

# 2012 Tuesday Morning Quarterback Week 10

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 27, 2012

This weekly exercise has brought the discovery that ranking the likes of Tom Brady, the Manning brothers, Robert Griffin III and Josh Freeman is a joy, and even disappointments like Philip Rivers, Tony Romo and Matthew Stafford are fun to grade. But it's also dreadful reviewing the likes of Ryan Fitzpatrick, Sam Bradford, Christian Ponder and Mark Sanchez. How to separate the middlin' to bottom-tier quarterbacks? The NFL's week 13 quarterback rankings according to Denver Post reporter Mike Klis:

## **1. Tom Brady, Patriots (1)**

Ran for a TD, threw for three TDs and 323 yards even though the Pats had 35-3 lead at halftime. He's played as well as his long-time rival Peyton Manning. And both Brady and Manning are playing on teams with Super Bowl-caliber defenses.

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

So who goes to the Super Bowl? Best throw he made Sunday was 27-yard pass down left side to Demaryius Thomas to convert third-and-7 while protecting 14-9 lead at two-minute warning.

## **3. Robert Griffin III, Redskins (6)**

Not many rookies have ever thrown eight TD passes in five days. He did throw one pick in the second half that was rookie-bad and nearly helped the Cowboys rally.

## **4. Matt Schaub, Texans (4)**

I can't figure out if he's underrated because of his team's strong running or overrated because of his team's strong running game. Either way, he's 10-1.

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

Just as in last season's playoffs, his offensive line was exposed against Giants' front four. When there's no protection, no running game and not much defense, it's difficult to be a good quarterback.

## **6. Eli Manning, Giants (12)**

Much ballyhooed bye week may have helped produce slump-busting performance against the outmanned Pack: three TDs, zero picks, 249 yards on Sunday night primetime.

### **7. Colin Kaepernick, 49ers (10)**

Like most people, I applaud Jim Harbaugh for going with the kid. There's a reason why Harbaugh went after Peyton Manning in March: His very good team was a top 10 QB shy of winning it all. Kaepernick is not top 10 yet, but like RG III and Cam Newton, he's a top-10 talent.

### **8. Jay Cutler, Bears (11)**

Can't deny he wins for a team that can't block. The Bears do have a championship-caliber defense so his 188 yards passing are plenty.

### **9. Joe Flacco, Ravens (13)**

He can throw a fourth-and-29 checkdown with the best of them.

### **10. Matt Ryan, Falcons (8)**

Bounced back from 5-pick game to complete 26-of-32 for 353 yards to win a tough, 1-point game on road against hot Tampa Bay team.

### **11. Josh Freeman, Bucs (7)**

Didn't get beat so much as time ran out in 24-23 loss to what is now a 10-1 Falcons team. Played well, completing 19-of-30 for 256 yards and no interceptions.

### **12. Cam Newton, Panthers (21)**

If he could dial down his ego a tad, and get the right coach (Mike McCoy?) he could play in five or six Super Bowls. The league's most physically-gifted player.

### **13. Drew Brees, Saints (5)**

I don't care what a quarterback's reputation is, or how much he's accomplished. If he throws two pick-six's at home, you don't make the top 10 of Tuesday Morning Quarterback.

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

There are stats of mediocrity: 56.8 completion percentage; 13 TDs vs. 13 INTs. But he's also already thrown for 3,200 yards and he's lifted a 2-14 team to 7-4 with top wild-card seed.

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

In three games since he looked like Ordinary Andy against the Broncos, he's been Hot Andy with nine TDs, zero picks and 3-0 record.

### **16. Chad Henne, Jaguars (17)**

Jags have Henne fever. Threw for 261 yards on just 17 completions in home win. Only problem with beating Titans is Jags just gave No. 1 overall draft pick to Chiefs.

### **17. Russell Wilson, Seahawks (20)**

Another solid effort in another tough road loss. Completed 21-of-27 for 224 yards, two TDs, zero picks and also rushed for 38 yards - pretty good considering Miami is 3,314 miles from home.

### **18. Tony Romo, Cowboys (15)**

Same ol' Romo: Talented enough to throw for 441 yards and three TDs to nearly pull off 25-point comeback; bad enough to throw two picks and fall behind at home against division rival Washington, 28-3 by halftime.

### **19. Matthew Stafford, Lions (19)**

A great arm and makes plenty of big plays. But like another strong-armed QB (Jay Cutler), he throws too often off his back foot and misses too many easy throws. Had 30 incompletions on Thanksgiving.

### **20. Philip Rivers, Chargers (25)**

Played a solid, no-pick game against a tough Ravens defense. Struggled to finish off drives, though, and it cost him.

### **21. Sam Bradford, Rams (27)**

Is Jeff Fisher trying to make him the next Tebow? Completed just 8-of-17 but for 205 yards and two TDs in division road win at Arizona.

### **22. Ryan Tannehill, Dolphins (30)**

Put together an impressive fourth quarter - coming up with 17 points on his final three possessions -- to stun Seattle, 24-21.

### **23. Carson Palmer, Raiders (22)**

His former Bengals gave it to him, and rightly so. Threw for season-low 146 yards and took four sacks while his Raiders got crushed again, 34-10.

#### **24. Mark Sanchez, Jets (23)**

Threw for 301 meaningless yards after he was part of first-half collapse that put his team down 35-3 at halftime against division rival New England.

#### **25. Jake Locker, Titans (24)**

You either get it done or you don't: Down 21-19 with three minutes remaining and ball at his own 37, he threw a loss-clinching pick at Jacksonville.

#### **26. Ryan Fitzpatrick, Bills (26)**

Struggled with accuracy in 20-13 loss at Indy. Completed just 17-of-33 for 180 yards.

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

Shouldn't 43 pass attempts produce more than 159 yards? The play-calling is way too conservative for the second-year QB's development.

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

Hate to knock a rookie for beating Pittsburgh, but Browns won despite him. Threw a pick-six and Steelers kept giving him great field position with eight turnovers.

#### **29. Nick Foles, Eagles (31)**

When you complete 16-of-21 for only 119 yards, as he did on Monday night against Carolina, it means you and I could complete 16-of-21.

#### **30. Brady Quinn, Chiefs (37)**

You could see his confidence coming as game moved along against his former Broncos teammates. Now he has to throw a few more intermediate-route passes.

#### **31. Charlie Batch (N/R)**

The veteran should not be playing. Too old and rusty. And there are three picks with zero TDs in loss to Cleveland - Cleveland! - to prove it.

#### **32. Ryan Lindley, Cardinals (39)**

The kid should not be playing. He's not ready. And there are four picks with zero TDs in home loss to St. Louis Rams to prove it.

**Broncos need one win or one Chargers loss to clinch AFC West**

# Broncos need one win or one Chargers loss to clinch AFC West

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 27, 2012

All scenarios, all possibilities, all future numbers bounce off a magic number of one.

One more Broncos victory or one more San Diego loss, and Denver wins the AFC West title for a second consecutive season.

Win the AFC West title, and the Broncos are assured of playing a 17th game this season. Win the AFC West, and the Broncos play a ninth home game. Game 17, home game No. 9, would come in the playoffs.

"No. 1, we don't want to worry about all that," Broncos coach John Fox said. "We want to worry about the Tampa Bay Bucs in all three phases. That will be the mantra when we gather the team back up on Wednesday."

The Broncos can clinch the AFC West and no worse than a No. 4 AFC playoff seed by defeating Tampa Bay on Sunday at Sports Authority Field at Mile High. If the Broncos wind up a No. 4 or No. 3 playoff seed, they will play at home in the first round of the playoffs. If they wind up a No. 1 or No. 2 playoff seed, they will get a first-round bye and will play at home in the second round of the playoffs.

The AFC West is now between the Broncos and the Chargers. And because of tiebreakers, the Broncos essentially have a five-game lead with five to play.

It has been verified by the Elias Sports Bureau that the third-place Oakland Raiders are eliminated from the division title even though with a 3-8 record they can mathematically match the Broncos, who are 8-3 with five games remaining.

Five consecutive victories by the Raiders and five straight losses by the Broncos, though, would still give the Broncos the tiebreaker of best record against common opponents.

Oh, and the 1-10 Kansas City Chiefs are done, too.

**Ayers excused.** Broncos defensive end Robert Ayers was excused from team meetings Monday so he could be with family on the East Coast after the unexpected death of his father.

No timetable has been set for Ayers' return.

"We're just trying to be there for a brother when he's down," fellow Broncos defensive lineman Kevin Vickerson said. "We all just want to support the guy."

Ayers was at the Broncos' team hotel in Kansas City on Saturday night when he learned of his father's unexpected passing. Ayers decided to play Sunday afternoon against the Chiefs.

**Hester becomes 53rd man.** The Broncos signed former Chargers tailback, fullback and special-teams player Jacob Hester to their 53-man roster Monday. Hester takes the roster spot vacated last week when tailback Willis McGahee was placed on injured reserve with a designation to return.

Hester played his previous four seasons with the rival Chargers.

"I'm not going to lie. Today in the weight room they broke it down with 'Broncos,' and it was a little weird saying 'Broncos,' " Hester said. "But no, I'm excited. I knew a lot of guys here because I played against them for four years in the division, and I know a lot of them from college. So it'll be fun, and it's something I'm looking forward to."

**Manning update.** Fox confirmed quarterback Peyton Manning took a concussion test during the game Sunday against the Chiefs but was cleared.

"It's been out there about Peyton was banged on his head," Fox said. "Our medical staff does a great job. He was cleared in the locker room at halftime to come out in the third quarter."

# Broncos' Robert Ayers leaves team because of father's death

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 26, 2012

Broncos defensive end Robert Ayers was excused from team meetings Monday so he could be with family on the East Coast after the unexpected death of his father.

No timetable has been set on Ayers' return.

"We're just trying to be there for a brother when he's down," said fellow Broncos defensive lineman Kevin Vickerson. "We all just want to support the guy."

Ayers was at the Broncos' team hotel in Kansas City on Saturday night when he learned of his father's unexpected passing. Ayers decided to play Sunday afternoon against the Chiefs.

The Broncos defeated Kansas City, 17-9 for their sixth consecutive victory. In the process, the Broncos also eliminated the Chiefs and third-place Oakland Raiders from the AFC West race while stretching their lead against the second-place San Diego Chargers to five games (counting head-to-head tiebreaker) with five to go.

"No. 1, we don't want to worry about all that," said Broncos coach John Fox. "We want to worry about the Tampa Bay Bucs in all three phases. That will be the mantra when we gather the team back up on Wednesday."

The Broncos can clinch the AFC West and no worse than a No. 4 AFC playoff seed by defeating Tampa Bay on Sunday.

Also during Fox's Monday news conference:

\* He confirmed quarterback Peyton Manning took a concussion test during the game Sunday against the Chiefs, but was cleared.

"It's been out there about Peyton was banged on his head," Fox said. "Our medical staff does a great job. He was cleared in the locker room at halftime to come out in the third quarter."

\* The Broncos officially signed former Chargers' tailback/fullback/special teams standout Jacob Hester to their 53-man roster.

"I expect to be on special teams first, that being my background and we'll go from there," Hester said.

Hester played his previous four seasons with the rival Chargers, who had many games against the Broncos where the two sides didn't always like each other.

"I'm not going to lie, today in the weight room they broke it down with, "Broncos," and it was a little weird saying, "Broncos,"" Hester said. "But no, I'm excited. I knew a lot of guys here because I played against them for four years in the division, and I know a lot of them from college. So it'll be fun and it's something I'm looking forward to."

# Broncos sign Jacob Hester to add bulk at running back vs. Buccaneers

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 27, 2012

The Broncos signed former Chargers running back Jacob Hester on Monday morning. Hester, at 235 pounds, becomes the biggest back on the Broncos' roster. Hester was at the team's Dove Valley complex Monday and will practice with the team Wednesday.

Hester started 23 games for the Chargers in his four seasons with the team, usually working out of the fullback spot. He had 94 carries split over those four years to go with 55 receptions.

Hester also could play some special teams. Denver will host the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on Sunday at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

The Broncos had worked Hester out last week, along with former Texans running back Steve Slaton. The Broncos had only 52 players on their roster last week, including four running backs in Knowshon Moreno, Ronnie Hillman, Lance Ball and Chris Gronkowski.

Willis McGahee tore the medial collateral ligament and suffered a compression fracture of his right knee early in the second quarter of the Broncos' 30-23 victory over the San Diego Chargers on Nov. 18. McGahee was moved to injured reserve, but has been designated to return during the playoffs.

Broncos coach John Fox has said McGahee would be sidelined six to eight weeks. The injured reserve designation means McGahee will be sidelined six weeks before he can return to practice Dec. 31, which would be the first day of the postseason.

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.

# Chiefs, Texans find common ground in running game when facing Broncos

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 26, 2012

When a defense prevents any NFL offense from scoring a touchdown in a game, there's really no downside to that.

And that is what the Broncos did Sunday when they limited the Chiefs' balky offense to three field goals. It was the second time this season the Broncos have held an opponent without a touchdown.

But though the Chiefs are now 1-10, they did join the 10-1 Texans in at least one respect. Kansas City did the most damage to the Broncos' base defense since Denver's Week 3 loss to the Texans.

In the Broncos' Sept. 23 loss, the Texans scored all four of their touchdowns against Denver's base defense. They also ran for 113 yards in the game, 105 of those coming from Arian Foster, most of it against Denver's base defense.

Sunday, with a backup left tackle in rookie Donald Stephenson and two other ailing linemen in the offensive front (Ryan Lilja and Jon Asamoah had been limited in practice last week), the Chiefs pounded out 148 yards rushing.

In the end, 130 of those rushing yards came against the Broncos' base defense, their personnel grouping they favor when an offense is in a run-first position or with heavier personnel in the formation.

The Chiefs, who came into the game with the league's No. 4 rushing attack, had success out of a two-back or two-tight end look as Jamaal Charles found some cutback lanes in a zone-run look that was reminiscent of the Broncos' past. The Chiefs had five runs of at least 11 yards. And while they simply don't have the finishers to close out drives, it is something the Broncos' future opponents will look at.

"We know we have to clean things up," said cornerback Champ Bailey. "But it's always better to clean up after a win. We still did some good things on third down, got off the field and we kept them out of the end zone, but people see what you do, you always have to be ready."

In their next five games, the Broncos will face the league's No. 4 rusher (Tampa Bay's Doug Martin), the No. 11 rusher (Baltimore's Ray Rice), the No. 13 rusher (Cleveland's Trent Richardson) and Charles (No. 8). In the quest to keep the ball

out of Peyton Manning's hands, they will all likely take their swing at the Broncos' run defense as well.

# Inside the game: Broncos poised for a big run if turnovers improve

Jeff Legwold

The Denver Post

November 27, 2012

*EDITOR'S NOTE: NFL reporter Jeff Legwold analyzes the Broncos' 17-9 victory at Kansas City on Sunday and looks ahead.*

Now, it's about the details.

The 8-3 Broncos have won pretty, they've won ugly, they've won close, they've won going away and they've won with one historical comeback from 24 points down at halftime against San Diego that got the ball rolling.

With their sixth victory in a row Sunday, a rough-around-the-edges 17-9 affair at Kansas City, their football lives become about playoff positioning and ironing out the wrinkles. There is some work to do.

The Broncos are the only team in the NFL to put together six-game winning streaks in the past two seasons. They are the only team in the league to have constructed six-game winning streaks in three of the past four seasons.

"And if you've been around here, you know what happened there," Broncos defensive end Elvis Dumervil said.

In 2009, they opened the season 6-0, the toast of all things NFL. The Broncos followed with a 2-8 run over the final 10 games to finish 8-8 and out of the playoffs.

They won six consecutive games last season, with Tim Tebow at quarterback, and were the toast of all things football as they went from 2-5 to 8-5 with those six victories. But they lost their last three games of the regular season to barely hang on to a division title.

Then the Patriots made it clear how much distance the Broncos, who went 1-4 in their final five games of the season, really had to cover to be a legitimate playoff team.

This team is far better than those two. It has a likely Hall of Famer at quarterback and a potential defensive player of the year at outside linebacker and, exiting Sunday's game, the Broncos were the only team among the league's top five in total offense and total defense (they are No. 4 in both categories).

So, what's the issue?

Turnovers are the issue. Save for an injury to Peyton Manning, there is no other factor that would derail the Broncos' season more than turnovers.

They still are one of 16 teams that are minus in turnover margin. Only four of those teams have winning records — Denver, Minnesota, Pittsburgh and Indianapolis.

Of those four, only Denver and the Colts are trending up, with the Broncos having won six straight and the Colts having won five of their past six.

The Broncos, at minus-3 in turnover margin, must find a way to get on the other side of the ledger over the next five weeks. They are 3-1 in games where they win the turnover battle, 3-0 when it's even, like Sunday's victory, and are 2-2 when they lose it.

Yes, things are rolling along, but the Broncos won't go on to bigger things if they are at the mercy of a bouncing ball.

### **Key matchup**

The Buccaneers are sporting the bookend look on defense. After Sunday, Tampa Bay's defense was No. 1 in the NFL against the run and last (No. 32) against the pass.

Quarterbacks have topped 300 yards seven times against the Bucs this season, including a 510-yard day by the Giants' Eli Manning in Week 2 to go with the Falcons' Matt Ryan's 353 yards Sunday.

The Buccaneers have surrendered 17 touchdown passes, including four each to Drew Brees and Carson Palmer. The Bucs also have had five games this season with one or no sacks.

If the Broncos can protect Manning and keep the middle of the field clean, there should be some big plays available.

### **Comparison shopping**

They are the Big Three. Three quarterbacks in the NFL have at least 24 touchdown passes and fewer than 10 interceptions — Peyton Manning, Tom Brady and Aaron Rodgers.

Brady has 24 touchdown passes and three interceptions. Manning has 26 touchdown passes and eight interceptions, and Rodgers has 28 touchdown passes and seven interceptions.

---

## **Playing with fire**

Sixteen teams in the NFL, including the Broncos, are on the minus side of the turnover margin. Only four of those teams have winning records and only two are headed the right way at the moment.

Team, turnover margin, record, trending

Denver, -3, 8-3, Has won six in a row.

Minnesota, -5, 6-5, Is 1-3 over past four games.

Pittsburgh, -10, 6-5, Has lost past two games.

Indianapolis, -14, 7-4, Has won five of past six games.

# Broncos' Chris Gronkowski unlikely to take any handoffs this season

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
November 27, 2012

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

**Q:** What ever happened to Chris Gronkowski in all the discussion about running backs to replace Willis (McGahee)? Can't he run a lick?

**A:** Mike, Gronkowski's role in the offense has been clearly defined in the Broncos offense thus far, even more so after the Broncos signed Jacob Hester on Monday morning.

Gronkowski doesn't have a carry this season and likely won't get one any time soon unless there are a few injuries.

Hester is seen by the Broncos as a 235-pound option in the running game. He's played some in a single-back set in his career. And he could see some snaps in a two-back look as well having lined up as a fullback previously in his career too. The Broncos worked out Hester and former Texans running back Steve Slaton last week, but elected to give Hester the available roster spot.

Hester is expected to get some carries in the offense at some point. He'll first have to get acclimated. All of the other Broncos backs — Knowshon Moreno, Ronnie Hillman, Lance Ball and Gronkowski — have been with the team all through the offseason program and training camp, so Hester is well behind them in the ways of the offense.

But he's expected to get a crash course this week. The Broncos would like to play him in a situational role at some point.

The Broncos ran far more two-back looks early in the season and may have to tweak the approach if they want to get more running backs on the field. The team has almost been exclusively a three-wide receiver team over the last two games.

Against the Chargers, the Broncos were in a three-receiver look for every snap of the first half and were in three wide for all but a smattering of snaps in the second half. In the second half against the Chargers, they played a three-tight end look for one play in the third quarter and played two tight ends for two snaps on their last drive.

This past Sunday, in the win over the Chiefs, the team stayed in a three-wide look for all but one play. They played one snap of three tight ends, with eight minutes to go in the game, and on two of the three wide receiver snaps they did play Trindon Holliday as the third receiver and he was lined up in the backfield.

So, while early on this season, indications were it was going to be part of the offensive scheme, the Broncos have essentially removed the two-back look from the offense of late. As a result, Gronkowski has played five snaps on offense in the last four games combined.

He played two snaps on offense against the Bengals, two against the Panthers, one against the Chargers and did not have an offensive snap against the Chiefs. He has been one of the team's most active players on the special teams, having played 16 snaps on teams — third highest total on the team — Sunday in Kansas City.

For the year he's also played 190 special teams snaps overall, behind only linebacker Nate Irving and safety David Bruton. And that was a key component when they traded for Gronkowski, that he could potentially be a foundation player on special teams and play on offense if needed.

They never saw him as a potential ball carrier, at least not more than an occasional change-of-pace carry. And now his opportunities could decrease a little more if Hester is quickly worked into things.

Hester is seen as a run-game option, as well as a potential receiver out of the backfield. And the fact the Broncos spent so much time with him on pass-protection scenarios in his workout last week is an indication he will make an appearance on passing downs, possibly as a single back, as soon as he has a handle on the offense.

Here's how Fox put it Monday:

"(Hester is) a very smart guy, he's a little bit more of a tweener type as far as a bigger, more physical type back, he's very sharp in protections. He gives us a little bit different dimension than the guys we have on our roster at this point."

Fox added that when put through the paces in some of the Broncos' protection schemes, Hester did "an excellent job."

# Broncos' revamped secondary has become primary asset

Tom Kensler  
The Denver Post  
November 27, 2012

The dramatic improvement in the Broncos' secondary began in training camp. With so many new faces in new places, that's just what coaches had hoped for.

"We knew we had to get better in a hurry, so in camp we practiced with an edge," said Broncos strong safety Mike Adams, a ninth-year pro in his first season in Denver. "One guy in the secondary would make a great play in camp, and it would be up to the next guy to try to top that, do something even better. We used a lot of different combinations (in the secondary) and had kind of a competition among ourselves."

A free agent, Adams was signed to fill the spot vacated when Brian Dawkins announced his retirement. Dawkins played his final three seasons in Denver to complete a remarkable 16-year career. There's little argument that Dawkins ranked among pro football's best safeties.

If Adams felt pressure to duplicate what Dawkins did, he didn't show it.

"I just came in here and worked as hard as I could," Adams said. "We all did."

In 2011, the Broncos ranked 18th among the NFL's 32 teams in pass defense with an average of 231.5 passing yards allowed per game. This season, Denver (209.6) ranks fifth.

What's stunning about that improvement is that the Broncos are doing it with new players. Among the current starters in the Broncos' secondary, only veteran all-pro cornerback Champ Bailey was a full-time starter here last year. Early-season starter Tracy Porter and now Chris Harris have replaced 2011 regular Andre Goodman at the cornerback spot opposite of Bailey. Adams filled the slot that opened with Dawkins' departure. And at free safety, second-year pro Rahim Moore has regained the starting job he lost during midseason a year ago to Quinton Carter, who is on injured reserve.

What may have looked like a patchwork secondary has meshed into a cohesive, sure-tackling unit that rarely gets burned by big plays. And there's dependable depth, including cornerbacks Tony Carter and Omar Bolden and safeties David Bruton and Jim Leonhard.

Denver's 13 interceptions are tied with Cleveland for second place in the AFC, behind New England's 14.

The Broncos limited Kansas City to 126 passing yards Sunday in Denver's 17-9 victory at Arrowhead Stadium. Of course, the Broncos' ferocious pass rush is a huge factor in the improved pass defense.

"Those guys in the secondary made some huge hits," Broncos linebacker Wesley Woodyard said Monday. "The secondary has been good from the beginning of the season, and they continue to get better every week. That really shows in their preparation."

Bailey cautions that there still is much work to be done if the Broncos are to reach their goals.

"By watching tape (of the Kansas City game), I felt we leveled off," Bailey said Monday. "We need to continue to grow. We've come a long way from last year, but there's still ways we can get better."

At home Sunday, Denver will face an imposing quarterback in Tampa Bay's Josh Freeman. And the 6-foot-6, 248-pound former Kansas State standout has become more careful and consistent this year. He has thrown only seven interceptions, compared with 22 last season.

"(Freeman) has corrected that," Bailey said, referring to the reduction in turnovers. "He's always had talent. Now he has a lot of weapons, and he's playing with more confidence."

"It's another challenge in this league, as usual."

### **NFL pass defense leaders**

(yards allowed per game)

1. Pittsburgh 165.7
2. San Francisco 187.3
3. Seattle 200.7
4. Arizona 203.7
5. Denver 209.6

# Broncos eye on: The Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Tom Kensler  
The Denver Post  
November 27, 2012

## Eye on ...The Buccaneers

### Tampa Bay at Denver, 2:05 p.m., Sunday, Fox

**For the record:** With a 24-23 home loss Sunday to Atlanta, Tampa Bay slipped to 6-5, four games behind the Falcons (10-1) in the NFC South.

**Streaking:** The loss to Atlanta snapped a four-game winning streak for the Bucs. It was a key swing game. Had Tampa Bay won, the Bucs would have pulled within two games of Atlanta in the divisional standings.

**Who's hot:** Quarterback Josh Freeman. Though not necessarily spectacular, the former Kansas State standout has taken care of the ball this season with 21 touchdown passes and just seven interceptions. That's a marked improvement for the fourth-year pro, who finished 2011 with 22 interceptions and 16 TD passes.

**What's not:** The Bucs' pass defense. Tampa Bay ranks dead last among 32 NFL teams in passing yards allowed (315.5) per game. Atlanta QB Matt Ryan torched Tampa Bay for 353 yards Sunday. Up next: Denver's Peyton Manning.

**Key stat:** It's a bad year for anyone not named Andrew Luck or Robert Griffin III to vie for league rookie of the year honors, but Bucs running back Doug Martin (5-foot-9, 223 pounds) might have been the favorite in other years. The 2012 first-round pick from Boise State ranks fourth among NFL rushers with 1,050 yards.

**FYI:** Under first-year coach Greg Schiano, previously at Rutgers, the Bucs have been better on the road (3-2) than at home (3-3).

**Injury report:** CB Eric Wright (Achilles) was inactive vs. Atlanta, then listed as day to day and now has been suspended for performance-enhancing drugs.

**Playerspeak:** "Denver is a challenge in itself. We've got to get past this game and the nasty feeling ... because (Manning) is a great quarterback. We've got five games left, and to get to the (playoffs), we need a ticket." — Buccaneers linebacker Adam Hayward, to the Tampa Tribune after Sunday's loss to Atlanta.

# Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis planning to return for Broncos game

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 26, 2012

What does Peyton Manning mean to the Broncos?

It means the Broncos have drawn the respect of Baltimore Ravens middle linebacker Ray Lewis.

I share the opinion of many others that Lewis has surpassed Dick Butkus as the greatest middle linebacker in NFL history. Lewis, 37, suffered torn triceps in a game against the Dallas Cowboys on Oct. 14. While the injury is a season-ender for most players, Lewis is going to try and come back in just two months for the Broncos game on Dec. 16 in Baltimore.

Without Peyton Manning, the Broncos have been dreadful in Baltimore, going 0-5 there since the city robbed the old Cleveland Browns and changed their name to the Ravens in 1996. When Manning was with the Indianapolis Colts (who robbed the Baltimore Colts) he was 6-2 lifetime against the Ravens.

The game figures to be big because it could have No. 2 playoff seed implications. The No. 2 seed gets a first-round playoff bye, plus home-field advantage at least to the AFC championship game. Currently, the Ravens have the No. 2 seed with a 9-2 record and the Broncos have the No. 4 seed at 8-3.

# **Pats, 49ers co-Super Bowl favorites; Broncos, Texans next at 5-to-1 odds**

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
November 26, 2012

The wise guys in Las Vegas believe the Broncos are as good, or better than the league's two 10-1 teams.

The Broncos, winners of six in a row, are listed by the Las Vegas Hotel & Casino as 5-to-1 favorites to win the Super Bowl. That ties them with the 10-1 Houston Texans, who suddenly have an injury crisis at linebacker. The 10-1 Atlanta Falcons, with their failed recent playoff history, are next at 7-to-1.

The 8-3 Broncos lost to both Houston and Atlanta earlier this season but the sense is Denver is getting stronger as quarterback Peyton Manning continues to adjust with his new team.

The favorites are New England and San Francisco, each with 7-to-2 odds.

The Baltimore Ravens, who currently have the AFC's No. 2 seed with a 9-2 record, defending Super Bowl champion New York Giants and Green Bay Packers, are tied for the sixth-best odds at 10-to-1.

# Channel 7 overtakes Channel 9 in Denver's morning TV ratings race

Joanne Ostrow  
The Denver Post  
November 26, 2012

Denver's 9News, known for its round-the-clock TV ratings dominance, showed new vulnerability in the just-completed November sweeps, as 7News won the early morning ratings battle.

NBC affiliate KUSA lost its claim to across-the-board kingpin status as ABC affiliate KMGH enjoyed a surge.

7News is No. 1 from 4:30 a.m.-5:30 a.m., is tied with 9News at 5:30 a.m. and is closing the gap from 6-7 a.m.

KUSA's Mark Cornetta countered that the morning race is "neck and neck" and noted that "overall viewing levels have dropped precipitously" at 4:30 a.m.

For many years, KUSA drew more viewers in the morning than all the competing stations combined. As recently as November 2010, 9News scored a 2.8 rating and 25.7 share (or percent of the viewing audience) while KMGH was No. 2 with a 0.7 rating and 6 share. This month, KMGH came out on top.

7News revamped its morning format at the end of the summer under new owner E.W. Scripps.

"It's all about what's happening right now," said KMGH news director Jeff Harris.

At 5 a.m., "7News Now" scored a 0.9 rating and 16 share; "9News Daybreak" followed with a 0.7 rating, 12 share; "CBS4 Morning News" trailed with a 0.4 rating, 6 share.

Channel 7's win might reflect the national disenchantment with NBC's "Today." The effect of "lead-in" programming "can creep backwards for sure," Harris said, "but if anything, Denver is the 'Today' show's last stand. They're still doing fairly well here compared to the rest of the country."

From 7-9 a.m., "Good Morning America" on Channel 7 and "Today" on Channel 9 were tied with a 1.6 rating and 14 share; "CBS This Morning" on Channel 4 lagged with an average 0.8 rating and 7 share.

In the late news battle, 9News wins, with help from NBC, which had its first November win in nine years. On weeknights at 10 p.m., among adults ages 25-54,

KUSA wins with a 4.3 rating and 14.2 share, KMGH is No. 2 at 2.5 and 8.2, and KCNC trails with 2.1 and 7. KDVR's 9 p.m. newscast has a 2.1 rating and 5.8 share. 9News sister station KTVD has a 1.3 rating at 9 p.m.

# NFL playoffs taking shape, and still a month to go

Barry Wilner  
Associated Press  
November 26, 2012

Start the playoffs now.

Well, just about.

More than a month from the end of the NFL season, and nearly every division race is decided. Atlanta and Denver have four-game leads and can earn titles with victories Sunday, although the Falcons also need Tampa Bay to lose coincidentally, to the Broncos, who don't need any help if they win to walk off with the AFC West.

The Falcons (10-1) get an early start by hosting New Orleans on Thursday night. Considering the rivalry, and that Atlanta's only defeat this season has been to the Saints, taking the NFC South crown merely adds to the team's already soaring incentives.

"Ten and one is great, but I'll tell you what I've said since the beginning of the season: We're just jockeying for position," star tight end Tony Gonzalez said. "We just want to put ourselves in the best position, playing the best football. Right around this time is when you want to start jelling as a team and take it on into the playoffs because that's the most important thing."

Denver (8-3) already has swept San Diego, so one more victory puts Peyton Manning back in the playoffs with his new team. Oddly, Manning's Colts didn't always fare so well after early clinchings, but every coach, including his latest one, John Fox, will say that owning a postseason berth overrides any potential negatives.

"We can't influence what everyone else does over the last five games," Fox said. "We know we have to take care of this week and that'll be our mindset."

Manning's mindset is to keep the foot on the accelerator regardless of the standings.

"You certainly always want to get better late in the season," he said. "You either get better, or you get worse and our goal is to get better every week."

Baltimore (9-2) can grab the AFC North crown by beating visiting Pittsburgh and having Cincinnati lose at San Diego. A division race that most projected to go down to the wire barely will get into December if that happens.

The Ravens should be thankful if that occurs, because they are as banged-up as anybody and they wouldn't need to rush defensive leader Ray Lewis back onto the field.

Baltimore also would like nothing more than to spend the entire playoffs at home, where it is 5-0 especially if it can avoid a trip to Houston, where the Texans routed the Ravens 43-13 last month.

Houston (10-1) is in the unusual position of owning the AFC's best record, yet not being in line for an immediate clinching. Even if the Texans win at Tennessee on Sunday and the AFC South runner-up, the Colts, fall at Detroit, the division remains unsolved because Indianapolis and Houston meet twice in the final three weeks.

A wild-card berth is within reach for the Texans, but that's hardly what they're aiming for.

No team wants to trek to Foxborough in the playoffs, even if the Patriots have been eliminated from the Super Bowl chase at home in two of the last three years. New England (8-3) can wrap up the AFC East by beating Miami on Sunday because the Patriots would own all the necessary tiebreakers in the division.

Bill Belichick is not likely to let up a bit even when that happens. Did anyone notice how long Tom Brady was on the field during the 49-19 romp over the Jets on Thanksgiving night, a game decided in the second period?

The only truly close division through 11 games is the NFC North, where Chicago (8-3) has a one-game edge on Green Bay, but has lost to the Packers. The Bears also lost a handful of starters to injuries Sunday, so holding off the Packers could be problematic. Of course, Green Bay also is plagued by injuries to stars such as Clay Matthews, Greg Jennings and Charles Woodson.

That one could go down to the season finales, when the Bears are at Detroit and the Packers visit the Vikings, who are in the wild-card derby. Green Bay is at Chicago on Dec. 16.

Both of last season's NFC championship game teams are in good shape in their divisions, but could be tested before clinching. The Super Bowl champion Giants are two games up on Washington and Dallas, and they are at the Redskins on Monday night. The Skins have a better record within the NFC East and might push New York to the limit if they can win in prime time.

The 49ers' rare tie has not hurt their standing in the standings. At 8-2-1, they lead Seattle by 2 1-2 games, and the Seahawks have dropped all three NFC West contests. The teams meet Dec. 23 at Seattle, but by then it could be too late to make any difference.

# Broncos want to see even more of Moreno

Eddie Pells

Associated Press

November 26, 2012

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — In his first start in 56 weeks, Broncos running back Knowshon Moreno kept the pile moving forward, didn't fumble and didn't get hurt. It was, in his coach's eyes, such a solid performance that Moreno will start again next week, too.

Playing his first game since Sept. 17, and making his first start since Oct. 30, 2011, Moreno rushed for 85 yards on 20 carries in a steady return for the Broncos.

He ran for 30 of those yards while the Broncos were draining all but 14 seconds of the final 6:24 off the clock in their 17-9 win over Kansas City. In other words, Moreno did precisely what the Denver running game is designed to do in 2012 — complement Peyton Manning and help the Broncos salt away games.

"I thought he had a very good performance," coach John Fox said. "It's the way he's going about his business up to this point. Everybody had great confidence in him and he came through for us. We've pretty much had running back by committee as it is, and he'll start out there as the starter."

But up to now, the Broncos, now 8-3 and one win away from clinching the AFC West, have used one back as the featured runner in that committee while everyone else has played supporting roles. Before getting injured in the second quarter last Sunday, Willis McGahee had 173 of the running backs' 257 carries (67 percent), with the rest divided between Ronnie Hillman, Lance Ball and Moreno.

Moreno had only eight of those carries. Since he lost a fumble in Week 2 against the Falcons, he hasn't been seen in a uniform on a game day. In fact, the bulk of his time on the practice field has been spent working with the scout team — hardly the role the 12th pick in the 2009 draft expected to play this far into his career.

"I never felt discouraged," Moreno said. "I knew what my abilities were. At the same time, I was just waiting for my opportunities to come, and that's what I think I did."

Fox said the running back's extended period on the scout team wasn't so much caused by the fumble as the torn ACL he suffered last November in a game in Kansas City.

"It does take time until you're 100 percent," Fox said. "You're cleared to play but you're not exact as you probably think you should be. He needed some time. But he had a great attitude, a great mindset through that period of time. And just by the nature of this league, injuries are part of the game, we knew we'd need him and he went about it right and that's why he looked so good."

Moreno downplayed the knee as a factor in his long-term benching.

"Never a problem," he said. "It's part of the business. It happens. You just go with the punches, wait for your chance to come and that's what I did."

Of the backs left on the roster after McGahee, Moreno was largely considered the one with the biggest upside. He was, after all, a first-round draft pick, with speed, size (5-foot-11, 200) and, now, the experience to handle the all-important blocking assignments that take some running backs a long time to master.

Yet because he hadn't played for two months, there was speculation that Hillman, the rookie, or Ball, the dependable backup, might get the bulk of the carries against the Chiefs.

Turns out, the call went to Moreno, who proved more than ready.

Next, the team finds out how he recovers.

The 20 carries and four receptions marked the most times he's touched the ball since December 2010.

The morning after, Moreno woke up with some aches and pains.

"I'm sore," he said. "But it's a good kind of sore."

Notes: Fox didn't list a single injury in his Monday news conference. QB Peyton Manning was checked out after the back of his helmet got slammed to the turf during a tackle by the Chiefs' Tyson Jackson in the second quarter. Fox said Broncos medical staff cleared Manning at halftime to play the third quarter and there was nothing new to report Monday. ... Fox said newly signed RB Jacob Hester gives the Broncos a different "protection-based" dimension to the running back corps. Hester, who played with the division-rival Chargers for his first four years, said that because the Broncos don't use the fullback much, he expects to play special teams and "we'll go from there." ... The last time the Broncos had an 8-3 record after 11 games was 1991, when they won the division and lost the AFC title game to Buffalo.

# Moving on: Denver Broncos

Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

November 26, 2012

Here are some areas the Denver Broncos need to focus on after a 17-9 road win at the Kansas City Chiefs on Sunday:

**Recap:** It wasn't a pretty win for the Broncos. They were flat and were outplayed by the 1-10 Chiefs at times in the game. But road wins are at a premium in the NFL and Denver will gladly take their sixth straight win. The Broncos are now 8-3 and they can clinch the AFC West next Sunday.

**Biggest area to fix:** Run game. Knowshon Moreno had 85 yards on 20 carries, which is fairly impressive considering he was inactive the past eight games. Denver finished with just 95 yards on 24 carries in its first game without starter Willis McGahee. He is out until the AFC title game if the Broncos make it. Denver needs to find a way to get more dynamic in the run game at times to keep opposing defenses honest.

**Biggest area to build on:** Attitude. Good teams win on days they don't have their 'A' game. That's what Denver did. It has the look of a team that may go deep into the playoffs. A six-game win streak is impressive.

**What to watch for:** The Broncos play their final NFC South opponent Sunday when they host the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. They are a tough opponent and it will be a big challenge for Denver. It must play much more better than it did at Kansas City.

# AFC West playoff scenarios

Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

November 26, 2012

The AFC West title comes down to this: If the Denver Broncos (8-3) win one more game or if the San Diego Chargers (4-7) lose one more, Denver will win the division.

The Oakland Raiders (3-8) have already been eliminated and the Kansas City Chiefs (1-10) are of course out. The Chiefs are on pace for the No. 1 pick in the draft.

This has all been confirmed through the Elias Sports Bureau. Here is its breakdown:

Denver clinches AFC West with a win against Tampa Bay or a San Diego loss against Cincinnati on Sunday. If both Denver and San Diego finish 8-8, the Broncos own the tiebreaker due to a head-to-head sweep.

Oakland is now eliminated from winning the division. If both Denver and Oakland finished 8-8, they would split the head-to-head matchup and would be tied with 4-2 division records. But Denver has a better record against common opponents (7-5 to 6-6). This is the next tiebreaker for division tie, followed by conference record.

If there is a three-way tie between Denver, San Diego and Oakland, Denver would hold the tiebreaker because of the better to head-to-head record.

# As we hit home stretch, suspense reigns in NFC playoff chase

Peter King  
Sports Illustrated  
November 26, 2012

*Prelude to a diss: In the last 52 weeks, the Packers have met the Giants three times. Green Bay has allowed 35, 37 and 38 points, and an average of 419 yards a game, and nine Eli Manning touchdown passes. Time for defensive coordinator Dom Capers to figure out a way to cover the Giants deep. Time for Charles Woodson and Clay Matthews to heal. Time for a shaky line to protect Aaron Rodgers. Time for GM Ted Thompson to find reinforcements for the line.*

\*\*\*

Now we enter the cruel month of December with six NFC teams separated by one game fighting for the last playoff spot. (And if Green Bay doesn't wake up after that five-alarm fire of a loss Sunday night to the Giants, the Packers might give away the five seed.) In the AFC, we're going to sleep through the playoff race, because it looks like it'll be 7-4 Indianapolis, 6-5 Pittsburgh and 6-5 Cincinnati fighting for two spots, and the way things look now, none is a threat to the AFC elite.

But there is an interesting subplot in the AFC, which Ray Rice raised to me last night, before getting on a giddy Ravens charter to return home from the impossible 16-13 overtime win at San Diego.

"I don't know what kind of medicine the Steelers will put Ben Roethlisberger on this week," Rice said, "but they're going to give him something."

Pittsburgh-Baltimore, the rematch, Sunday at The Big Crabcake. (I think that's Chris Berman's invention, so I'll give him naming rights.) And does anyone think the Steelers stand a chance of winning in Baltimore without Roethlisberger, who missed his second game with a dislocated first rib (last week's column explains how dangerous that injury can be, and typically the injury would take more than a month to heal) Sunday? Next Sunday, he'll be 20 days out from the dislocation. I can't see him playing, and when I look at the Steelers' schedule, I'd hope he could play the last four, because the schedule's advantageous to Pittsburgh compared to the Colts and Bengals down the stretch. The Steelers finish at Dallas, then Cincinnati and Cleveland at home. Indy has Houston twice in the last three weeks. The Bengals close with the Steelers and Ravens. Logic says Roethlisberger for the last three games, four if the Steelers are lucky, could still win the sixth seed.

Now for the NFC. It's bizarro world. Here's how I handicap the six-team race:

1. Washington (5-6). The 'Skins and Bucs are playing the best among the contenders, and if Washington can win one of the next two (Giants Monday, Ravens to follow), the last three weeks (at Cleveland, at Philly, Dallas) are manageable.

How great would it be to see Robert Griffin III in a Wild Card game at Soldier Field, getting chased through the snow by Urlacher and Briggs?

2. Tampa Bay (6-5). Watching the Bucs the last month, I keep thinking no one wants to play them. Greg Schiano's instilled a toughness in them, and offensive coordinator Mike Sullivan has obviously worked wonders with a rejuvenated Josh Freeman. The problem's the schedule. Bucs are at Denver, at New Orleans and at Atlanta in December. The only hope with that tough slate is maybe the Falcons have nothing to play for in Week 17, and Julio Jones and Matt Ryan sit.

3. Seattle (6-5). Seahawks have the tiebreaker right now, but that can disappear if Richard Sherman does. (See below.) Russell Wilson has been efficient in his rookie season. Now he'll need to be explosive, even more than in his last four weeks (nine touchdowns, one pick) to make up for what may be a yawning gap in the secondary.

4. New Orleans (5-6). The loss to San Francisco was logical, as well as disappointing. New Orleans now has to go 4-1, minimum, against a murderer's row slate (at Atlanta Thursday, at the Giants, Tampa Bay, at Dallas, Carolina) in the next month. All things are possible with Drew Brees, of course, but maybe not with a defense that just doesn't pressure the quarterback enough.

5. Minnesota (6-5). Can Adrian Peterson play quarterback? Green Bay twice, Houston on the road, and Chicago in the last month. I just don't see it.

6. Dallas (5-6). Schedule doesn't matter to me. The Cowboys haven't played well since September. Why start now?

### **So here's how I see the Wild Card round on the first weekend of January:**

**NFC (Byes: Atlanta and San Francisco):** Green Bay at the Giants (Saturday night, NBC), Washington at Chicago (early Sunday, FOX).

**AFC (Byes: Houston and New England):** Cincinnati at Baltimore (Saturday afternoon, NBC), Indianapolis at Denver (late Sunday, CBS).

I repeat: Andrew Luck at Peyton Manning. The Irsay Bowl. I am reminded of a quote Bill Parcells uttered every other week in the four seasons I covered the Giants for *Newsday* in the '80s: "Sometimes God is playing in these games."

Now for the news of Week 12:

**The best cover corner in the game is in limbo this morning.** Adam Schefter broke the news last night just after the Seahawks' charter lifted off from South Florida to go home from a loss at Miami: Seattle cornerbacks Richard Sherman and Brandon Browner were handed four-game suspensions for violating the league performance-enhancing drugs policy. They'll appeal, and be available for the Seahawks until their appeals are heard and ruled on. Sherman has taken over the title of top cover corner in the game from the IR'd Darrelle Revis, and he should be available to play Sunday in Chicago, as the Seahawks try to stay alive in the playoff hunt.

"This ... issue will be resolved soon and the truth will come out. Not worried," Sherman tweeted early this morning when the Seahawks landed at SeaTac. He should be. The likelihood is he'll eventually have to serve four games, and if it's not this year while the appeal plays out, it'll be next year, which would put Seattle in a major hole early in 2013. As it is now, pass defense has been a major reason why Seattle's the sixth NFC seed through 11 games. The best secondary in football has allowed just 59 percent completions and a 75.4 passer rating. What we don't know now is how long the appeals process will take, but since the news broke, the league isn't going to want it to linger. Seattle's December: at Chicago, Arizona, at Buffalo, San Francisco, St. Louis. Looks like 3-2 with Sherman, 2-3 without him to me.

**Fourth-and-29 will go down in Ravens history.** I've watched the play that saved the game for the Ravens 15 times now, and what I marvel at is what I asked Rice about last night: "Did you know exactly how far you had to go for the first down?" Because it looked like Rice knew exactly how far he had to go to save the game for the Ravens. The situation: Chargers up 13-10, 1:59 to play, fourth quarter. Baltimore ball, 4th-and-29 at the Ravens' 37. Rice slipped out after staying in for a second to help protect Joe Flacco. "I was the check-down guy," Rice said. "I didn't expect Joe to come to me." But Flacco did, dumping it to Rice one yard past the line of scrimmage. That's some pressure right there, asking Rice to elude eight Chargers in coverage and somehow make 28 yards on his own through the San Diego gauntlet.

Again: Did Rice know where to aim for -- namely the San Diego 34? "I saw the yard marker," Rice told me, "so I knew how far it was. I just knew somehow I had to get there. And when I took off, I saw them overpursuing me, so I cut to the left. I think I must have found another gear. And then I got that great block from Anquan [Boldin]." Which looked like a classic crackback block that should have been penalized; Boldin blindsided Eric Weddle, who had to be removed from the game, just as Rice dove for the Chargers 34. He made it ... Or did he?

"There was a lot being said out there, but I didn't pay attention," said Rice, while the spot of the play was examined and re-examined and replayed. The more I looked, the more I thought Rice's knee didn't come down until the ball was at approximately the 34-yard line. If Gene Steratore and his officiating crew erred in the spot, it wasn't by more than a foot. No outrage to me. The play kept the game-tying drive alive, and the Ravens won 14 minutes into overtime. When I've been around the Ravens in the last couple of years, I've always gotten the impression that Ray Lewis was preparing to pass the mantel of team leadership to Rice. Lewis loves Rice, and this play shows why he does. A play that had no business getting made got made by Rice, and it could be the play that makes the difference between a first-round bye and a veteran team having to play a wild-card game. How incredible would it be for that extra week of rest allowing another week of healing for Lewis -- and enabling him to come back from his arm injury to take the field in mid-January, maybe for the final time?

**Kaepernick was the right man at the right time, apparently.** Colin Kaepernick didn't have the wild success Sunday in New Orleans that he had last Monday against Chicago at Candlestick Park; it would have misguided to think he could. But

the second-year man from Nevada, Jim Harbaugh's hand-picked quarterback of the future, played like Harbaugh would want him to play. "Just go out and be yourself," Harbaugh told him before the game.

Two things that impressed me: Kaepernick turned it over once, and led the Niners into scoring position five times (two touchdowns, three field goal chances) in 10 San Francisco possessions ... and he did all of that while running the offense in a silent snap count for all 56 offensive snaps. "It was difficult our first few drives because of the noise and the energy here, but then it was just football," Kaepernick told me after the game.

Impressive thing No. 2: Alex Smith was an ally, not a disgruntled employee, throughout the game. "It's got to be tough," said Kaepernick, "but Alex is so good to me. Our relationship is still the same as it's been. Every time I came off the field, he'd say to me, 'Did you see this?' Or, 'Did you see that?' Alex is a great guy." Apparently.

The hidden advantage in the choice Harbaugh made is that now he knows he can win with two quarterbacks. One more mobile with a stronger downfield arm, weapons Harbaugh had on display in the Dome; Kaepernick completed throws of 26, 40 and 45 yards. The other is as efficient and smart a player as a coach could hope for, in Smith. I mean, who has a backup quarterback leading the league in completion percentage, with a rating over 100? All over a deep roster, Harbaugh has almost an embarrassment of riches -- just two seasons after the 49ers were an embarrassment.

**The low-block business.** I reported Friday night on NBC Sports Network that the NFL Competition Committee will consider a move the league very much wants to see happen -- the banning of all blocks below the waist for the first time in the NFL's 93-year history.

Reaction was swift. Two coaches with an offensive leaning told me they thought it'd be the death knell for running games as we know them, because so many teams teach pulling guards and backs to chop down defenders by diving and rolling at their feet; they also said smaller backs who have to blitz-protect would be at a disadvantage -- the diminutive Darren Sproles is a good blitz man, and chops down rushers much bigger than he -- against defensive ends and outside linebackers. But the defenders? They love it. "That'd be great," said Houston linebacker Connor Barwin. "It'd be the first thing this league has done to protect defensive players in years."

Last season, Buffalo receiver Stevie Johnson dove at Kansas City safety Eric Berry's knees, causing torn ligaments and Berry to be out for the year. On Sunday, Johnson told me: "That's cool. I'd be in favor of them making that rule. I stopped doing it anyway, because I didn't want to knock guys out for the year. That's not the kind of player I am, and this is a brotherhood. We don't want to be hurting each other." I don't think the league will get the votes to ban all blocks below the waist in 2013, but I do think downfield blocks away from the play, such as Johnson's on Berry, have a good chance to be banned.

**Dot dot dot things.** Until I saw Rice's incredible fourth-down conversion, I thought the play of the day was Stevie Johnson's strip and recovery late in the fourth quarter on Colts safety Tom Zbikowski after Zbikowski picked off Ryan Fitzpatrick. Smart play for Johnson, who had to aim for the strip and make the strip, all while being stiff-armed by an amateur boxer, which Zbikowski has been. "At the time, we're driving, and it's pretty much the season on the line," Johnson said. "So I did what you'd do in the backyard -- you just try any way possible to knock the ball away. I'm like, 'Where's that football at?' And it bounced right up to me. That never happens." ... If Hines Ward were still a Steeler, he'd make running backs Rashard Mendenhall, Chris Rainey, Jonathan Dwyer and Isaac Redman (six fumbles at Cleveland Sunday, four recovered by the Browns) walk around the facility lugging a football tight to their chests. An eight-TO day? Inexcusable ...

Mike Holmgren told Kevin Harlan of FOX this weekend that Sunday was his last day with the Browns, an odd way to end one's club presidency. Sounds very much like Holmgren will return to his big digs in Seattle and hope he gets an offer to coach again. He's 64, two years younger than Tom Coughlin, and may want to erase the way things ended for him in Seattle, and in Cleveland. In Holmgren's last three coaching seasons in Seattle, he was 23-25. In his three seasons as Browns president, the team was 12-31 ... Six starters hurt for the Bears. A month ago, I thought the NFC North was the best division, top to bottom, in football. Now it's the War of Attrition Division ... Any doubt about the wisdom of Mike Brown playing hardball with Carson Palmer in 2011 got erased Sunday. The Bengals have the better quarterback for the long-term, to be sure, in Andy Dalton and building-block cornerback Dre Kirkpatrick (from the first-round pick acquired from Oakland in 2012), not to mention a pick that appears to be around 35 or 37 in the upcoming draft, also from Oakland. "Hopefully everyone believes the Bengals did the right thing," Dalton told me after the Bengals' 34-10 rout of Oakland and Palmer. "I think they do. I think my teammates do. We went to the playoffs last year, and now we're playing complete games and should have a good chance to go back this year." More importantly: Palmer didn't want to be in Cincinnati. Dalton craved it, because it was a place that would give him a starting job from day one.

### **The Deep End**

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

**If the last six weeks of the 2012 season play out similarly to the first 10, the defensive story of the season could well be two sophomore defensive players: Texans defensive end J.J. Watt and Broncos linebacker Von Miller.**

Their play has been so outstanding that the question might not be which deserves the Defensive Player of the Year award, but are either worthy of the MVP? I asked Neil Hornsby of ProFootballFocus.com to break down their play to try to answer those questions:

**Playing Time:** Watt has played 89 percent of Houston's defensive snaps and Miller 90 percent for Denver. Watt has been so dominant that teams have had to start

game-planning just to stop him. So the Texans have moved him from his favored position on the left. In 2011 he was on the left 85 percent of his snaps, but it's 74 percent this year, as the Texans have shifted Watt around to counter blocking schemes. Miller has actually spent more time on his preferred left side (72 percent, up from 67 percent last year) because his position and style of play means he is far harder to scheme against. EDGE: Even.

**Run Defense:** Watt plays the run better than anyone else at his position (including defensive tackles). His 35 defensive stops in run defense (tackles which are defeats for the offense) are four more than anyone in football. In productivity terms that gives Watt a stop on 18 percent of running downs; the next best is Justin Smith at 12 percent. Miller can't match those pure numbers (he's 12th in the same stat against outside linebackers) but that's not his game. His position on the field distorts those figures. It's much fairer to say when he makes a play in run defense, it's usually a big one; the average gain on his 24 tackles in run defense? Minus-1 yard. EDGE: Watt.

**Pass Rush:** Miller is the most devastating pass rusher at any position in the NFL. There is no one on offense who can consistently match up to him; offensive linemen are not quick enough to counter his acceleration. The 49ers' brilliant outside 'backer, Aldon Smith, has 43 quarterback disruptions this year on 292 pass rushes. Miller has 61 on 297, 41 percent more on nearly the same number of attempts. Watt's base numbers are excellent too (49 quarterback disruptions from 402 rushes). They come a close second in productivity terms to the Bengals' Geno Atkins, who has 40 QB disruptions on 300 pass rush snaps. EDGE: Miller

**Coverage:** Well, Watt doesn't cover, so this is an odd stat for him (he's dropped in coverage only 14 times), but there has to be a way to count his passes swatted away. He has tipped 13 passes at the line of scrimmage, more than twice as many as the next player. Since 2008, the most we'd had in a full season before this was in 2009, when Johnny Jolly batted down 10. Watt is probably redefining the way in which linemen will be taught to play. Pass coverage is currently seen as a weakness in Miller's game. He's average in that regard, but compared to the other facets of his game it's clearly not as well developed. Having said that, he's only dropped in coverage on 92 plays so far. EDGE: Watt.

**In Summary:** Many players on defense are having great years, but no one is as far ahead of the competition as J.J. Watt and Von Miller. Just as Darrelle Revis did in the early part of 2011, they are redefining what's achievable at their positions.

**Who's better? Flip a coin. Good thing there are five games left for each, so one can win the award they both now deserve.**

### **Fine Fifteen**

**1. New England (8-3).** Pats have averaged 47.5 points per game the last four weeks. Tom Brady's on pace for 35 touchdowns and four interceptions. Occasionally they show signs of being defensively competent. And Thursday, they won by 30 without their two best offensive linemen, best tight end and best defensive end. How they have three losses, I have no idea.

**2. San Francisco (8-2-1).** We will never question you again, Jim Harbaugh. Well, at least maybe not until next week.

**3. Houston (10-1).** I appreciate the fact that their defensive leaders -- Connor Barwin, to me on Thursday -- says they're ticked off about giving up 983 yards in five days. They should be. But to play 10 quarters in five days and win both games deep in overtime ... that erases any negative in my mind.

**4. Denver (8-3).** Romeo Crennel always has a good game plan for Peyton Manning. One problem. Denver's defense is for real.

**5. Atlanta (10-1).** At the risk of sounding like a broken record: Michael Turner's output Sunday in the 24-23 win at Tampa: 16 touches, 30 yards; Jacquizz Rodgers' output: 12 touches, 79 yards. I keep thinking I'm watching a different game than the Atlanta coaches.

**6. Baltimore (9-2).** Ravens down 10 with six minutes to play in San Diego. Win in overtime. Something to be said for winning late on the road, ugly though it was.

**7. New York Giants (7-4).** The best performance in the league after a bye this year, and it's not close. What a strange team this is, struggling as much as it was, then battering a strong offensive Packers' team that came in with a five-game winning streak.

**8. Chicago (8-3).** It's vital the Bears somehow find a way to keep Jay Cutler from getting mashed to pieces behind that line, because he's the only quarterback who can get chased and whacked around and still find a way to complete 74 percent of his throws.

**9. Tampa Bay (6-5).** The more I see the Bucs, the more I think they might do what the Giants of 2007 or 2011 did -- get hot late and get on a January run that could take them very far. Not saying I think this will happen. Just saying it wouldn't surprise me if the Bucs were the NFC's sixth seed and made some big noise.

**10. Green Bay (7-4).** Giants beat Packers 38-10. Packers beat Texans 42-24. That means, of course, if the Giants and Texans played, the final would be New York 46, Houston 0.

**11. Cincinnati (6-5).** Won three in a row by a combined score of 93-29. At this time of the year, that qualifies as a team worthy of being in the Fine Fifteen.

**12. Washington (5-6).** I don't have to take a poll to tell you that no team in its right mind wants to play Washington right now, not after Robert Griffin III put up 69 points in the last two weeks with his arm (mostly) and legs. And teams might feel that way about the Redskins for a long time, which wasn't the case before he arrived.

**13. New Orleans (5-6).** Never thought I'd see the 2012 Saints conjure up memories of the bygone days of September. Good thing they don't play the 49ers very often.

**14. Indianapolis (7-4).** If the Colts go 2-3 in December, they're likely a playoff team.

**15. Seattle (6-5).** I liked Seattle's upstart playoff chances until Sunday, when they looked nothing like a playoff team.

## **The Award Section**

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

**T.Y. Hilton, WR/PR, Indianapolis.** Hilton's 75-yard punt return started the scoring for the Colts in their 20-14 win over Buffalo at home Sunday, and his 8-yard touchdown pass from Andrew Luck finished it. In between, he got knocked into next week by a hit on his second punt return that certainly should have finished him for the day, but Hilton returned to return three more punts and make the catch that allowed the Colts to escape with their seventh win. After the game, I asked him how he felt. "Fine. Perfect," he said. I said to him: "What hurts right now?" And he said, "Nothing. I am fine." Well, if that were true Sunday night, I doubt it'll be true this morning, unless Hilton's made of Silly Putty.

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

**J.J. Watt, DE, Houston.** Another week, another great game in the insane season of J.J. Watt. In the 34-31 overtime win at Detroit, Watt had three sacks, two passes deflected (he now has 13), one tackle for loss and two quarterback pressures. Amazing for a player who started his career as a tight end at Central Michigan and continued it at Wisconsin to return to Michigan as the best 3-4 defensive end in the NFL ... at age 23.

**Janoris Jenkins, CB, St. Louis.** His 39- and 36-yard interception returns for touchdown made him the first rookie to return two picks for scores in 52 years, and made coach Jeff Fisher a genius for benching him two weeks ago at San Francisco for violating team rules and having to run the stadium stairs before the game at Candlestick Park. Watch how he baited quarterback Ryan Lindley of the Cardinals, especially on the first pick-6, and you'll see why the Rams took a chance on the troubled college star in the second round of the draft.

### ***Special Teams Player of the Week***

**Justin Tucker, K, Baltimore.** Big deal. A 38-yard field goal. Or two. Well, I say it is a big deal. The Ravens trailed 13-10 in San Diego with four seconds left when Tucker, the rookie free agent from the University of Texas, came on and kicked a 38-yard field goal to send the game to overtime. Then, with 67 seconds left in overtime, he trotted out for another 38-yarder. Drilled the game-winner too. No doubt about either one, both straight down Broadway. The Ravens, who will be playing in January, look to have a playoff-caliber kicker they won't have to worry about in the big spots.

**Leon Washington, KR, Seattle.** His 98-yard touchdown return on the kickoff after Miami tied the game at 14 gave the Seahawks a 21-14 lead midway through the fourth quarter. The eighth kickoff-return touchdown in his career was among the

most electrifying, and should have given Seattle an edge for the sixth playoff seed in the NFC, but Miami rebounded to win 24-21.

**Rafael Bush, SS, New Orleans.** How about this? An "R. Bush" for New Orleans who wears number 25? Reggie, however, wouldn't be playing on the punt team, which Rafael was midway through the second quarter of a 7-7 game with the 49ers. Bush sprinted downfield to cover a Thomas Morestead punt, and as Ted Ginn Jr. muffed it (sound familiar, Niner fans?) Bush reached in and grabbed it, setting up a short, 11-yard touchdown drive. Bush and Courtney Roby have been terrific on punts this year, and are big reasons Morestead is having such a great net-punting season.

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

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

**Will Montgomery, C, Washington.** A standout all season for Washington, he's the No. 2 rated center in the game this year, according to ProFootballFocus.com rankings. Montgomery kept Robert Griffin III clean all game Thursday and was a force in the running game as well. The Redskins did a very smart thing in the offseason when they knew they were in cap jail but also knew they wanted to keep this promising 29-year-old center as the centerpiece for a rebuilt line to protect RGIII. They signed him to an extension through the 2016 season, guaranteeing only \$2.5 million of his deal; Montgomery will earn \$12 million over the next four years, a good deal for a center who earned it, and a good deal for the team paying him.

### ***Coaches of the Week***

**Jim Harbaugh, head coach, San Francisco.** Harbaugh proved last week he's got some Bill Belichick in him. As a coach, you have to be able to tune out the majority of the public and the media and even some in your own organization who think you're making a mistake if you firmly believe you're doing the right thing and you trust in your players to know you're doing the right thing. Such was the case when he chose Colin Kaepernick as his starting quarterback over Alex Smith, who was playing at a Pro Bowl level.

Kaepernick went out and played better than Drew Brees at the Superdome Sunday, and Harbaugh was proven correct, for the week, anyway. Harbaugh's brash, and rubs some people the wrong way. He's also the brightest star, by far, of all the young coaches in the game today. Who would have imagined, approaching the last month of the regular season of his second season in the league, that he'd have but five career regular season losses?

**Bruce Arians, interim coach, Indianapolis.** Arians raised his eye-popping record to 6-2 with the victory over Buffalo. What I liked was his message to the team following the 59-24 drubbing by the Patriots last week: "Your job is to play well

enough to earn the right to go back to Foxboro and show you can beat this team." Arians has a good grip on a team he was never supposed to coach in the first place, and he's showing a cadre of owners and general managers who will be in search of a new coach in January that he deserves their attention.

### **Goat of the Week**

**Ron Winter, referee, Pittsburgh-Cleveland game.** As horrible as the Steelers were Sunday -- and turning the ball over eight times is sufficient to lose 100 percent of the time -- Winter made an incredible non-call with two minutes left in the fourth quarter and Cleveland trying to run out a 20-14 lead. Cleveland running back Trent Richardson ran into a clogged line, got stoned and stripped at the same time, and the Steelers jumped on the fumble. Though no whistle was audible, and Winter was staring at the play as it happened, no fumble was ruled, and the Steelers lost a last legitimate chance to catch up. You just can't miss those calls.

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

"Everybody is always doubting us because we give them reason to do that."

-- *Giants defensive end Osi Umenyiora, after New York broke a two-game losing streak with a 38-10 domination of the Packers Sunday night in New Jersey.*

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

"This was his second career start? He's been playing like he's been in there forever."

-- *San Francisco wide receiver Mario Manningham, after Colin Kaepernick's second start, and second win, at New Orleans on Sunday.*

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

"The runner's buttocks was down on the ground before the ball came loose. Therefore, it's Indianapolis ball at the 47-yard line. The clock should be reset to 13:22."

-- *Referee Ed Hochuli, explaining why he reversed a call that originally had Indianapolis fumbling and Buffalo recovering in the second quarter Sunday.*

And if you weren't watching, yes, announcer Marv Albert did chuckle when Hochuli said "buttocks."

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

"I know the rule: You can't challenge on a turnover or a scoring play, but I was so mad that I overreacted. I had the flag in my hand before he even scored because he was obviously down. It's my fault. I overreacted in that situation and cost us a touchdown."

-- *Detroit coach Jim Schwartz, who threw a challenge flag after a Houston touchdown he wanted to challenge Thursday, preventing the challenge from taking*

*place because of the dumb NFL rule that negates an automatic replay if a coach throws the flag after a scoring play or turnover. The league, thankfully, will erase the non-replay of the challenge by 2013, and maybe sooner.*

### **Quote of the Week V**

"He writes down everything. 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."

**-- Denver coach John Fox, to Sam Farmer of the Los Angeles Times, in a story about Peyton Manning's road back to the NFL (I recommend it.)**

### **Stat of the Week**

Bill Belichick won his 200th game (regular season and postseason) Thursday night, in his 307th NFL game. As a means of comparison, let's measure Belichick versus the great Chuck Noll of the Steelers, who needed 347 games to reach win number 200 and who coached 366 games in all. Now we're getting some sense of where Belichick will rate in the pantheon, with his three Super Bowl wins and 65 percent winning percentage. Look at the numbers: He could match the great Noll in career victories in 50 fewer games. Comparing the two:

<b>Coach</b>	<b>Years</b>	<b>Reg. Season W-L (Pct.)</b>	<b>Playoff W-L (Pct.)</b>	<b>Total W-L (Pct.)</b>	<b>Titles</b>
Noll	23	193-148-1 (.566)	16-8 (.667)	209-156-1 (.572)	4
Belichick	18	183-100-0 (.647)	17-7 (.708)	200-107-0 (.651)	3

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

For two men so inextricably connected in Cincinnati Bengals history, it's notable that the first time Carson Palmer and Andy Dalton met was on the field at Paul Brown Stadium Sunday.

The extent of their conversation after the game went something like this, per Dalton:

Dalton: "Stay healthy."

Palmer: "You too. Good luck."

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

Not mine. Ian Eagle's. What the CBS football/YES Network basketball/Dial Global sports radio football announcer has done in the past week:

**Sunday, Nov. 18:** Flew from St. Louis to New York after doing Jets-Rams game for CBS. Arrived at his New Jersey home at 11:15 p.m.

**Monday:** Flew from Newark to Los Angeles at 8 p.m.

**Tuesday:** Did the Nets-Lakers game in Los Angeles for YES Network.. Flew on Nets' charter with team from Los Angeles to San Francisco. In bed by 2 a.m. Wednesday.

**Wednesday:** Did the Nets-Warriors game in Oakland for YES Network. Flew on Nets' charter with team from San Francisco to Newark after the game. In bed in his New Jersey home by 9 a.m. Thursday.

**Thursday:** Did the Patriots-Jets game for Dial Global Radio. Home by midnight.

**Friday:** Did the Clippers-Nets game from Brooklyn for YES Network. Home by midnight.

**Saturday:** Flew to San Diego at 8:20 a.m. Did CBS production meeting with Chargers at noon at their team facility.

**Sunday:** Did the Ravens-Chargers game for CBS at 1 p.m. Pacific Time. Returned to San Diego hotel. Rested. Flew to Newark at 9:30 p.m., with the redeye due to deliver him home just after dawn today.

"At one point on the flight to San Diego Saturday," Eagle reported Sunday night, "I napped for about seven minutes and woke up and I thought I was flying to Buffalo to do a Bills game. Then again, I also thought at one point I was an orthodontist."

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

"Manning family has 750 combined @NFL TD passes. Peyton (425), Eli (200), Archie (125). #justwow"

-- @NFLhistory, NFL Record and Fact Book editor Jon Zimmer Sunday night, as Eli Manning passed Phil Simms for first on the Giants' all-time passing touchdowns list.

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

"From Steve Kelley: 'It's going to be hard to tell when the crowd starts leaving.' "

-- @dannystoneil, the Seattle Times' Seahawks' beat man, reporting from the press box at the Seattle-Miami game in South Florida, quoting his buddy and columnist Kelley about the sparse crowd at the game.

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

"I HATE LOSING!"

-- @TerrellePryor, after the 3-8 Raiders lost their fourth straight game, in Cincinnati on Sunday.

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

**1. I think this is what I liked about Week 12:**

a. The Washington offensive line, which I have criticized often. Great job enabling Robert Griffin III to make his magic. What a treat a rested Griffin and his mates will be against the Giants, at home, next Monday night.

b. Tom Brady, on pace for 35 touchdown passes and four interceptions. Is it possible he's getting better with age?

c. Adam Merchant, the 15-year-old Make-A-Wish kid who pumped up the Giants with a Friday speech to the team and then appeared in their locker room after that 38-10 rout of the Packers.

d. And the Giants, for making Merchant's appearance -- and his dreams -- come true.

e. Catch of the 1 o'clock Sunday games: Cleveland tight end Benjamin Watson's full-extension dive with Lawrence Timmons in coverage.

f. The NFL, for doling out approximately \$187 million in retirement, health and pension benefits over the past 12 months to former players ... and for its 228 approved Parkinson's, ALS and dementia cases, to which \$20.5 million has been given since the league's "88 Plan" was kicked off five years ago. Much work remains to be done. Much work is being done.

g. Ahmad Brooks and Donte Whitner, for their pick-6s of Drew Brees. San Francisco's defense is the best in football, and those two unsung players are big reasons.

h. Jay Cutler. If we define "value" in "Most Valuable Player" as someone whose loss would totally deflate and screw up his team, then Cutler has to be in the running for the award.

i. Brandon Marshall, for his sixth straight season of 1,000 yards receiving.

j. The two bald Colts cheerleaders, particularly ringleader Megan Meadors, the former Miss Indiana. It has to be a pretty big deal for a woman who makes her living at least part due to her looks to shave her head with a jillion cameras and eyes watching. But raising \$22,000 for leukemia research, which the cueballing look ensured, was worth it to the women.

k. Chuck Pagano, for touching so many Hoosiers. When he heard about Meadors' plan to shave her head during the Colts' game, he texted Meadors. "It was a pretty lengthy text," she said. "The gist of it was that he was thankful for all the support from me and the fans in Indianapolis. He said he came to Indianapolis hoping to build a team based on service and community. He was proud of the way everyone has responded and he wished me and my family a happy Thanksgiving."

l. Who wouldn't want to play for that guy?

m. Chad Henne, for leading a Jags win, their first at home this year. He'd have to royally mess up to not be the Jacksonville quarterback heading into the 2013 offseason.

n. Julio Jones, whose six catches for 147 yards and a vital touchdown for the 10-1 Falcons came on a bum ankle. Jones is making the 2011 megatrade by Thomas Dimitroff look better every week.

**o. Knowshon Moreno, who came off the scout team with the injury to Willis McGahee to grind out 85 yards in Kansas City and help the Broncos overcome the stubborn Chiefs defense.**

p. C.J. Spiller, 14 for 107. He's electric every week.

q. Indy's defense. In winning five of its last six, the D has allowed 13, 13, 20, 10 and 13 points in the five wins.

**2.** I think this is what I didn't like about Week 12:

a. The Steeler running backs. All four fumbled in what was easily the most justified team loss of Sunday.

b. Rex Ryan's logic after the 49-19 loss to New England Thursday. He tells his coordinators he doesn't want them to play Tim Tebow, then says Tebow (two broken ribs) was "100 percent available." I'm not getting that. Wonder if Woody Johnson is.

c. Great Carson Palmer trade, Raiders. I like the headline I saw somewhere during the night about Bengals assistant Hue Jackson "taking the high road" after the Bengals wiped out the team he head-coached last year, Oakland. What? Jackson got fired from the Raiders, in part because he overpaid (first- and second-round picks for Palmer) for a quarterback and went 4-6 after acquiring him. What high road exactly would he be taking?

d. Worst pass interference call I've seen in a while, on Antoine Winfield of the Vikings, saying he interfered with the clear interferer, Brandon Marshall, in the end zone at Chicago.

e. Wait! Even worse was Randy Moss yanking down Malcolm Jenkins in full view of the world in the end zone at New Orleans, and a blind official seeing nothing. Horrendous non-call.

f. Indy cornerback Darius Butler, for biting on the Stevie Johnson double-move, giving up a huge gainer.

g. Catch the easy interception, Asante Samuel. But I can't kill Samuel too much, because he played hurt down the stretch when his Falcons desperately needed him.

h. Josh Freeman's overthrow of a wide-open Mike Williams.

i. The Norv Turners, scoring three points in the last 59 minutes of another crushing loss.

j. The Packers, for whatever that was at the Meadowlands Sunday night.

**3.** I think the league overreacted, and that's putting it mildly, by censoring Rich Eisen's interview with Oscar favorite Bradley Cooper and yanking it from Eisen's

Thanksgiving special on NFL Network. "The segment was pulled because the movie included content related to gambling on NFL games," the statement from NFL Network said.

Cooper stars in *Silver Linings Playbook*, a movie about a bipolar Philadelphia Eagles fan who returns home to live with his parents to help him handle his mental illness. His father, played by Robert DeNiro, is a part-time, small-time bookie. None of Eisen's questions, and none of Cooper's answers, concerned gambling on NFL games.

Three points. First, Eisen's interview with Cooper would have gotten zero attention in this column and scant attention elsewhere had it aired, but banning it pushed it to the top of the *New York Post's* infamous Page Six gossip column Friday morning and made the NFL look small and paranoid.

Second, Cooper is one of the biggest stars in America. Eisen's podcasts and specials get some big stars talking about how much they love the NFL. I'm sure Cooper talked about growing up loving the Eagles, and building the brand that Eisen is trying to build, of the NFL as a paragon of entertainment that people in show business and politics and power all love. Now see if Cooper wants to do anything with the NFL again.

Third, the NFL can't sanitize life. I would bet (oops; bad word choice) that a father or two of a prominent NFL player is an inveterate gambler, and puts down money on NFL games. I bet NFL players go to Vegas in the offseason and put a few bucks down on horses and games. It's America.

**4.** I think, by the way, there isn't a more pro-NFL guy on TV than Eisen, and he can do it without seeming like a total house man. That's a great skill to have. And what the NFL has done, essentially, is to say to Eisen, who is the league's Brian Williams: We don't trust you. If I'm Eisen, I'm furious.

**5.** I think these sound like the top five college coaching candidates for NFL head coaching jobs, per chats with front office people in the last two weeks (in order):

1. Chip Kelly, Oregon
2. David Shaw, Stanford
3. Brian Kelly, Notre Dame
4. Kirk Ferentz, Iowa (even coming off the bad season at Iowa, he's well-respected in the NFL)
5. Doug Marrone, Syracuse.

I didn't include Bill O'Brien of Penn State because (and call me naive) I can't see him preaching love of, and loyalty to, Penn State, and then leaving after 12 months. But never say never in this business.

**6.** I think these sound like the top 10 NFL assistants who will get sniffs for head coaching jobs in the league next year (in order):

- 1. Mike McCoy, Denver offensive coordinator**
2. Mike Zimmer, Cincinnati defensive coordinator

3. Vic Fangio, San Francisco defensive coordinator
4. Perry Fewell, Giants defensive coordinator
5. Dirk Koetter, Atlanta offensive coordinator
6. Dave Toub, Chicago special teams coordinator
7. Bruce Arians, Indianapolis interim head coach/offensive coordinator
8. Ray Horton, Arizona defensive coordinator
9. Kyle Shanahan, Washington offensive coordinator
10. Clyde Christensen, Indianapolis quarterbacks coach.

**7.** I think the most curious decision of the week came from appeals officer Ted Cottrell, who cut the Ed Reed discipline from a one-game suspension and a \$423,000 fine to no suspension and a \$50,000 fine. Cottrell said he didn't think Reed's helmet-to-helmet hit on Emmanuel Sanders was serious enough to merit the suspension and fine. Then Cottrell called Reed's hit "egregious." The definition of "egregious," according to Merriam-Webster, is "conspicuously bad; flagrant." If Cottrell thought the hit was conspicuously bad and flagrant, why in the world did he eliminate the suspension and cut the fine by 88 percent? How is that justice?

**8.** I think the Steelers, normally among the smartest two or three teams in the league in player personnel, need to answer this question: Why are you backing up a perennially beaten-up quarterback with Byron Leftwich, a very slow 32-year-old quarterback, and Charlie Batch, a soon-to-be-38-year-old quarterback?

Isn't it logical to think that, among starters in the league, Ben Roethlisberger has a better-than-average chance of needing a replacement during the year? Maybe the long-term younger backup is Brian Hoyer, who the Steelers signed last week. But Steelers football czar Kevin Colbert needs to find someone so Pittsburgh won't have two old and/or slow backups.

**9.** I think, for all of you Fireman Ed fans, put some black crepe paper over the this column today. Ed Anzalone, the longtime Jets mascot who does the J-E-T-S chant in the stands, writes in the free paper Metro that, "I decided to leave [the Jets-Pats game before halftime] Thursday because the confrontations with other Jets fans have become more common, even though most Jets fans are fantastic. This is an indication of how society has lost and is continuing to lose respect for one another ... I will attend games as usual, just not as Fireman Ed." Well, I sure am glad we got that straight.

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

- a. So long, Larry Hagman. You were a fixture on Friday nights in the King family house -- and in millions of others -- as J.R. Ewing.
- b. Controversial: Mike Florio says he was bored by *Lincoln*. I have to carve out three hours, and soon, to see it.
- c. Black Friday. One of the lightest traffic days of the year, because I had to drive quite a bit Friday. Can't figure that one out.
- d. Dope that I am, I never heard of "Cyber Monday" until Friday.

e. Congrats, Toronto Argonauts, for the Grey Cup win, the 100th Canadian Football League championship game. Argos 35, Stampeders 22. You can be sure Doug Flutie was there, and received a standing ovation. One of the fun things about working with Flutie at NBC these days is listening to his stories about the CFL.

f. Congrats, Notre Dame. Of all the crazy things you could have said 12 months ago, the craziest might have been this: Notre Dame will be universally ranked No. 1 in the country at the end of the 2012 regular season and will play Team X for the BCS National Championship. And it's not online yet (Wednesday it will be), but take time to read Tim Layden's SI magazine story about the rise of the Irish. Really a great history lesson.

g. I really want to see the Civil War in Oregon one day.

h. My Bobcats sank like stones, didn't they? Still think Nick Saban quakes at the thought of facing the mighty men of Solich.

i. Florence Norman has been born. One piece of advice, Flo: Don't listen to a word your grandfather says about rooting for the Yankees. It's the wrong thing to do.

j. Coffeenerdness: Daughter Mary Beth is visiting, and I'm proud to say I've got her on the espresso trail. Her drink of choice: a quad (four-shot) grande Americano. Chip off the old block, that girl.

k. Beernerdness: Thanks, Ommegang (Cooperstown, N.Y.) for making your White beer available throughout Manhattan. I don't like it as much as Allagash White, but any port in a storm when you're jonesing for some Belgian beer is a good thing.

l. So good to see Christie Werder, daughter of ESPN's Ed Werder, as such a good soldier battling brain cancer, and good of the *Dallas Morning News*' Barry Horn to write about it so movingly.

### **Who I like Tonight, and I Mean Charles Siebert**

Siebert wrote an incredibly enlightening story about the life of an end-of-the-roster NFL player, Atlanta linebacker Pat Schiller, for the *New York Times* Sunday magazine this week. So much about the profile is moving and beautifully written and heartfelt and portrays the requisite desperation of an undrafted free agent trying to make a roster. Siebert could write that way, because he is Schiller's uncle.

He wrote of being in Schiller's apartment during this season and seeing the area where he kept his medicines. "I noticed that the dresser was topped with all manner of balms, unguents and painkilling medications: a 23-year-old with the medicine cabinet of a septuagenarian. Somehow, it was only then that I felt the full weight of what my nephew had managed to pull off: the ridiculous odds he overcame; all the excellent players he beat out. I suddenly felt more like one of his hometown acolytes than an uncle to a kid who grew up a thousand miles and, in terms of life experiences and career pursuits, a world away from me. A kid I only came to know at this juncture because he is so good at a game that I, like millions of others, so love to watch.

"Dude,' he said, as I stood staring at his dresser. "I swear to God, if someone tells me right now there's some miracle body cream out there that would make me feel 100 percent and prevent me from getting hurt but that could also cause cancer or liver damage down the line, I'd use it in a heartbeat. I would."

You will fly through this story, I guarantee it. Siebert has made a great contribution to the football landscape. He's explained so well what so many marginal players, hundreds of them, go through every spring, summer and fall.

Regarding tonight's game, I have **Philadelphia 21, Carolina 17**. In a battle of endangered coaches, it's not going to do Ron Rivera much good to lose to a team that hasn't won a game in October or November. Not to make you feel worse, Eagles fans (is that possible?), but how about this for offensive frustration: Games scoring 25 points or more in 2012 -- New England 9, Philadelphia 0.

### **The Adieu Haiku**

*Colin Kaepernick.*

*Looks like I misjudged the lad.*

*Chiefs sound good, Alex?*

# AFC divisions close to being wrapped up

Lindsay H. Jones  
USA TODAY Sports  
November 26, 2012

It isn't even December, and every AFC divisional race is looking like a snooze-fest.

The Denver Broncos, New England Patriots and Baltimore Ravens could clinch titles by Sunday night with wins in Week 13. The Houston Texans, the only AFC team with 10 victories, can clinch a playoff spot but not the AFC South.

And the Atlanta Falcons could claim the NFC North title.

The drama in five divisions is all but gone. Never before have so many teams held at least three-game leads this early, but try finding a playoff-bound coach who feels comfortable in planning for the postseason.

"There is no comfort in football. It's not allowed," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said Monday. "Comfort is not the word that comes to mind. Competitive, confront — not comfort — comes to mind."

Coach John Fox is preaching a similar message in Denver, where his Broncos have a six-game winning streak. A division title would be nice, sure, but the Broncos currently are positioned for the fourth seed. They lost to New England and Houston but play at Baltimore on Dec.16.

"The best formula is one game at a time and put all our focus and energy into that particular opponent," Fox said. "You guys can keep asking and I'll keep telling you the same thing, but that's the truth."

That message has resounded with the Broncos after their 17-9 win against the Kansas City Chiefs on Sunday. Too many times Denver has been on the verge of the playoffs, only to see chance after chance to clinch a postseason spot slip away in December.

In 2008, the Broncos squandered a four-game division lead by losing their last four games. Last year, the Broncos lost their final three games and backed into the playoffs.

"It's in the back of our heads, don't want to put it in the front," defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson said. "We're trying not to do like we did last year."

## **Week 13 playoff scenarios**

**AFC East:** New England clinches with win against Miami.

**AFC North:** Baltimore clinches with win against Pittsburgh and a Cincinnati loss to San Diego.

**AFC West:** Denver clinches with win against Tampa Bay or a San Diego loss to Cincinnati.

**AFC wild card:** Houston clinches with win against Tennessee.

**NFC South:** Atlanta clinches with win against New Orleans and a Tampa Bay loss to Denver.

# Broncos' Robert Ayers takes leave after father's death

Lindsay H. Jones  
USA TODAY Sports  
November 26, 2012

Robert Ayers led the Denver Broncos out of the tunnel at Arrowhead Stadium on Sunday afternoon on what had to have been one of the most difficult days of his life.

Ayers, a backup defensive end and 2009 first-round draft pick, learned Saturday night — while the Broncos were in Kansas City to play the Chiefs — that his father, Robert Sr., had died unexpectedly. Ayers chose to remain with the team and play in the game before heading to New Jersey to join his family. It is unclear when Ayers will rejoin his teammates.

Denver coach John Fox gave Ayers a game ball in the locker room following the Broncos' 17-9 win against their AFC West rivals. Ayers declined to talk to reporters about his father as he left the stadium, telling *The Denver Post* he wanted to keep the matter private.

Ayers' father and mother, Charlotte, divorced when he was a child. The family's oldest child, Ayers was sent to live with relatives in South Carolina when he was 15, mostly to help him avoid trouble in New Jersey while focusing on high school football. Ayers went on to play at the University of Tennessee.

Ayers lost his starting job this year to rookie Derek Wolfe but has remained an important part of the defensive line rotation. He was credited with one quarterback hit Sunday in Kansas City.

**Hester signed to fill McGahee's roster spot:** A week after losing starting running back Willis McGahee to a torn knee ligament, the Broncos added a big back to help bolster their backfield.

The Broncos announced Monday the signing of former San Diego Chargers fullback Jacob Hester, who worked out for Denver last week. At 5-11 and 235 pounds, Hester is more than 20 pounds heavier than any other Denver running back.

The Broncos rushed for only 95 yards in Sunday in their first full game without McGahee, who could return if Denver reaches the AFC Championship Game. Knowshon Moreno, a 2009 first-round draft pick, had 85 yards on 20 carries in his first game since being benched in mid-September. Rookie Ronnie Hillman had three carries in a complementary role.

Hester played in 94 games for the Chargers from 2008 to 2011 but never had more than 28 carries in a single season.

The Broncos also re-signed running back Jeremiah Johnson to the practice squad. He was waived in a procedural move on Saturday as the team decided to go into Sunday's game with only 52 players on the roster.

# Surprise, Knowshon Moreno is the man for the Broncos

Nicholas Minnix  
USA TODAY Sports  
November 26, 2012

Big Thanksgiving Day performances set a high standard for those playing Sunday in Week 12. The spotlight still shone on San Francisco 49ers' second-year QB Colin Kaepernick, whose status as starter was one of the least suspenseful mysteries in recent memory. His 231 yards, one touchdown and one interception passing, plus 27 yards and one score rushing, in a victory may have validated Jim Harbaugh's decision and demonstrated Kaepernick is a high-end, high-upside QB2, with the fantasy playoffs just around the corner.

You want secrecy? Ronnie Hillman was a trendy player once Willis McGahee (knee injury) went down, but the Denver Broncos opened old fantasy wounds by going with Knowshon Moreno at running back. John Fox started the 2009 12th overall draft pick and Moreno responded with 85 yards on 20 carries, along with 26 yards receiving against the Kansas City Chiefs. Denver has an attractive schedule for RBs in Weeks 14 through 16, making Moreno a likely popular pickup this coming week.

Michael Bush's touchdowns, both of which came before Matt Forte sustained an ankle injury, emphasize his potential value in the short term. Owners will wait impatiently for word on the severity of the injury to the Chicago Bears' lead runner.

BenJarvus Green-Ellis rumbled for 138 total yards and a touchdown in his Cincinnati Bengals' drubbing of the Oakland Raiders. Doug Martin recorded two one-yard scoring rushes and 63 total yards for in his Tampa Bay Buccaneers' one-point loss to the Atlanta Falcons. Beanie Wells celebrated his return from injured reserve (for severe turf toe) with 48 yards and a pair of rushing scores. Trent Richardson piled up 112 total yards and one TD against the Pittsburgh Steelers to help the Cleveland Browns to a rare W. And it's impossible to overlook the 164 total yards the Baltimore Ravens' Ray Rice put up in a Herculean effort against the San Diego Chargers.

But on a day when their team most needed them -- because Charlie Batch was starting under center - Pittsburgh's backs failed to make anything but a negative impression. Both Rashard Mendenhall and Chris Hainey fumbled twice, and Isaac Redman and Jonathan Dwyer put the ball on the floor once apiece. Each back lost one to the opposition. In all, the Steelers fumbled eight times and lost five.

Some receivers rose to the challenge, however. Julio Jones, who has been dealing with a trouble ankle injury, pleased those who gambled on him with his 147 yards and one TD receiving. Torrey Smith's 144 yards, on seven receptions, represented his greatest yardage total of 2012. The Jacksonville Jaguars got yet another long scoring catch -- a 59-yarder - from Cecil Shorts to give him 105 yards on the day and a TD in three straight. Brandon Marshall caught 12 passes in the return of his best pal, Jay Cutler, from a concussion. And Cincinnati's Mohamed Sanu compiled only 29 yards, but his five catches were good enough to get him into the end zone twice. He's become quite an interesting complement to A.J. Green and is worth rostering.

By the way, if the Arizona Cardinals decide to go with Ryan Lindley again in Week 13, consider the New York Jets a worthwhile play. The rookie signal caller's four interceptions, including two returned for TDs, helped the St. Louis Rams' team defense to a big fantasy day.

# Broncos Notebook: Ex-Charger Jacob Hester adjusts to new team

Andrew Mason  
CBSSports.com  
November 26, 2012

As RB Jacob Hester wrapped up his first workout as a member of the Broncos on Monday, the reality of his new situation settled in as he and teammates gathered for a post-lifting huddle.

"I'm not going to lie: today in the weight room, they broke it down on, 'Broncos!' and that was a little weird, saying 'Broncos,'" Hester said, smiling. "But I'm excited."

Hester was signed to the Broncos' roster Monday morning, issued jersey No. 40 and immediately went to work learning the offense and meeting his new teammates after being out of work for the past 12 weeks since San Diego cut him in the preseason.

He had workouts with four teams during his dozen weeks out of the game, and the Broncos were his last stop for a session Nov. 21, one day before Thanksgiving, which complicated matters.

"With Thanksgiving being on that next day and only being here half a day and then traveling on Friday, it didn't make sense to do anything then," Hester said. "They said the workout went well, and they'd get in touch with me Sunday. They did, and they held to their word. So I'm here now."

Broncos coach John Fox said that "a lot" of Hester's workout focused on pass protection, offering a hint of part of his role in the offense. Hester is also the most proven short-yardage runner among the runners currently on the active roster with Willis McGahee out until January because of torn medial collateral ligament and a fractured bone in his knee.

Denver did not have to cut anyone to make room for Hester, since the spot vacated when McGahee was placed on injured reserve last week was not filled until now.

**RB Johnson re-signed:** RB Jeremiah Johnson was re-signed to the practice squad Monday. Johnson was released from the practice squad Saturday in a procedural move; because the Broncos were one man short of the 53-man limit on the primary roster, they had to cut one player from their practice squad. Hester's signing meant the Broncos had a full complement again.

**Ayers with family after father's death:** DE Robert Ayers left the team to be with his family. Ayers' father died suddenly Saturday night, but Ayers remained with the team in Kansas City and played 21 snaps Sunday.

# Broncos Report Card: Average was enough against Chiefs

Andrew Mason  
CBSSports.com  
November 26, 2012

Having been with the Colts for three playoff appearances and an AFC Championship in his five-season career, Broncos TE Jacob Tamme knows more about the evolution of a successful season than most of his teammates and the key lessons along the way.

The one most apt for the Broncos (8-3) during their 17-9 win over 1-10 Kansas City in Week 12 was this: sometimes you're going to have an off-day, but what separates contenders from the pack is the ability to eke out a win regardless.

"I feel right now like it was good for us to scrap one out," Tamme said. "We've played in close games, we've won close games, but this was on the road, against a team desperate for a win."

It was a shaky performance, but it was enough.

## **Offense: C**

Denver's scoring total would have looked a bit better if K Matt Prater had been on target, but he missed a pair of field goal attempts and has now misfired on four of his last nine tries dating back to Nov. 11. The offense wasn't completely ineffective; six of its nine drives netted multiple first downs; RB Knowshon Moreno had 111 yards from scrimmage in his first start of the season, and QB Peyton Manning's lone interception was a deep heave intended for WR Eric Decker that essentially functioned as a punt. But the 17 points were the offense's lowest total of the season, as the Broncos had a streak of five games with at least 31 points snapped, and multiple drops kept the passing game from finding its proper rhythm at times.

***Previous game's grade: B-***

## **Defense: B**

After being caught off-balance on its first series, the Broncos' defense gathered itself and began clamping down on the Chiefs. When Brady Quinn did throw, he rarely had time to set up and get comfortable, and after a pair of coverage gaffes on Kansas City TE Tony Moeaki in the first half, the Broncos tweaked their coverage and rarely let him get open after halftime. But what the Broncos did learn is that they can be run upon, and the Chiefs' 148-yard, 4.8-yards-per-carry performance on the ground offers a template that the Bucs and Ravens might try to follow with Doug Martin and Ray Rice, respectively. The run defense has some work to do if the Broncos are to extend their winning streak. ***Previous game's grade: B***

### **Special teams: C-**

KR/PR Trindon Holliday set up the offense in good field position twice with kickoff returns of 50 and 42 yards Sunday, but P Britton Colquitt had arguably his worst punt of the season, a 39-yard wobbler that Kansas City's Javier Arenas returned 20 yards to the Denver 37-yard-line, leaving the Chiefs just one first down away from a field goal that put them in front 6-0. Prater's struggles aren't a concern to the Broncos yet, but his two missed field goals and four in the last three games are mystifying -- especially a 33-yarder that he slammed into the left upright.

***Previous game's grade: B***

### **Coaching: B.**

Broncos coach John Fox and offensive coordinator Mike McCoy had a perfect opportunity to give Moreno a chance, and he played a mistake-free 60 minutes that likely earned him the job for the foreseeable future until Willis McGahee returns sometime in January. Defensively, they adapted to the Chiefs' running tendency and played most of the game in their base packages, which gradually closed the holes that Jamaal Charles, Peyton Hillis and Dexter McCluster saw early. As a result, the Chiefs amassed just three first downs on their last five possessions after falling behind 14-9 and never seriously threatened a comeback. ***Previous game's grade: B***

# Jamaal Charles asked for Peyton Manning's autograph after loss

Chris Chase  
USA TODAY Sports  
November 26, 2012

Kansas City Chiefs running back Jamaal Charles asked for Peyton Manning's autograph after Sunday's loss to the Denver Broncos.

Wide receiver Dwayne Bowe took a picture with the future NFL Hall of Famer.

CUE OUTRAGE!

Former Chiefs player Rich Baldinger was on KCTV's *Off the Bench* when these offensive clips were aired and was asked by host Michael Coleman whether he'd ever asked for an autograph during his playing days.

"No," he replied. "I don't understand it at that moment. They were smiling and laughing after the loss like that today. I just think it just goes to show what this team's about. I don't know if winning's really that important."

Before we pile on Baldinger, let's acknowledge that there's validity in his comments about losing teams smiling and laughing immediately after defeats. Show me a player who doesn't mind losing and I'll show you a loser.

# On Romeo Crennel and Peyton Manning

Sam Mellinger

The Kansas City Star

November 26, 2012

The column is on the out-of-answers Romeo Crennel, and I do hope you'll read it. So be a pal, and click.

I referenced this in the column, but didn't get much into the continuing fascinating Romeo juxtaposition of being such a tremendous defensive coordinator and such a rotten head coach.

Yesterday's game provided a pretty stark reminder, because Crennel might be the closest thing the NFL has ever had to a Peyton Manning stopper.

Coming into this game, Manning was 145-67 with a 95.4 passer rating against all teams whose defenses were not coached by Crennel. Including the playoffs, Manning was 3-4 with a 67.8 passer rating against Crennel.

To review: against everyone else, Manning is one of the greatest quarterbacks in football history. Against Crennel, he is Charlie Frye.

Manning throws half as many touchdowns, nearly twice as many interceptions, and is a hundred times more likely to stare at the ground and curse – golly gee dangit, probably – as he rips his chin strap off.

Manning is having another MVP-caliber season, transforming one of the league's worst offenses from last year into one the very best this year. His pass to Demaryius Thomas – 30 yards down the left sideline for a touchdown through good coverage by Jalil Brown – was perfect. His orchestration of a 94-yard touchdown drive just before halftime was flawless.

But there were other moments, other glimpses of mediocrity from a Hall of Famer. His second quarter interception was as terrible a decision (Eric Decker was double-covered) as it was a throw (at least five yards off target). Denver went three-and-out twice in the fourth quarter with a chance to put the win away.

Overall, Manning was ordinary by his standards: 22 of 37 for 285 yards, two touchdowns and one interception. The Broncos' 17 points are a season low. They are a Super Bowl favorite that struggled to beat the same team in the same stadium where the mediocre Bengals won by 22 last week.

No matter what faults Crennel has as a head coach, he deserves credit for much of this.

Of course, no matter what strengths Crennel has as a defensive mind, he deserves blame for much of the rest.

# Denver Broncos sign former LSU running back Jacob Hester

Katherine Terrell

New Orleans Times-Picayune

November 26, 2012

Former LSU running back Jacob Hester is no longer looking for a team. Depleted by injuries, the Denver Broncos added Hester to the lineup Monday.

Hester is replacing running back Willis McGahee, who was sent to injured reserve with a designation to return.

Hester played 52 games for LSU and was a key component of the Tigers' 2007 national championship squad. He rushed for 1,017 yards and 12 touchdowns that season in fourteen starts.

Hester was taken in the third round of the 2008 NFL draft by the San Diego Chargers and played for them from 2008-11. Used in a fullback role, Hester rarely racked up stats, but finished his career there with 308 yards and five touchdowns. He also had 319 receiving yards and a touchdown.

# **Peyton Manning passes concussion test after a hard hit**

Cindy Boren  
The Washington Post  
November 26, 2012

It's been a long time since there was any concern over Peyton Manning and the neck injury that sidelined him all of the 2011 season, but the Denver Broncos' victory Sunday over the Kansas City Chiefs brought one scary moment.

As he released a touchdown pass to Jacob Tamme with 18 seconds left in the first half, Manning took a hard hit and the back of his head slammed against the turf. He rose holding his head and was quickly checked out by offensive lineman Chris Kuper.

At halftime, he was given a concussion test by the medical staff and was cleared to continue playing.

"I'm fine. Everything checked out okay, " Manning told the Denver Post's Mike Klis as he headed toward the team bus. "I took a hit there, but I was cleared."

# Del Rio Seeing Great Success With Defense, But Will He Stay?

CBSDenver.com

November 26, 2012

**DENVER (CBS4)** – Denver Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio has had a lot of success this season, and that's sparked speculation he may be ready to be a head coach again.

If that happens, the Broncos would be looking for their eighth defensive coordinator in as many years.

CBS4's Gary Miller talked with Jake Plummer and Tom Nalen, two former Broncos and buddies, about just what it's like to go through so many changes.

"It's huge," Nalen said. "Players develop relationship with these coordinators. If a coordinator leaves it changes how you draft, it changes your free agency. There's a lot of things that go into when a guy leaves and a new guy comes, he wants to get his guys in there, to use his system."

Plummer said coordinators are key to keeping a group of players together, whether it's offense or defense.

"It all depends on if the system is going to change and a let a coordinator bring in his system that he's used his whole career or does he come in and take on the system," Plummer said, "that's really working well for the Denver Broncos."

"I would see a new coordinator coming in and not bringing in his new defense because right now their defense is playing so well you just have to get a coach who can keep those parts together and keep them playing hard and fast."

Nalen knows firsthand just how hard the adjustment can. Gary Kubiak was his coordinator for the first 10 years he was with the Broncos and it was tough when he left.

"It was like, 'What are we going to do? What's our identity?' " Nalen recalled. "I know Mike (Shanahan) was calling a lot of plays but having a guy like Gary Kubiak on the sidelines was very reassuring so I enjoyed having him and I wished he stayed there my last three years."

# Next Day Notebook: Manning 'OK' After Hit

Gray Caldwell  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 26, 2012

Peyton Manning was cleared to return to Sunday's win after a hard hit; the Broncos aren't looking past Sunday; the locker room expected Knowshon Moreno's big game.

**ENGLEWOOD, Colo.** -- Just before halftime of Sunday's win against the Kansas City Chiefs, quarterback **Peyton Manning** fired a touchdown pass to tight end **Jacob Tamme**.

The score gave Denver its first lead of the game, but came with a scary moment -- Manning was pulled to the ground by defensive lineman Tyson Jackson after the throw, and his head hit the turf hard.

"Peyton was banged on his head," Head Coach John Fox said Monday. "Our medical staff does a great job. He was cleared in the locker room at halftime to come out in the third quarter."

Manning felt it was a non-issue after the game, saying simply that he was "OK." After all, he threw for 148 more yards and another touchdown in the second half.

## **ONE GAME AT A TIME**

This Sunday, the Broncos have a chance to wrap up their second consecutive AFC West title with a win, a San Diego loss or a tie by both teams.

But Fox said the team isn't thinking about anything other than the task ahead of it.

"We don't want to worry about all that as much as we want to worry about the Tampa Bay Bucs in all three phases," Fox said. "That'll be the mantra when we gather the team back up on Wednesday."

The Buccaneers, winners of four of their last five, are coming off a hard-fought, one-point loss to the 10-1 Atlanta Falcons. Denver understands the challenges that team -- led on offense by quarterback Josh Freeman, running back Doug Martin and wide receiver Vincent Jackson -- brings with it to Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

"They may be as hot of a team as there is in the league right now," Fox said.

"That's really where all our focus is right now. We can't influence what everybody else does against who, as far as the last five games, but we know we've got to take care of this week and that'll be our mindset."

Fox prefers to divide the season into quarters, with the goal each quarter being a 3-1 record. The club was just behind that in the first quarter of the season at 2-2 and met the goal during the second quarter, going 3-1.

This Sunday marks the final game of the third quarter, and the Broncos have a chance to go 4-0 in the stretch.

"Our goals are still alive with what we want to accomplish, that is win our division and get into the tournament," Fox said. "That's still our goal and to us the best formula is one game at a time and put all our focus and energy into that particular opponent."

### **CONFIDENCE IN MORENO**

With **Knowshon Moreno** listed as inactive for eight consecutive games, there might have been some questions outside Broncos headquarters as to how the running back would perform in a starting role against the Kansas City Chiefs.

There were no such questions within the locker room.

"I thought he had a very good performance -- we kind of expected it," Fox said. "I think his teammates did. I know I did, just how he's gone about his business up until that point. Everybody had great confidence in him and he came through for us. We've got pretty much a running back by committee as it is, and he'll start out there as the starter."

On 24 touches, Moreno racked up 111 total yards. He led the team with 20 of the club's 24 runs, picking up 85 of his yards on the ground.

The fact that he wasn't a part of the team's gameplan for Weeks 2 through 11 didn't affect Moreno's preparation.

"As far as him coming off an ACL (injury suffered in 2011), it does take time until you're 100 percent," Fox said. "You're cleared to play but you're not as exact as you probably think you should be. He needed some time and he had a great attitude, great mindset throughout that period of time. Just by the nature of this league -- injuries are part of the game - we knew we needed him, and he went about it right. So that's why he looked so good."

# Broncos Sign Hester

Stuart Zaas  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 26, 2012

The Broncos have signed running back Jacob Hester and added running back Jeremiah Johnson to the practice squad.

**ENGLEWOOD, Colo.** -- With running back **Willis McGahee** on injured reserve with a designation for return, the Broncos have signed running back Jacob Hester, the team announced on Monday.

The team also added running back Jeremiah Johnson back to the practice squad, where he spent the first 11 weeks of the 2012 season.

A fifth-year pro, Hester has rushed for 319 yards on 94 carries (3.4 avg.) with one touchdown in 62 career games (23 starts). A third-round draft choice by the San Diego Chargers in 2008, he spent his first four seasons in San Diego.

Hester is also a receiving threat out of the backfield, having caught 55 passes for 308 yards (5.6 avg.) and three touchdowns in his career. He's also made an impact on special teams, having posted 36 tackles and scored two special-teams touchdowns.

Hester played 52 games at Louisiana State University, running for 1,780 yards with 20 touchdowns and catching 60 passes for 454 yards with seven receiving scores. He fumbled just once in 364 career carries and was a starter on LSU's 2007 National Championship team.

Johnson has rushed for 77 yards on 14 carries with seven catches for 62 yards in eight career NFL games.

With the addition of Hester, the Broncos now have five backs on the active roster: Hester, **Lance Ball**, **Chris Gronkowski**, **Ronnie Hillman** and **Knowshon Moreno**.

# Hester Joins Broncos Backfield

Tyler Everett

DenverBroncos.com

November 26, 2012

Running back Jacob Hester is excited to get to work as a Denver Bronco.

**ENGLEWOOD, Colo.** – The newest member of the Denver Broncos, running back **Jacob Hester**, is excited to put a difficult stretch of 12 weeks behind him.

Hester spent his first four seasons in the NFL with the Chargers, where he started 23 games, rushed for 319 yards and one touchdown on 94 carries and added 55 receptions for 308 yards before spending this year looking for a new team. After trying out for four teams since the start of this season, he is pleased to be a Bronco.

“Being with one team your whole career, and then all of a sudden that ends, and for 11 or 12 weeks you kind of head home, not really knowing,” Hester said. “You do the workouts, whatever, and hope to get in a good situation. And luckily I fell into a great one.”

Head Coach John Fox said Hester is a quality addition to the roster, which lost running back **Willis McGahee** to injured reserve — with a designation for return -- because of a knee injury he suffered in Week 11.

“He’s a very smart guy,” Fox said of Hester. “He’s a little more of a 'tweener (between a running back and fullback) type as far as a bigger, more physical type of back. He is very sharp in protections and he gives us a little bit different dimension than the guys we have on the roster at this point.”

“We spent time with him in the workout, a lot of it protection-based, and he did an excellent job,” he continued.

Though Monday marked Hester’s first day as a Bronco, four previous seasons in the AFC West as a Charger made Denver a landing spot with some familiarity.

“I’m not going to lie, today in the weight room they broke it down on 'Broncos,' and that was a little weird saying Broncos,” Hester said. “I’m excited, I’m familiar with a lot of the guys here because I’ve played against them the last four years in the division. I know a lot of them from college, (linebacker Wesley) Woodyard and (tight end Jacob) Tamme, I’ve played against them for a long time. It will be fun, something I’m looking forward to.”

Hester first worked out for the Broncos coaching staff last week, when his effort drew praise and he was told to expect a phone call. But because of the timing of Thanksgiving and Denver’s trip to Kansas City, Hester did not sign with his new team until Monday.

Joining a team like the Broncos, winners of six straight and owners of a four-game lead in the AFC West, Hester was happy with the way things worked out.

"You just never know what situation you're going to fall into, but being able to come into a team that's 8-3 and on a roll like this is pretty special," Hester said. "I'm very lucky."

As the heftiest of the Broncos' running backs at 235 pounds, Hester is a big body capable of serving as a lead blocker and carrying the ball in short-yardage situations. But at the moment, his only expectation regarding his role is that he will be utilized on special teams.

"I don't know, I'll find out," Hester said of how he anticipates being used. "Obviously fullback's not a huge part of the offense here. So we'll see. I'm expecting it to be on special teams first, that being my background. We'll go from there."

# Cheerleaders Help the Hungry on Thanksgiving

Cheerleaders

DenverBroncos.com

November 26, 2012

Hey Broncos Fans!

I'm Katie W. and this is my second year on the team. This time of year is my favorite for three reasons — family, friends and football!

This Thanksgiving I spent the day with some family members, friends and fellow Cheerleader Toni D., assembling over 3,000 meals to pass out to the less fortunate. I could not have asked for a more perfect way to spend the Holiday!

Rosa Linda's is the local restaurant that graciously opened their doors to host the event. I have never seen more selfless, caring individuals come together and work hard to assure everyone in need had a meal. I was also blown away by the gratitude of those individuals receiving meals that I was able to interact with. This was a very special day for Toni and I.

There are so many things I am thankful for but especially for everyone I met on Thursday who made a special impact on my life. I am also extremely thankful to be a part of the Broncos organization and to make a difference in the community through their graciousness.

I hope everyone has a safe and healthy Holiday season.

Go Broncos!

Katie W.