H. Jones
USA Today
November 21, 2012

After a couple of days to think about it, the Broncos realized they had no shot at getting starting running back Willis McGahee back before the end of the regular season.

The best the team could hope for was that McGahee would recover from a torn medial collateral ligament by January – in time for the playoffs.

Denver used its one spot on the short-term injured reserve list Wednesday for McGahee, with hopes that he could return to the field in time for the AFC Championship Game, should the Broncos make it that far.

Under the new injured reserve rule, McGahee – if his knee heals properly – can practice after six weeks. He would not be eligible to play for two weeks after that, meaning he would have to miss the wild-card and divisional rounds of the playoffs.

"We decided it would be outside of six weeks and we'd go from there," Broncos head coach John Fox said Wednesday. "The IR gives us a guy to train at that position or possibly another position was probably our best bet."

The Broncos have yet to make a move to replace McGahee on the 53-man roster, but the likely step is to sign running back Jeremiah Johnson off the practice squad to join rookie Ronnie Hillman and veterans Lance Ball and Knowshon Moreno. Johnson played in 10 games for the Broncos (including two playoff games) last season.

"For this week, we feel very comfortable with who we have. It's fair to say, pretty obvious, that we'll pull from the guys that we have that know our system," Fox said.

Still, the Broncos understand what a significant loss McGahee is as the team tries to secure its second playoff spot in seven years. McGahee, 31, is the Broncos' leading rusher, best all-around running back and a locker room leader.

"To say we're not going to miss Willis would not be telling the truth," quarterback Peyton Manning said. "He's that good of a player."

McGahee's replacements will be an issue for the Chiefs defense Sunday. The Broncos defense, meanwhile, is preparing to face former teammate Brady Quinn, who was announced Wednesday as Kansas City's starting quarterback.

Quinn was a backup to Kyle Orton and Tim Tebow in 2010 and 2011 in Denver. He did not play in any regular-season games in his time with the Broncos.

"It's not my regret. It wasn't my decision," Quinn said in a conference call with Denver reporters. "When you're a player, you take an opportunity when it's given to you, and I never got the opportunity."

Oddly enough, the last time the Broncos faced the Chiefs, in the 2011 regular-season finale, they also faced a former teammate in Orton, whom Kansas City claimed off waivers from Denver a year ago. Orton led the Chiefs to a win in that game. Now it's Quinn's turn to try to do the same.

"I'm just trying to focus on this game and get things turned around for our offense," Quinn said.

NFL MVP forecast: Peyton Manning on top for first time

Gregg Rosenthal
NFL.com
November 21, 2012

It was ridiculously early in the season when we started writing this MVP forecast. With six games left, the best candidates have started to solidify.

Matt Ryan's five-interception game in Week 11 has shaken up the list -- even if three of the picks weren't his fault. We have a new leader.

1. Peyton Manning, Denver Broncos

We still have reservations about putting Manning first, because the Broncos lost their three toughest games of the year, and Manning didn't play well in two of them. But his overall excellence during Denver's five-game winning streak has been too hard to ignore. He might stay atop the list for a while.

2. J.J. Watt, Houston Texans

Watt's pace has slowed down in recent weeks. He'll need monster games against the Detroit Lions on Thursday and the New England Patriots on "Monday Night Football" for a real chance to win. Of course, for Watt, "slowing down" meant notching eight tackles, three QB hits, two tackles for loss, one sack and a tipped pass against Jacksonville.

3. Tom Brady, New England Patriots

Eleven touchdowns and no interceptions in his past four games. A 21:3 split on the season. Some of Brady's passes up the seam against the Colts were criminal. He's taken for granted.

4. Adrian Peterson, Minnesota Vikings

We're a little frightened by the thought of what Peterson will do after a week off. Running through the Bears' defense twice in four weeks would prove a point.

5. Aaron Rodgers, Green Bay Packers He's playing out of his mind right now and still has a shot to win this thing. Carrying a depleted roster on his back certainly won't hurt his chances.

6. Matt Ryan, Atlanta Falcons: It might seem unfair to drop him based on one game, but Ryan hasn't been as consistent as the players listed above since October started.

7. Von Miller, Denver Broncos: Watt has serious competition for the Defensive Player of the Year award with Miller and Bears cornerback Charles Tillman.

8. Drew Brees, New Orleans Saints: It's his first appearance on the list. A win against the San Francisco 49ers would seriously put the Saints in the playoff race.

9. Reggie Wayne, Indianapolis Colts: We'll think of Wayne's career differently because of this season.

10. Charles Tillman, Chicago Bears: Don't pin Chicago's meltdown on him.

Peyton Manning's road back to the top

Sam Farmer
Los Angeles Times
November 21, 2012

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — All Peyton Manning wanted was a haircut. Somewhere between his Denver home and the barber, he got lost.

That's right, the NFL's premier traffic cop on the field, a guy who does commercials for cars that talk back to him, had to call his wife for directions. Mr. Manning was Mr. Magoo.

"I'm calling Ashley all the time, 'Now, how do I get here again?'" he said. "She's got an unbelievable sense of direction. I don't."

The Indianapolis transplant, now star quarterback for the Broncos, eventually reached his destination — and found a bright side.

"Those reminders are good," said Manning, 36. "You're in a new place. Let's keep working hard. Take it slow."

The Broncos aren't taking it slow. They're rolling with their new quarterback, winners of five in a row with a three-game lead in the AFC West. Manning has the AFC's most passing touchdowns, 24, best completion rate, 68.5%, and top passer rating, 106.2.

The league's only four-time most valuable player, who sat out the entire 2011 season recovering from four neck procedures, is on course for MVP No. 5.

"What Peyton is doing, in my brain, is not just remarkable, it's freaking historical," Broncos Coach John Fox said. "To be where he is, off of what he just went through. Just look at it, his life got turned upside down.

"He's been in one place for 14 years, and he never imagined he'd be anywhere else. To have a real serious injury, where at one point you weren't real sure you were ever going to throw again. To be where he is right now? He's doing it in a completely different part of the country, with a completely different organization. I'm loving it, but I think about it and I'm like, 'This is kind of bizarre.'"

Manning, standing with a reporter in an otherwise empty corridor outside the locker room at the practice facility, detailed his improbable and sometimes uncertain ascent back to the top of the game, and the help he received from an old friend.

That friend was Duke Coach David Cutcliffe, who was Manning's offensive coordinator at Tennessee and his younger brother Eli's head coach at Mississippi.

Cutcliffe, who a year earlier had worked with Eli during the lockout, was Peyton's coach of choice during his arduous comeback.

"Going to a private college, where the gates are locked, there's no spectators, and you can get concentrated work, that was big for me," said Peyton, who had made at least four trips to Duke last winter before the media caught wind of it.

Manning lived with the Cutcliffe family during those visits. Just another kid in the stately, lodge-like house, with his own room and a pile of laundry every day.

"He and I both really got to go back in time," Manning said. "I was a junior in college again. He was my coach. He coached the hell out of me. He yelled at me. 'Faster! Faster! Faster!' I can remember that same feeling I had in college. I'd get mad at him.

"We'd go at it. It would be intense. But I'd always caught a ride home to his house that night, had dinner with him, and spent the night at his house. So we couldn't get too mad at each other."

Cutcliffe, who speaks in a rich Southern drawl, calls himself a "drills maniac" and says that stems from his childhood in Alabama, when he would throw his way through a pasture by "completing" passes to specific limbs of trees.

He had Manning do all the traditional drills, and some different ones, such as Manning making precise throws while equipment managers hammered away at him with heavy bags.

"We call those distraction drills," Cutcliffe said. "One of the more critical things for a quarterback to prove to you is that his eyes stay downfield. We're making him make decisions. We'll have two targets down there and we'll immediately try to lean toward one of them and make him make an accurate throw to the other target. At the same time, he's got big bags being thrown down at his hips, legs, across his face. But you know he's keeping his eyes downfield."

For Manning, the process was grueling. It wasn't just drills, but near-constant work on his strength, conditioning, flexibility, nutrition ... everything. There were no guarantees he'd be able to return.

"Nobody knew, including me, how this would play out," he said. "I couldn't find anybody else who had the same injury. There was no model. [Former NFL safety] John Lynch said he kind of had something like it, but he can blow up guys with a bad, weaker arm. [Former NFL quarterbacks] Chris Weinke and Brad Johnson kind of had something like it, but it wasn't quite the same. So even these doctors, these respectable doctors, the top neuro guys in the world, are going, 'I don't know. It's kind of hard to say. Nerves are unpredictable.' That's kind of what I had to go on."

Manning's progress was measured in millimeters, not miles.

"It's been the biggest physical and mental challenge I've gone through, as far as a test of patience," he said. "I'm talking about progress that literally [pinching his fingers to indicate a tiny bit] where a good month is there's no setbacks. There was no significant weight-room increase. And it's still that way. I could go to the weight room right now and show you.

"What I've learned to do is compensate. That's what athletes do. You learn to compensate with what you've got."

He likened that to a golfer who might not be able to hit a three-wood as far anymore but instead lays up with an iron and relies on his precision to make birdie.

"I've come to accept the reality that I am 36 years old," he said. "I'm not trying to be the player that I was when I was 28. I'm not. I don't compare myself to that.

"At our college camp [the Manning Passing Academy] this summer, these kids, they've got some arms. This kid from Georgia, Aaron Murray, he can throw it a mile. All these kids. Six years ago, I'd have said, 'Hey, I'm going to out-throw all these guys.' But now, these kids can throw it farther, and it has zero effect on my psyche. I'm 36 years old, I'm coming off a major injury, and my arm has a lot of miles on it.

"I can still get them in the end zone doing it a different way, dinking and dunking, taking my shots at certain times. So I've learned a lot about my body, and about my team."

Cutcliffe's final test was incredibly elaborate. The coach wanted to make sure Manning was able to make all the throws necessary to win an NFL game. So he meticulously broke down every element of the Colts' 30-17 victory over the New York Jets in the 2009 AFC championship game — then completely re-created a seven-on-seven version of that game.

To make the simulation as realistic as possible, Cutcliffe brought in Tom Moore, Manning's offensive coordinator in Indianapolis, and some of the players who No. 18 knows best — center Jeff Saturday, tight end Dallas Clark and receiver Brandon Stokley. Filling the other spots were former Duke players, and even some equipment managers.

"We took every play and the Colts' script," Cutcliffe said. "Then we took the Jets' offense and timed how long they were on the field and what they accomplished. So Peyton would go to the sideline and sit on the bench and I'd say, 'All right, it's third down.' He'd get up and jogged a little bit. He'd throw to loosen up. Then we'd have a punt or whatever.

"He'd head out there, and he knew that we're trying to throw it in 2.7 seconds. Here's the receiver and here's the play. We had one of our running backs who'd finished his eligibility, and we ran the play when it was a run. We even made it so if a guy dropped the ball in the real game, he'd drop the ball in the fabricated game."

Afterward, Manning and Cutcliffe studied the video of the simulation and determined he was able to make every throw needed to win a playoff game. The Colts had yet to release him, but he knew that he would be ready to play this season.

"The appreciation for me was reliving the intensity of a man willing to work beyond what any human can push themselves," Cutcliffe said. "It was an incredible thing. I wish now — and he agrees with me — that we had let somebody come in to document that. Because I don't know if anybody else could have done it."

Even though most everyone expected the Colts to release Manning and use the No. 1 pick on Stanford's Andrew Luck, the finality of it still left Manning stunned.

That was evident when he first met with Broncos executive John Elway a couple of days after he was released.

"He was still in shock when he got here," Elway said. "That's when I told him, 'Peyton, you can take these trips and visit. But you need to just take your time and not rush into anything. You need to get your arms around what's happened. Then you can take the next step.'

"We went to dinner over at Cherry Hills [Country Club]. We're sitting on the sofa talking, and I just told him, 'I understand.' He was just saying, 'Everyone's telling me, my wife's telling me, it's in the paper. I know it. But it still shocks me.' And you could tell. But I think that's the mind-set of great players. There's no way you can let it go."

The Broncos saw him throw and were satisfied. They were one of three teams that were finalists to land him, the others being San Francisco and Tennessee.

Manning said his top concern was actually being the player those team owners — Denver's Pat Bowlen, Tennessee's Bud Adams and San Francisco's John York — expected to get.

"When you sign with a team, when I met with Mr. Bowlen and he said, 'I want you here,' same way when I met with Bud Adams, or when I met with York in San Francisco, I feel that responsibility to be the player they wanted," he said.

The Broncos couldn't ask for more. Manning is a coach's dream. He doesn't waste a moment, whether it's during practice, in the meeting rooms, on the road, wherever.

"He writes down everything," Fox said. "He writes down my Wednesday talks to the team, and then I'll hear it again with the media. I'll hear it again when he talks to his teammates, at the end of practice. It's off-the-chain leadership.

"He holds guys accountable, man. They don't want to let him down."

What's more, Manning wants to know everything that's going on in the organization. He wants to know where the college scouts are headed and why. Wants to know who that person is on the sideline, and whether he really needs to be there. He's half player, half coach, and seemingly all knowing.

"If he weren't a great player and you were a player on his team, he'd be a pain in the butt," Hall of Fame coach John Madden said with a laugh. "Because he never wants to leave you alone.

"If you're an offensive player and it's a defensive period, they go over and stand on the sideline and B.S. Peyton won't let them do that. He'll grab a guy and go down on the 10-yard line and work there. He just goes the whole time. 'Now remember this: When we don't huddle, I'll give you the signal, and they're going to do this...'
It's constant for him. He's seeking perfection. The only way he's going to get close to that is when everyone else is striving for perfection and getting close to it."

The Broncos players have embraced that. They appreciate Manning's relentless pursuit of precision and perfection, and the results reflect that.

"From day one when he got here, there was a certain way he wanted to do things," receiver Eric Decker said. "If you wanted to be great, you had to be willing to do that. That's the thing that's so special about him, is his work ethic. We're always talking about a route that we see, or a coverage that we're going to go against. It's always football."

The way Madden sees it, we've gotten only a glimpse of how good Manning can be — that he'll be even better in the coming weeks.

"I've been watching him and saying, this guy is going to get better," Madden said. "He's not going to be Peyton until after the midway point of the season. I think he's getting close to being comfortable. And it's very important to Peyton that he's comfortable.

"I'll text back and forth with him once in a while. I'll say, 'You're better this week than you were.'
And you can just see the progression. I think everyone is going to the neck and the health and the arm strength. But with Peyton it's about perfection. Everything has to be perfect. From the calls, the other players understanding, to what he can do to help himself, to what he can do to help his team."

But he's not the same player he was in Indianapolis. He has adapted and grown. Like that meandering trip to the haircut, he's blazing a new path in Chapter 2 of his career.

"I'm a different quarterback," he said. "I've got these two unbelievable kids now. My life has just totally changed. I've changed with it. I'm learning to live with something every day."

KLEE: By the numbers, Broncos on winning pace

Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
November 21, 2012

DENVER — What's better than Thanksgiving leftovers?

For Broncos fans, this: Denver is favored to win the final six games of the regular season.

That's what the numbers say.

Denver this week is in charge of breaking down Kansas City. Brady Quinn could be the starter at quarterback for the Chiefs. This seems like a good time to look ahead.

Massey-Peabody gave me the numbers. Cade Massey has more degrees than a Phoenix July. And there are three things I don't argue: the law with lawyers, anything with Steve Atwater and numbers with a professor that taught at Yale and advised Google.

Massey is a statistics guru who calculates, among other math things, the probability of a team winning the rest of its games. The probability is based on their power rankings.

Denver (7-3) is No. 3 in their power rankings. Over their final six games, the Broncos will play only one team with a power ranking above 20. That one team is No. 6 Baltimore.

The front end of the Broncos schedule made you gulp. The back end makes you giggle.

Based on their numbers, the Broncos right now are favored to beat the Chiefs, Bucs, Raiders, Ravens, Browns and Chiefs (again, which is nice).

Based on their numbers, the Broncos have an 86-percent chance of beating Kansas City on Sunday. Arrowhead Stadium might be 86-percent empty in the fourth quarter.

Based on their numbers, the shakiest result is the Week 15 game at Baltimore. The Broncos have a 51-percent chance of beating the Ravens. Yes, right now Denver would be favored.

Denver had a 74-percent chance of beating San Diego on Sunday. By sweeping the Chargers, Denver did everything but lock up the AFC West title in Justin Bannan's wine cellar. Based on the numbers, this season is maturing into a 1987 Diamond Creek Cab.

"They (the Chargers) have had our number for a number of years," Champ Bailey said, helping our theme.

Only two other teams probably will win the rest of their games. One is the best team in the AFC (New England); the other is the best team in the NFC (Green Bay, right now).

The Broncos remaining win probability — a phrase that confuses me but makes sense to numbers people — is 51 percent. Green Bay's is 58 percent, New England's 53 percent.

I'm 100-percent certain we can't power-rank Peyton Manning's Broncos ahead of Tom Brady's Patriots until Denver solves that no-huddle offense.

Numbers are negotiable. They don't account for Willis McGahee's knee injury, Raiders rivalry games or Denver's ugly history in Baltimore.

"I know it sounds cliché, but you look around the league and I don't have to mention names of teams, but their record doesn't mean anything," Broncos coach John Fox said. "I'll watch a one-win team against a one-loss team and you wouldn't have ever known it."

The numbers can't explain how Jacksonville (the one-win team) took Houston (the one-loss team) into overtime (one of three OT games last Sunday).

So don't blow the holiday bonus on Broncos betting tickets, based on the numbers.

But we know these Broncos save the best for last. The Broncos go bananas in the final quarter. Peyton Manning has 48 fourth-quarter comebacks, the NFL record for a starting quarterback. Denver has scored 121 points in fourth quarters this season. That's tied with Detroit for most in the NFL.

The next time Denver enters a fourth quarter facing a deficit, consider these numbers: Denver 121, Opponents 37. That's the score of their fourth quarters this season.

Only one team — San Diego, last Sunday — has outscored Denver in a fourth quarter. The Broncos are 9-1 in fourth quarters.

Fox likes to organize the 16-game regular season into four quarters. With six games remaining, there are 2.5 quarters left in his regular season.

He uses different math to predict the rest of the schedule: "My experience has been you're about two games away from disaster.

"I think I've mentioned before is all we're assured of right now is 7-9," he said. "The best we can do is 13-3."

Based on the numbers, the Broncos will do their best.

RELAX! There's no reason to be concerned about the Broncos offense

Eric Goodman
Mile High Sports
November 21, 2012

Broncos fans amuse me, but some Denver media members are just as wack.

Moments after the Broncos beat San Diego to essentially clinch the AFC West title for the second year in a row, one media dude asked Peyton Manning if there was more happiness or frustration after the win.

(For the record, I don't know who I'm calling out. So if you're reading this, just know it's nothing personnel; it's just a stupid question. And all of us have been guilty of that.)

Manning's response was succinct. "Happiness. We won didn't we? Are you not happy? Strange question. Strange question."

Strange indeed. As strange as someone saying, "That Cindy Crawford would be REALLY hot if she didn't have that mole on her face."

Why so many fans and media are criticizing the Broncos offense is puzzling considering this is the best O in Denver since this franchise won the Super Bowl. Striving for perfection is one thing, but this is borderline neurotic.

Broncos fans have gotten so spoiled so quickly with Manning that it's as if they need something to complain about. It was understandable with Tim Tebow where every game included a complimentary dose of cardiac arrest. Even though the Broncos offensive performance has been flawed at times over the last four games, did you really think any of the outcomes were really in doubt?

Let's go back even further though to the game that started this five-game winning streak. A national television audience saw the full power of this offense when it scored a pair of fourth-quarter touchdowns to beat San Diego in one of the most remarkable comebacks in NFL history.

One week later, the Broncos dismantled a New Orleans team that's suddenly back in the playoff picture. The offense scored 34 points and rolled up 530 yards with very little help from the defense. This was the Saints' only loss in a six-game span that's got them believing the playoffs are a real possibility.

Cincinnati was coming off a bye week and desperate for a win after losing three straight games. A pair of fourth-quarter touchdowns on the road sealed it. The Bengals throttled the defending Super Bowl champion Giants the following week and are looking like they are on the verge of entering the playoff picture.

I know what you're thinking about Carolina. But the Panthers have one of the better front fours in football. There's no shame in scoring 20 offensive points on the road when you're defense is playing at a ridiculously high level.

So that brings us to last Sunday, when another reporter asked Manning about the offense having to succumb to a three-and-out.

"I guess it's a good thing when a three-and-out is shocking to you all or surprising to you all. It means we're doing something well, but this was a good defense we were playing against," said Manning.

The Chargers defense isn't great, but they were certainly desperate. They were consistently blitzing Manning and going into one-on-one coverage. It was high risk/high reward for a team that badly needed a win to stay in the divisional chase. They lost when the Broncos offense scored 30 points with no defensive or special teams touchdowns. Yes they had short fields, but last I checked, you're not automatically given a touchdown with good field position.

Oh, I know what you skeptics are saying. Manning threw a pick six, overthrew some open guys and the offensive line gave up a safety against the Chargers.

An optimist would say the Broncos don't need a perfect game to win. A pessimist would say these mistakes won't cut it in the playoffs.

It hasn't been perfect offensive football over the last three weeks, but no team plays perfect games. Do you really believe this offense is regressing? Need I remind you the Texans nearly lost to Jacksonville last Sunday and the Patriots have had more than few close calls this season?

The Broncos offense certainly needs to hold onto the ball better, but I can't imagine it hasn't been addressed a couple of hundred times. It's not as if they don't understand what's going on.

A game is never out of reach with Manning in the fourth quarter. And with the way the defense is playing, it must be refreshing for Manning to not have the entire outcome resting on his surgically repaired neck. John Elway likely felt the same way with Terrell Davis.

If Manning and the offense are the Broncos biggest problem, they're going to go deep into the playoffs. If you want something to worry about, the rushing attack without Willis McGahee could be a problem.

Manning has been so good, so fast, with so much early success, some Broncos fans groan every time there's a bad or wobbly pass.

Lighten up! This offense is still coming together with six games to go. There's no reason to panic. Every dip has the promise of new heights. So just take a deep breath, open your eyes and enjoy the ride. It has the potential to be a memorable one.

Broncos bring in RB Jacob Hester for a look

Dan Fellman
Mile High Sports
November 21, 2012

The Broncos know Jacob Hester well from his career playing for division rival San Diego.

According to the *Denver Post*, the team brought Hester in for a workout Wednesday following the news of Willis McGahee being placed on the injured reserve list.

Hester, who played mostly fullback for the Chargers, is a bigger back matching McGahee's weight of 235 pounds, and could be used in short yard situations and for pass protection.

The 28 year old was a third-round draft pick out of Louisiana State University in 2008, and played all four years in the NFL with San Diego before being released in this year's training camp.

Tuesday, the Broncos worked out Steve Slaton as a possible replacement for McGahee.

The Broncos are expected to use the trio of Knowshon Moreno, Ronnie Hillman and Lance Ball against the Kansas City Chiefs on Sunday at Arrowhead Stadium.

Willis McGahee's Torn MCL Means Denver Broncos Will Run by Committee

Rich Kurtzman
CBS Denver
November 21, 2012

Without Willis McGahee, the Broncos are missing their workhorse.

McGahee, the 31-year-old that has carried the load for Denver over the last two seasons, partially tore his MCL in the second quarter of the team's win over San Diego last Sunday. Luckily for McGahee and the Broncos, the MRI showed the ligament wasn't completely torn, meaning it won't require surgery and he's hopeful to return in 4-6 weeks, though doctors believe it will be more like 6-8 weeks. The 6' 235 pound running back has been enjoying a late-career resurgence in the Mile High City, gaining 1,930 yards with eight touchdowns since 2011 and he's a solid blocker on the blitz pick up. But he's also had difficulties with holding onto the ball, losing four fumbles in 10 games this season alone.

Behind McGahee on the Broncos bench is a stable of young runners that will have to step their respective games up.

Ronnie Hillman has been the No. 2 back behind McGahee, and the rookie has a ton of speed. Hillman, at 5'9" 200 pounds, uses his explosive ability to burst down the sidelines and has been close to breaking some big runs as of late, racking up 188 yards and one score. But some are worried he's too small to pick up blocks as consistently as he needs to, meaning Lance Ball and Knowshon Moreno may get more playing time ahead of Hillman.

Ball is a bruiser, at 5'9" 215 pounds, able to push through the line between the tackles and make sack-saving blocks when blitzers bust through. He's gained 94 yards on the ground and Ball also has good hands, with seven receptions for 61 yards and one score this year.

Of course, the wildcard is fourth-year running back Moreno. Moreno went from the starter in 2010, to the backup last year and inactive for almost every game this season. Considering how little he's played, the 5'11" 200 pound back should have fresh legs and he's proven as a blocker and receiver. But where he's never lived up to his potential is running the rock, averaging only 4.1 yards per carry over his career and is not able to break the long runs to the house. Ball and Hillman will almost certainly get more playing time, at least at first, but Moreno will get an opportunity in the backfield, his last chance to prove himself worthy of continuing to play in the NFL.

And really, every one of the Broncos' running backs should have motivation  to run well. Ball's never really had a shot with a consistent amount of carries—he will show

he can run the ball. Hillman is still a rookie trying to prove he's an NFL-caliber runner, which means much more than just taking the ball outside the tackles. For Moreno, many believe this is his last chance to make something happen, at least with the Broncos. Something says he'll find a way to make something positive happen.

Willis McGahee put on IR but could return for AFC championship

Chuck Schilken
Los Angeles Times
November 21, 2012

Willis McGahee was placed on injured reserve Wednesday, but it's not the end of the world for Denver Broncos fans.

It may not even be the end of the season for the Broncos' top running back.

For all those asking "Whatchu talkin' 'bout?": McGahee, who tore the medial collateral ligament in his right knee Sunday against the San Diego Chargers, was placed on the new recallable IR list.

That means McGahee is eligible to start practicing after missing the rest of the regular season and could be able to play again if the Broncos make it to the AFC championship game.

And that still remains a distinct possibility for the Broncos, even without McGahee and his 731 rushing yards and four touchdowns.

After all, they made it to the second round of the playoffs with Tim Tebow as their starting quarterback last year -- surely they can go at least one game further with four-time MVP Peyton Manning now calling the signals.

McGahee will be replaced by Ronnie Hillman, Lance Ball and former first-round pick Knowshon Moreno, who's been inactive since Week 2.

Von Miller wins AFC defensive player of the week honors

Darin Gantt
ProFootballTalk.com
November 21, 2012

Von Miller might have lost the league sack lead this week, but he did win AFC defensive player of the week honors.

Miller had three sacks and two forced fumbles in the Broncos' 30-23 win over the Chargers.

He now has 13 sacks on the season, and it took Aldon Smith's 5.5 against the Bears to knock him out of the league's top spot.

Miller's 24.5 sacks in 25 games are the most in the same span since Derrick Thomas had 25 in his first 25.

Miller and Smith have a friendly back and forth going on, and it's amazing watching them change games on a weekly basis.

Willis McGahee designated for return, could play AFC Championship

Michael David Smith
ProFootballTalk.com
November 21, 2012

We noted earlier that Broncos running back Willis McGahee is being placed on injured reserve, but there's a silver lining for Denver: McGahee has been designated for return.

That means McGahee will be able to play after sitting out for eight weeks. The regular season has six more weeks, which means the earliest McGahee could return would be the AFC Championship Game. That the Broncos designated McGahee for return indicates both that they're optimistic he could be ready to go in eight weeks, and that they're optimistic they'll still be playing in eight weeks.

A new rule this year allows each team to place one player on injured reserve with the return designation. Those players are allowed to practice after six weeks and play after eight weeks. So McGahee could start practicing with the team during the wild card round of the playoffs, then play in the AFC Championship Game and, if they make it, the Super Bowl.

Losing McGahee will make it tougher for the Broncos to get to the AFC Championship, but if they get there, they could have McGahee with them.

Willis McGahee heads to IR

Michael David Smith
ProFootballTalk.com
November 21, 2012

The Broncos will play the rest of the regular season without running back Willis McGahee.

McGahee, who suffered a knee injury on Sunday, is being placed on injured reserve, according to Jay Glazer of FOX Sports. McGahee suffered both a torn MCL and a fracture in his leg.

That means Ronnie Hillman, Lance Ball and Knowshon Moreno will split the running back duties for the rest of the year.

For Denver's offense, the loss of McGahee is significant: He was averaging 4.4 yards a carry and had 731 yards this season, while Hillman, Ball and Moreno are all averaging less than four yards a carry and have totaled just 297 yards. McGahee is also a better receiver out of the backfield than any of the younger runners and the most reliable of the Broncos' running backs in pass protection, so Denver will need one of those younger runners to step up his game, and do it quickly.

McGahee Placed IR, Designated for Return

Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
November 21, 2012

The Broncos on Wednesday announced that running back Willis McGahee will be placed on injured reserve with a designation to return.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- With running back Willis McGahee sidelined for an extended period with a torn ligament in his knee, the team announced on Wednesday that he will be placed on the injured reserve list with a designation to return.

McGahee must miss six weeks of practice and eight weeks of games before he is eligible to return to the active roster.

That makes McGahee eligible to return to practice on Wednesday, Jan. 2 — three days after Denver's final regular-season game against the Kansas City Chiefs -- and to play in any games after Jan. 16, which leaves only the AFC Championship Game and Super Bowl on the NFL schedule.

The short-term injured reserve is a new NFL rule that was adopted in the offseason, allowing teams to designate one player to return from its injured reserve list each season. The player must be designated for return at the time he is placed on the injured reserve list.

The Broncos currently have three running backs on the active roster --Lance Ball, Ronnie Hillman and Knowshon Moreno -- along with fullback Chris Gronkowski.

"Right now, we feel really good about the guys we have — they're trained in our system," Head Coach John Fox said on Monday. "I've said many, many times, it's the next man up. It was yesterday and will be next Sunday. Who that'll be? We'll see how practice goes and what our active list will look like next Sunday."

Familiar Face Across the Line

Stuart Zaas
DenverBroncos.com
November 21, 2012

The Broncos are preparing to face their former teammate in Chiefs quarterback Brady Quinn, who was named the starter by Kansas City Head Coach Romeo Crennel on Wednesday.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – When the Broncos defenders look across the line of scrimmage on Sunday, they will see a familiar face under center for the Chiefs.

Kansas City Head Coach Romeo Crennel announced that Brady Quinn will start for the Chiefs against the Broncos, a team on which Quinn spent the 2010 and '11 seasons.

"I thought he did a great job for us," Head Coach John Fox said of Quinn. "He didn't get a lot of opportunity in the regular season a year ago, but I watched him a lot of times in practice and he's definitely very capable."

Quinn did not appear in a regular-season game for the Broncos during his two years with the team. He has started two games this season for the Chiefs, and has completed 35-of-58 passes for 308 yards with three interceptions this season.

He entered Kansas City's Week 11 game against Cincinnati in the second half and went 9-of-13 for 95 yards and a passer rating of 83.9.

"We have a lot of respect for him," safety Rahim Moore said. "He was once our teammate. He's like every other quarterback. You go out there and try to be your best, and just play fast."

Although Quinn spent two seasons on the Broncos, Denver's defense isn't counting on familiarity helping them on Sunday.

Even though they practiced opposite the signal caller, many times Quinn was quarterbacking the scout team, so he was mimicking that week's opposing quarterback – not himself.

"There isn't much familiarity," Moore said. "I went against him, but it's different in game mode. He's had another offseason, no question he is juiced to start. It's a time for him to showcase his talents. At the same time, you go out there and just play."

Safety Mike Adams was not on the Broncos last season, but he is the Bronco that has spent the longest amount of time as Quinn's teammate. They both joined the Browns in 2007 and played three seasons together.

Prior to this season, Quinn hadn't started a game since 2009, when he opened nine contests for the Browns. Adams also started nine games that season for Cleveland.

"(I'm) just looking forward to the challenge and forward to seeing him," Adams said. "I'm happy that he finally got his shot playing. I'm just looking forward to the game."

Even though the Chiefs announced that Quinn would open Sunday's contest, the Broncos defense is preparing for both Quinn and fellow quarterback Matt Cassel just in case the latter makes an appearance as well.

Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio has a challenge on his hands trying to prepare for Quinn, since there is not much recent film of the former first-round draft pick.

While Quinn has started two games this year, he has only thrown 58 passes in the last three years – not the typical sample size available on each of the previous 10 quarterbacks that the Broncos have faced this year, all of which have been Pro Bowlers.

After going 22-of-38 in his first start this season, Quinn opened the Chiefs' next game but was injured and left the game with a concussion after throwing just four passes.

"(We are) trying to get as much tape as we can on him," Del Rio said. "Obviously, (we are) preparing for both guys because both guys played last week. You have to prepare for that. Brady's a guy that I studied coming out of Notre Dame years ago and obviously he was here (in Denver) so I know there are people that have a reference point. From my standpoint, we want to make sure we do the things we can to slow them down, get the ball back for our offense and do our thing defensively that way as a team."

Filling the Void

Tyler Everett
DenverBroncos.com
November 21, 2012

The Broncos will need running backs Lance Ball, Ronnie Hillman and Knowshon Moreno to fill in for Willis McGahee, who has been placed on IR.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – With running back Willis McGahee on IR, the Broncos will have to finish the regular season without their starting running back from the first 10 games.

At the moment, the Broncos are looking internally to answer the question of who will now shoulder the load in the running game.

“For this week, I think we feel very comfortable with who we have,” Head Coach John Fox said. “That can change based on anything we might do but I think it’s fair to say, and pretty obvious, that we’ll pull from guys that we have that know our system.”

McGahee had picked up 731 yards on 161 carries and added 26 receptions for 221 yards prior to his injury. That production makes his knee injury a tough pill to swallow for the entire offense.

“We’re certainly going to miss Willis,” quarterback Peyton Manning. “To say we’re not going to miss Willis would not be telling the truth. He’s that good of a player.”

In McGahee’s absence, it will be important for not only the running backs, but every player on the roster to help fill the void. Injuries are an unavoidable aspect of the game that require every team to make adjustments, every season, Manning said.

“We have that next man up philosophy around here,” Manning said. “A lot of teams have that. Coach Fox certainly has it. We’ve had other players get injured and other players have stepped up, whether it’s (guard)Chris Kuper or (cornerback) Tracy Porter, whoever it was. That’s what you have to do in the NFL. (Running back) Knowshon (Moreno) and (running back) Lance (Ball) and (running back) Ronnie (Hillman) all have to step up. Everybody else has to step their game up, too, when you’re missing one of your top players.”

In Moreno, Ball and Hillman, the Broncos have a trio of players to turn to at the running back position. Moreno, a former first-round draft choice, has 24 career starts and 19 total touchdowns. Ball and Hillman have both been active in each of the team’s past eight games, with Ball playing in every game this season. The group has earned the confidence of Offensive Coordinator Mike McCoy.

"I've got no doubt that those guys can run and carry the load for him," McCoy said. "Every back, every player has a different style, so they'll do their thing, and we have all the confidence in the world in those guys."

"The good thing is all three guys had played plenty earlier in the year," McCoy added. "They're all familiar with the system, and they all have to pick up their game."

The best way to learn is to get experience. One positive for the Broncos who will be called upon to step up is that none of them will be seeing their first game action.

"Well, certainly I've said it before, experience is your best teacher," Manning said. "Game experience is the best, also. The more repetitions you can get in games, the better. Obviously, Willis has had the most game repetitions but Lance and Knowshon are veteran players and Ronnie's probably had as much experience as any rookie running back right now. Those guys will step up and do a good job."

As a competition for the starting nod at running back plays out in practice between Hillman, Moreno and Ball, each of the backs has said they will be prepared for whatever contribution they are expected to make.

"It's whatever the coaches ask of me, ask of Ronnie, ask of Knowshon," Ball said. "It's just when the number is called."

Should Hillman's role increase, he will view the opportunity as more of an increased responsibility than a cause for excitement.

"It's kind of like you have an expanded role and you have to be able to, No. 1, protect Peyton," Hillman said. "I've been in there a lot, but if I do get an expanded role, it's a little bit more pressure on you being able to do everything right every play that I'm in there if it's more reps."

Miller Making his Mark

Sam Davis
DenverBroncos.com
November 21, 2012

Von Miller's recent play is drawing comparisons to a player he grew up idolizing – the late Derrick Thomas.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The most recent performance from linebacker Von Miller, and the award that came with it, have garnered a new level of praise from those around him.

Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio couldn't say for sure if Miller is the most talented player he's ever coached, but he was able to make a comparison that might have spoken even greater volumes about the recently named AFC Defensive Player of the Week.

"I did spend a very short time in Kansas City with (former linebacker) Derrick Thomas," Del Rio said. "I think they're similar in terms of unique abilities to finish and get the quarterback to the ground. Rare ability, combination of speed and power. It's kind of fitting to mention that because we're going to K.C. this week."

Miller wears No. 58 on his jersey in honor of Thomas, his idol, who compiled 126.5 sacks from the outside linebacker position before passing away after a car accident in 2000.

"As far as that goes, just wearing the number, trying to make him proud and his family proud just by wearing 58 and playing in a way that he would play," Miller said. "That's all I can say about that."

After Sunday's game versus San Diego, Miller's 24.5 career sacks was more than any player has ever totaled in his first 25 games, except for one. Thomas recorded 25 sacks in his first 25 contests.

"Derrick Thomas, to be even in the same breath as that guy is humbling," Miller said. "I've got a long way to go to be even close, in my opinion. I'm just going to keep on taking it one day at a time. That's what I've been saying this whole time."

That mindset is one of the qualities that enabled Miller to have continued success since he came into the league in 2011. He has climbed near the top of the league in several defensive categories, leading the conference in sacks, with 13, and pacing the NFL in tackles for loss with 23. Miller's one-day-at-a-time approach is benefiting not only himself but the rest of the team.

"The best part is the way he's working every day because that gives you a chance to be special," Del Rio said. "Obviously, he's been blessed with a lot of ability and in

order to reach your potential you have to work at it and I think the best thing he's doing is doing just that - coming in and working every day and being a good teammate."

With 11.5 sacks last year, he was an excellent pass-rusher. But what Miller is doing this year goes beyond chasing after the quarterback. His four forced fumbles and 23 tackles for loss are evidence, and his defensive coordinator agrees.

"The one part that's really improved in Von is his overall play as a linebacker," Del Rio said. "Stuffing the run, tackles behind the line of scrimmage, jamming the tight end before he rushes, or covering the tight end or the back in the flap -- things like that. He's gotten better there."

As he continues to make plays all over the football field, he'll step into a new role as a leader of the football team. It's a process that has already begun to naturally take effect with a player who makes such an impact on the football field.

"As a player, when you make plays, it just comes along with it," safety Mike Adams said. "No one's going to give him that tag. He's just going to have to know that it's on him already to be the leader. He has to know that he's an older guy now. He's maturing, he's coming into his own so he has to know that. No one's going to give him that tag."

14th-year cornerback Champ Bailey has seen many talented players in his career, and on Wednesday Bailey said Miller is "right up there" with all of them.

Miller maintains that he has a long way to go until he makes comparisons to players like Derrick Thomas a reality. Bailey knows that's true. But with time, he believes it could be fair statement.

"I think what separates the real talented guys from the great professional football athletes is doing it over a long course of time, being consistent," Bailey said. "He has a chance to do that."

Miller Takes Home Second DPOW Award

Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
November 21, 2012

On the strength of a three-sack performance against the San Diego Chargers, linebacker Von Miller took home his second career Defensive Player of the Week Award for Week 11.

In addition to sacking Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers three times last Sunday, he forced two fumbles and registered six tackles — two of which were for a loss.

Miller's three sacks led the AFC for the week, and he is now the only AFC player to record at least three sacks and two forced fumbles in a game in 2012.

He currently ranks second in the NFL and first in the AFC with 13 sacks while leading the league with 23 tackles for a loss.

Miller previously took home Defensive Player of the Week in Week 11 as a rookie. He joins cornerback Tracy Porter and linebacker Wesley Woodyard as the third Bronco to take home the award this season.

2012 DENVER BRONCOS WEEKLY AWARDS

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

Porter Participates Early in Practice

Stuart Zaas
DenverBroncos.com
November 21, 2012

Although the Broncos received bad news on Wednesday when running back Willis McGahee was placed on injured reserve, there was a positive development on the injury front as cornerback Tracy Porter participated in the portion of practice open to the media for the first time in several weeks.

Porter has missed the past five games and has practiced just four times since symptoms related to a seizure he suffered in August flared up. He was listed as a limited participant on Wed., Oct. 24 and Wed., Oct. 31, a full participant on Thur., Nov 1, and a limited participant the last time the Broncos took the practice field on Nov. 16.

Prior to missing time, Porter played all five games for the Broncos, starting four of them. He made 21 tackles with one interception that he returned 43 yards to seal Denver's Week 1 win over Pittsburgh. He was named AFC Defensive Player of the Week after that performance, in which he tied for the second-most pass breakups in a game in team history with five and ranked second on the team with eight tackles.

Porter was one of 51 Broncos out on the field at the start of individual drills with only cornerback Omar Bolden (concussion) missing. Bolden was on the field for the stretching portion of practice. With McGahee being placed on injured reserve earlier in the day, the team only has 52 players on its active roster at the moment.

UPDATE: Porter was listed as a full participant in Denver's practice on Wednesday, marking the first full practice for the cornerback since Nov. 1. Cornerback Champ Bailey did not participate (non-injury reasons) and neither did Bolden. Defensive end Derek Wolfe (quadriceps), tight end Virgil Green (hamstring) and wide receiver Demaryius Thomas (knee) were limited. Guard Chris Kuper (ankle), defensive end Robert Ayers (groin) and running back Ronnie Hillman (hamstring) were all full participants.

Quinn to Start for Chiefs

Sam Davis
DenverBroncos.com
November 21, 2012

On Wednesday, the Kansas City Chiefs announced that Brady Quinn will be the starting quarterback for Sunday's game against the Broncos. It will be Quinn's third start of the season — his first in Kansas City — after spending the prior two years with the Broncos and not appearing in a game.

"I like his leadership qualities," Chiefs Head Coach Romeo Crennel said. "He has experience with a couple different teams and he's seen a couple different things. I think that will bode well for him."

Shortly after Crennel made the decision public, quarterback Brady Quinn spoke with Denver media on a conference call.

"Anytime you get the opportunity to start in the National Football League, you're very blessed," said Quinn, who has started 14 games since coming into the league in 2007 as the 22nd overall pick. "I haven't had as many opportunities in six seasons as some guys get in one season. Any opportunity for me to play is good. I'm always learning, always trying to get better."

Quinn added that both the live reps that he has gotten and the time he has spent watching from the sideline have helped him acquire a greater understanding of the game.

"As you grow older and more mature in this league, you understand what you need to get accomplished in each game plan," he said. "When you're younger, you have an idea of what's going on, but sometimes it takes a little more reps and playing in a game to actually get an understanding of that."

One thing that will help Quinn as he faces a stingy Denver defense on Sunday is establishing a ground game. The Chiefs are running for 145.4 yards per game — the fourth-best average in the league — thanks in large part to running back Jamaal Charles. The fifth-year back has totaled 821 yards on the ground this year, and Quinn called him "a great leader" for the Chiefs.

While Charles has gained 87 and 100 yards rushing in the last two games, the team hasn't been as dominant on the ground as it was in other points of the season. Quinn hopes that will change on Sunday at Arrowhead Stadium.

"That's one thing that we actually feel like we need to get back to," Quinn said. "Over the beginning of the season I think we did a good job of it, and we haven't been as successful of late. I think we have to do a better job as players to step up and do a better job blocking the scheme and making the right calls up front from

the QB, and making things happen. It's hard to play being a one-dimensional football team. You have to be able to run the football."

Through the air, Quinn said it will be a goal of his to get wideout Dwayne Bowe as involved as possible — easier said than done with the attention he tends to draw from opposing defenses. Quinn knows that there is a good chance cornerback Champ Bailey will line up across from Bowe, but the wideout still must be targeted.

"You've got to try to get him the ball," Quinn said. "That's one thing that sometimes is a tough task. We know teams are going to be gunning for him. They know how talented he is and how special he is. You usually get guys like Champ Bailey trying to match up with him, or guys trying to roll coverage to him, which is expected. We just try to our best we can to get him the ball."

Whether it's through Bowe, Charles or a combination of the two, the priority for the Chiefs on Sunday is to find a way to keep quarterback Peyton Manning and the Denver offense off the field by possessing the ball.

"I know that if Peyton is on the sideline and not on the field, then I have a better chance," Crennel said.

Broncos at Chiefs: Wednesday Injury Report

Sam Davis
DenverBroncos.com
November 21, 2012

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

DENVER BRONCOS

PLAYER	INJURY	WEDNESDAY
G Chris Kuper	Ankle	Full
CB Tracy Porter	Illness	Full
DE Derek Wolfe	Quadriceps	Limited
TE Virgil Green	Hamstring	Limited
RB Ronnie Hillman	Hamstring	Full
WR Demaryius Thomas	Knee	Limited
Thomas	Groin	Full
DE Robert Ayers	Non-Injury	Did Not Participate
CB Champ Bailey	Related	Participate
CB Omar Bolden	Concussion	Did Not Participate

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

PLAYER	INJURY	WEDNESDAY
T Branden Albert	Back	Did Not Participate
C/G Ryan Lilja	Knee	Did Not Participate
G Jon Asamoah	Thumb	Limited
WR Jon Baldwin	Head/Neck	Limited
WR Dwayne Bowe	Neck/Back	Limited
TE Steve Maneri	Ankle	Limited
TE Tony Moeaki	Shoulder/Back	Limited

Starting to Groove

Eric Decker
DenverBroncos.com
November 21, 2012

Looking around the locker room after last week's win against the Chargers, you could tell there was still some disappointment. That's just a testament to this team — we win, but we're still frustrated with some of our performances. We just want to make sure that we're running more consistently.

I think that even though it wasn't our best game, this is the ultimate team sport. That's why we play. Every week there are going to be mistakes, you've just got to correct them and get better. I think offensively we didn't play good situational football, and that's something that we're going to focus on this week. Meanwhile, the defense played unbelievable. The beauty of it is you get another opportunity this week to get better. That's really our focus.

Like they say, throw the records out when you play a division team. You have to. In this division, anyone can win. In this league, anyone can win. We talked this morning that Arrowhead's a really tough place to play. The fan support there, the noise and just the whole atmosphere that Kansas City brings, it's something that we've got to stay focused on and make sure that it doesn't affect us as we're executing our job on Sunday. One play at a time, one drive at a time.

From the front end to the back end, the Chiefs have got a lot of playmakers. Just watching film, they get after it in the run game, they put pressure on the quarterback in the passing game. Eric Berry, he fills for the run and Brandon Flowers is a Pro Bowl cornerback. So we've got some challenges ahead of us. We've got to, again, stay focused on our job and the task at hand.

Coach Fox has a saying, what's better than five-in-a-row? Six-in-a-row. That's the goal. I wrote earlier this year that great teams string wins together. That's something that at the beginning of the year we struggled with, just finding that consistency overall as a team. But we're finding who we want to be and creating an identity. It's fun to win ballgames. It's fun to win with these guys on this team. It's a very unselfish team and everybody's doing their part to win the ballgame. We're starting to groove.