

Broncos coach John Fox can join elite coaching group with win Sunday

Mike Klis
The Denver Post
November 30, 2012

Broncos coach John Fox is on the verge of making history.

A win Sunday against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, and Fox will become only the 10th NFL coach since the 1970 merger to win division titles in his first two seasons with a team.

The previous nine: Jim Caldwell (Indianapolis), Norv Turner (San Diego), Mike Tomlin (Pittsburgh), Barry Switzer (Dallas), George Seifort (San Francisco), Ray Malavasi (Los Angeles), Red Miller (Broncos), Ted Marchibroda (Baltimore) and Chuck Knox (Los Angeles).

Fox would join Knox and Marchibroda as the only coaches to inherit teams coming off losing records and win back-to-back division titles.

Furthermore, one doesn't need Elias Sports Bureau to confirm that Fox would be the only coach ever to win a division title with Tim Tebow as his quarterback in his first season and Peyton Manning in his second.

The Broncos enter play Sunday with a five-game lead against second-place San Diego (counting the head-to-head tiebreaker) in the AFC West with five games to play. A Broncos win or Chargers loss Sunday to Cincinnati would make Denver repeat winners of the AFC West.

There's a good chance the Broncos will play Sunday without defensive lineman Robert Ayers. He missed the full week of practice to be with family and help plan the funeral services for his father that will be held Saturday in Virginia.

Ayers is scheduled to return to the team Saturday night but was listed as questionable for the game against the Bucs. If Ayers does not play, rookie Malik Jackson is expected to fill in.

Meanwhile, Peyton Manning met Peyton Manning for the first time Friday.

No, the Broncos quarterback didn't just find the mirror. And he didn't name his young son Junior.

There is a 14-year-old youth hockey player in the Denver area named Peyton Manning. The older Peyton Manning and younger Peyton Manning chatted it up for about 10 minutes following the Broncos practice Friday.

"He said to always try to lead by example," the younger Peyton said. "Hey said, you don't have to say much to be a leader. Try to lead through your actions."

"It was nice to get some of the mystique out of the way," said Mick Manning, the father of the younger Peyton Manning. "People have always kind of made fun of his name. So to be able to put the two together that was nice."

What did the older Peyton tell the younger Peyton about the name Peyton?

"It's a good name and it's both a guy's and girl's name," said the young Peyton.

Yes, Mick Manning named his son after the famous quarterback.

"His senior year at Tennessee he had a chance to come out for the draft and make big money and he decided he wanted to stay. He showed a lot of character," Mick Manning said. "That's kind of what we were looking for."

Four Broncos make final 27 on ballot for Pro Football Hall of Fame

Mike Klis
The Denver Post
November 30, 2012

The Broncos have four players who made the cutdown to 27 modern-era semifinalists for the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

The four Broncos: running back Terrell Davis; safeties John Lynch and Steve Atwater; and linebacker/defensive end Karl Mecklenburg.

Lynch is eligible for the first time. There are normally 25 semifinalists, but there was a three-way tie for the 25th spot. Davis has made it to the top 25 multiple times but has never made the cut to the top 15 finalists.

The 27 semifinalists will be reduced to 15 finalists in January. The 15 modern-era finalists and two senior committee nominations (Curley Culp and David Robinson) will be considered by the voting committee on the eve of Super Bowl XLVII in New Orleans. Between four and seven new members will be elected to the Hall of Fame Class of 2013.

Here's how Broncos can win both 7th straight game and division title

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
December 1, 2012

Six-game win streaks are nice. The Broncos have now had three of them, after all, in the last four seasons alone: 2009, 2011 and now this year.

But seven? Now, seven-game streaks are something else entirely. The Broncos have had just three of those in the franchise's history (1984, 1996 and 1998) and won the Super Bowl in one of those years.

And with a six-game win streak in hand, here's how they can get the seventh consecutive win:

- **Muscle up.** The Broncos' base defense surrendered 130 yards rushing — of 148 total — last Sunday in Kansas City. Tampa Bay's rookie running back doesn't have the straight-line speed of the Chiefs' Jamaal Charles, but Doug Martin breaks more tackles, is a bit shiftier in the tight spaces in the middle of the field and has enough speed to close out the big play.

After after what the Chiefs did last week, the Buccaneers will certainly take their swings at the Broncos' 4-3 look. Middle linebacker Keith Brooking as well as defensive tackles Justin Bannan and Kevin Vickerson will be key.

In short, the Broncos have to handle their defensive business when the game is big-on-big.

The Buccaneers have been particularly effective running to the strong side of the formation — usually the offense's right — and that will be right at Von Miller in the Broncos' traditional early-down alignment.

Miller has been dominant in those situations this year, and the Broncos need another one of those marquee days from their marquee defender.

- **Get to Freeman.** Buccaneers quarterback Josh Freeman has thrown 16 touchdowns passes over his last seven games, and that's even with the Falcons holding him without a scoring pass last Sunday.

Freeman will hang in and hold the ball if he believes he can make a play down the field. He has the size at 6-foot6, 240 pounds to do it and the arm strength to get the ball anywhere he wants.

And he's routinely looking for haymakers. The Buccaneers have three receivers who have at least 20 catches to go with at least 15 yards per catch.

By contrast the Broncos have one — Demaryius Thomas.

Freeman has been tough to sack all season. The Buccaneers have surrendered 16 sacks (the same total as Peyton Manning has been sacked this season) despite placing two Pro Bowl guards (Davin Joseph and Carl Nicks) on injured reserve.

The key will be for the Broncos to get the run game off the table for the Buccaneers, keep Freeman in throw-first, down-and-distance situations.

- **Keep the pressure on.** The Buccaneers will be without cornerback Eric Wright, who was suspended four games for violating the league's policy on performance-enhancing drugs.

They'll play two rookies in the secondary, cornerback Leonard Johnson and safety Mark Barron, to go with a rookie at weakside linebacker in Lavonte David.

The Broncos could work out of a two-tight end set and put all three in coverage situations in the intermediate and deep areas of the field.

The Buccaneers haven't let anybody consistently run the ball. Three teams didn't even top 40 yards rushing. But they have surrendered 51 pass plays of at least 20 yards this season, and four teams (Carolina, Giants, Washington and Oakland) each had at least six pass plays of at least 20 yards against the Buccaneers this season.

- **Find the edge.** The Buccaneers will come to Denver believing they are the more physical team.

The Broncos can clinch the division title with a victory, which would clinch a playoff spot with a month to go in the regular season. That's plenty of incentive to play with passion and like a team that has intentions beyond an AFC West title.

Deterring Broncos' John Fox from deferring unlikely during win streak

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
December 1, 2012

Today's question about the Broncos comes from Trey Walters in Colorado Springs.

Q: First, the Broncos are playing well and exceeding everyone's expectations given where they were just two years ago. So a bit of a nitpick here, but I am a bit mystified by the Broncos' decisions in recent games to defer when they win the coin flip. Yes, they have a good defense, and yes, the Broncos have been better at scoring points in the second half this year than the first. But the Broncos' defense and excellent pass rush lend themselves to playing from ahead, not from behind. Why not go out, take the opening kickoff and use Peyton Manning's skill to build a lead and force the other team into catch-up mode which means having to pass?

A: Trey, you want to watch some NFL coaches argue a bit about something, just toss out the to-defer-or-not-to-defer question about opening kickoffs.

Opinions are all over the map, and the data is fairly evenly split as well.

Truth be told, if your quarterback is Peyton Manning or Tom Brady or Aaron Rodgers or somebody of that ilk, you're going to feel pretty good about your chances with the ball no matter when you get it. And overall it's still a fairly recent choice in the NFL.

The rule that allows teams that win the coin toss to defer possession until the start of the second half has only been used in the NFL since 2008.

Some coaches, like New England's Bill Belichick for example, always believe in deferring if they win the opening coin toss. Belichick last chose to receive the opening kickoff in a game where he won the coin toss in that 2008 season.

This season the Patriots have won the toss five times and elected to defer all five times. Belichick's disciples in coaching seem to defer a great deal as well, including former Broncos coach Josh McDaniels.

Those who believe in deferring to receive the ball to open the second half usually talk about "stealing" a possession, that if things go as expected, with the average number of possessions in a game, you would get a possession to end of the first half and then get the ball again to open the second half.

That if you scored on both of those, you have a huge momentum swing. Those who believe in deferring say that opening possession of the second half can be the most

efficient because you've seen what the defense has to offer on that day and can make specific adjustments to it.

But there are those coaches who are as passionate about taking the ball immediately, including Falcons coach Mike Smith. The Falcons, 11-1 after Thursday night's win, have won the coin toss six times this season and elected to receive the opening kickoff all six times, including Thursday night's win over the Saints.

Smith, a noted numbers cruncher, consistently says "ball possession" is one of the most important parts of the game.

The Broncos have done it both ways in John Fox's tenure. Last season Tim Tebow was routinely a slow starter in games, so Fox was more apt to defer when Tebow was in the lineup.

In Tebow's 13 starts last season, including the playoffs, the Broncos won the toss six times and deferred all six times. In the divisional round playoff game in New England, the Broncos deferred and the Patriots scored on the first possession of the game with a five-play, 80-yard touchdown drive that took all of 1 minute, 51 seconds.

This season, with Manning behind center, the Broncos won the toss in each of their first three games and took the ball all three times. They had two punts and an interception on those three game-opening possessions and surrendered just one field goal (against Pittsburgh), to go with two punts, on their opponents' opening possessions of the second half of those three games.

They also won the toss in New England and took the ball immediately, only to fumble on the drive.

They lost the toss in San Diego (Nov. 18), and the Chargers took the ball. The Broncos, trailing 24-0 at halftime, then took the opening possession of the second half 85 yards in eight plays for a touchdown.

Almost to a player, they said that drive to open the second half, and Manning's efficiency on it, was the key moment in the improbable comeback.

So, Fox a huge believer in the idea that you don't mess with a streak, has since deferred each time they have won the toss since — against Cincinnati, Carolina and the Chargers in Denver — to give his team the ball to open the second half.

The Broncos have kicked off, three times because they deferred and three times because they lost the toss, in each of the games during the current six-game winning streak. So, they'll likely keep doing it if the wins keep coming.

Peyton Manning meets the other Peyton Manning at Dove Valley

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
December 1, 2012

Two Peytons, one place for meeting

Peyton Manning met Peyton Manning Friday.

The Littleton eighth-grader who has lived the life of a famous name, met Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning face to face Friday at the team's Dove Valley complex.

The youngster, who was the subject of a Denver Post story last month, left with an autographed football and a memory or two.

"He was really nice. It was great," the younger Manning said after the team's practice. "Having the name was always a cool thing, but now that I've met him it's even cooler. ... My friends will be jealous."

The younger Manning doesn't play football — he has been the captain of his youth hockey team — but considers the Broncos quarterback his favorite professional athlete.

And what words of advice did the younger Manning receive from the Broncos' quarterback?

"He said it's a good name ... and to always try hard, lead by example, not necessarily with words, but by what you do."

G'day, mates. The Broncos also hosted the St. Kilda Saints from Seaford, Victoria, in Australia. The Australian Football League team, which hails from the Melbourne suburbs, is in Colorado to participate in high-altitude training.

Australian Rules Football, an ESPN staple in the network's early years, is similar to rugby. The St. Kilda Football Club has been in existence since the 1870s.

The team attended practice and toured the Broncos' facilities. Safety Mike Adams came away with a jersey, a scarf and a hat from the team while kicker Matt Prater and punter Britton Colquitt each got a ball.

The Saints finished in ninth place in the 18-team league last season and their 2013 season begins March 30. The team attended a CU women's basketball game this week as well.

Hall semifinalists. Former Broncos Terrell Davis, Karl Mecklenburg, Steve Atwater and John Lynch were among the 27 semifinalists for the Pro Football Hall of Fame's Class of 2013.

Ordinarily, 25 semifinalists are picked, but there was a three-way tie for the 25th and final spot.

The list will be trimmed to 15 modern-era finalists, and the Class of 2013 will then be voted on by the Hall's board of selectors the day before the Super Bowl. A maximum of five modern-era finalists can be selected for each Hall of Fame class.

Injuries. Wide receiver Brandon Stokley (wrist, hip) was limited in Friday's practice and was formally listed as questionable for the game. Guard Manny Ramirez (back), who had been limited in Thursday's practice, took part fully Friday and was listed at probable.

Tackle Chris Clark was held out of Friday's practice because of illness and is questionable for Sunday's game.

Running back Jeremiah Johnson, who is on the Broncos' practice squad, was sporting a sling on his left arm after Friday's practice. Johnson, who was in drills when practice began, suffered the injury during the workout.

Defensive end Robert Ayers was excused and not at Dove Valley. He is not expected to play against the Buccaneers.

The Buccaneers had no players on the 53-man roster sit out any part of practice Friday.

Footnotes. Lynch will be on the broadcast team for Sunday's game for Fox. He did a sit-down interview with Manning this week. ... In their combined 14 wins this season, the Broncos and Buccaneers have just three combined wins over teams with winning records. The Buccaneers defeated Minnesota (6-5), while the Broncos have defeated Pittsburgh (6-5) and Cincinnati (6-5).

Tampa Bay's Greg Schiano adjusting nicely from college coaching

Tom Kensler
The Denver Post
December 1, 2012

If this keeps up, Tampa Bay's Greg Schiano will join San Francisco 49ers coach Jim Harbaugh in erasing the long-held notion that former college head coaches can't succeed in the NFL.

After 11 years as boss at Rutgers, Schiano has turned around Tampa Bay in his first season. The Buccaneers, 4-12 a year ago under Raheem Morris, will enter Sports Authority Field at Mile High on Sunday fighting for a playoff berth at 6-5.

Schiano said after taking the job that he would emphasize fundamentals.

"Anytime there's change, it's difficult," Schiano said this week during a teleconference with Denver media. "But once we got over that, it's been great."

Schiano and Harbaugh had the advantage of previously serving as assistant coaches in the NFL. But their success at football's highest level could make NFL owners and general managers forget recent failures, including Steve Spurrier (12-20 with the Washington Redskins), Nick Saban (15-17 with the Miami Dolphins), Butch Davis (24-34 with the Cleveland Browns) and Bobby Petrino (3-10 with the Atlanta Falcons before quitting with three games remaining).

Saying college coaches are back in vogue for NFL jobs is going a bit too far, but Schiano has succeeded in transforming the Bucs. He brought a slew of former Rutgers assistants into the Bucs organization and had his team riding a four-game win streak before last weekend, when Tampa Bay lost 24-23 to Atlanta.

Schiano often said he was happy at the college level, and had long been mentioned as a top candidate to follow Joe Paterno at Penn State. But overtures from Tampa Bay intrigued Schiano because the Bucs featured some young talent — including quarterback Josh Freeman — and had won 10 games just two years ago.

Schiano, a three-year assistant with the Chicago Bears (1996-98), believed that if he instilled his disciplined, hands-on approach, Tampa Bay players would respond.

"I'm grateful I was a head coach in college for 11 years," Schiano said. "All the things you learn as you go through those experiences, they're no different (at this level) when you talk about leading your men, leading your staff."

Broncos rookie defensive end Derek Wolfe isn't surprised that Freeman has improved dramatically over last season. A former Cincinnati Bearcat, Wolfe faced Rutgers annually in the Big East.

"Schiano's Rutgers teams were always well-coached," Wolfe recalled. "He's always had a tough team. That's how he coaches."

Of course, change rarely comes without some road bumps. Schiano was criticized throughout the NFL after instructing his defense to jump over the line of scrimmage into a "victory formation" on the last play of a 41-34 loss to the New York Giants in Week 2.

Critics called Schiano "a college coach" and pointed out that there is an unwritten league rule to keep hands off when a team lines up in a victory formation, in which the winning quarterback takes a knee as a formality to run out the clock.

Giants quarterback Eli Manning was startled, but Schiano made no apologies.

"What I do with our football team is we fight until they tell us 'Game over,' " he said afterward. "It's not illegal or dirty."

The Bucs haven't jumped a victory formation recently. But that doesn't mean they won't, Schiano said.

"It's a play in our playbook, and we're going to use it if the situation dictates," he said.

Greg schiano

career highlights

1984-87 — Player at Bucknell
1988 — Ramapo (N.Y.) HS assistant
1989 — Rutgers grad assist
1990 — Penn State grad assist
1991-95 — Penn State defensive backs coach
1996-97 — Chicago Bears defensive assistant
1998 — Chicago Bears defensive backs coach
1999-2000 — U. of Miami defensive coordinator
2001-11 — Rutgers head coach
2012 — Tampa Bay Buccaneers head coach

Tight ends have been key to Broncos turnaround

Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
November 30, 2012

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — Tight ends are no longer an afterthought in Denver's passing game.

In 2009, they had all of 27 catches.

Last year, that number was just 30 — not a single one of them in the end zone — as they were basically used as big bruising blockers in Tim Tebow's read-option offense.

Enter Peyton Manning and exit the notion of such paltry production from the Broncos tight ends, who are oftentimes more of a slot receiver than a run-blocker in the four-time MVP's world.

"Last year we had to de-emphasize the tight end's role in the offense because of the style that we had to evolve to. And we were running the ball a heck of a lot more, so we spent the bulk of our time doing that," tight ends coach Tony Barone said. "The focus this year shifted back to getting the tight ends more involved and being more of a focal point in the passing game."

Fellow free agents Jacob Tamme and Joel Dreessen lead a new group of Broncos tight ends that has collected 70 catches for 657 yards and six touchdowns so far.

That's the kind of production Barone was accustomed to seeing in a full season from two Pro Bowlers — Atlanta's Alge Crumpler and San Diego's Antonio Gates — that he tutored before coming to Denver.

"This collection's already surpassed that after 11 weeks," Barone said. "And so I think that speaks volumes to their talents and Peyton's being able to spread the ball around."

Tamme and Dreessen signed with the Broncos after Manning picked Denver for his comeback, and they're a big part of Manning's re-emergence. With Tamme and Dreessen, offensive coordinator Mike McCoy has two transposable tight ends to move around inside and out to create mismatches.

"It's a credit to them because they can run some of those same types of option routes or whatever with good speed and good hands," Manning said. "Those guys have made a lot of plays for us this year."

After signing Manning, front office boss John Elway went looking for the tight ends to provide the Broncos with the kind of flexibility and production Manning enjoyed in Indianapolis, where he worked with the likes of Dallas Clark, Ken Dilger, Marcus Pollard, Bryan Fletcher and, oh yes, Tamme.

They targeted Dreessen, a seventh-year pro who had all the ingredients and who really hit his stride over the last two seasons in Houston, ranking second in the NFL in percentage (15.6) of catches resulting in touchdowns — 10 of 64.

"Joel was a guy that went to Colorado State, was from the area, was a free agent, was available, we liked him, he had the opportunity to be the No. 1 tight end here, been with a winning organization," coach John Fox said, rattling off the attributes.

To really capitalize on Dreessen's skills, the Broncos needed another equally adept and experienced tight end to produce now and also bring along raw second-year hoopsters-turned-tight ends Virgil Green and Julius Thomas. And they needed one with the smarts and flexibility to line up on either side of the line, out wide or in tight, because in the no-huddle or hurry-up offense teams don't have the luxury of swapping tight ends during the drive.

Tamme was their guy. He could be Dreessen's twin. Same size, same build, same skills, same speed, same hands.

A fifth-year pro, Tamme had one thing Dreessen didn't: experience catching passes from Manning. He played his first four seasons in Indianapolis, where he converted to tight end after playing wide receiver at Kentucky, and he collected 67 catches for 631 yards and four TDs in 2010, the last season Manning played for the Colts.

The Broncos considered themselves lucky to land him.

"Jacob was a guy that happened to be available, a guy Peyton had a great comfort zone with," Fox said.

Both signed on March 29, eight days after Manning's arrival.

"Not that Joel and Jacob have 8,000 years in the league, but they have had experience in a similar offense that we were building," Fox said.

They've provided both the progress and production the Broncos needed from their tight ends this year.

"When I came in for a visit and sat down and talked with everybody, it felt like the right place," Tamme said. "It felt like a place where we had a chance to do something big, and we do."

Dreessen said he wanted to be more of a factor, regardless of stats. He didn't mind sharing the spotlight with Tamme, either.

"I've seen it best when it's kind of tight end by committee," Dreessen said. "You stay fresher, you're more effective for the plays you are in there for. Coming here, I knew it was going to take both of us to get the job done and be special."

Tamme loved the idea of teaming up with Dreessen to create one of the NFL's best tight end duos.

"I'm not really a guy that's been concerned about getting X amount of catches," Tamme said. "Maybe we give up a little bit as individuals, but if you put the numbers together, it's great. I think it's good for our team and it's definitely been good for both of us, maybe not in the way of getting the best statistics that you could ever have, but in the end that's not what it's about."

Notes: DE Robert Ayers missed practice all week following the unexpected death of his father last weekend and he's questionable Sunday when the Broncos (8-3) host Tampa Bay (6-5). ... Manning's former tight end target, Clark, has 31 catches for 320 yards and three TDs for the Buccaneers this season. ... After Friday's practice, Manning met his namesake, a 14-year-old eighth-grader from Littleton who's the captain of his hockey team. The QB signed a football for him that read: "To Peyton, great name. All my best, your friend, Peyton Manning, 18." ... The Broncos hosted the St Kilda Saints of the Australian Football League at practice. The St Kilda Football Club is doing high altitude training at the University of Colorado in preparation for the 2013 season.

A surprise that we've seen before

Peyton Manning, Tom Brady in another MVP battle, but this one's unexpected

Adam Schefter
ESPN.com
November 30, 2012

So this year is like, and unlike, so many others. Please follow along.

Peyton Manning and Tom Brady are turning in vintage performances in a vintage year, as they have in so many other seasons. Only this time it feels unique, more unexpected, with each player that much further along in his career.

Thirty-six-year-old Manning is returning from a season lost completely to a neck injury just as 35-year-old Brady once returned after losing a full season in 2008 to a knee injury. Despite their setbacks, they are back as the game's two marquee and most productive players.

As good as Manning was as a four-time most valuable player, he has been just as good this season as Denver prepares to host Tampa Bay on Sunday. His 67.7 completion percentage is just off his career-best 68.8 in 2009, when he won his most recent MVP award. More impressive, Manning is on pace to throw for 4,742 yards, which would be a career high. And he has led Denver to eight wins -- as many as the other three AFC West teams combined.

Manning And Brady Pace

How this year's stats for Peyton Manning and Tom Brady compare to their career-best seasons:

	Manning 2012 pace/ Career best	Brady 2012 pace/ Career best
Comp pct	67.7/ 68.8 (2009)	65.1/ 68.9 (2007)
TD-Int	38-12/ 49 TD (2004)	35-4/ 50 TD (2007)
Yards	4,742/ 4,700 (2010)	4,798/ 5,235 (2011)

Brady's statistics do not compare to those of his MVP seasons in 2007 and 2010. He has completed 65.1 percent of his passes compared with his career-best 68.9 in 2007 and is on pace to throw for 4,798 yards, fewer than the career-best 5,235 he threw for last season. But as New England travels to Miami for Sunday's game

against the Dolphins, Brady is getting better. In his past five games, Brady has thrown 14 touchdown passes and zero interceptions.

In the twilights of their careers, Brady and Manning are giving football and their followers career years. No one would be surprised if it resulted in one more postseason matchup, one more chance for these men to cement their legacy as two of the greatest quarterbacks in NFL history. But there's still plenty to settle this regular season.

As friendly as the two quarterbacks have become, they are competing against each other for MVP honors. Already they have combined to win the award six times, including four straight years from 2007 to 2010. It's Brady and Manning, Manning and Brady, as it was in 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, the six previous seasons they won the MVP.

Should one win it this season -- and, right now, no one else is more deserving -- it will be the fifth time in six years Manning or Brady has won the award. They have practically owned it, just as they are owning this season. They are the story, again.

On to this week's 10 Spot:

1. Next wave of Tebow intrigue: Tim Tebow nearly returned to Jacksonville this offseason before the Jaguars' coaching staff and front office got their way in not finalizing a deal for the former Broncos quarterback. But Tebow is returning to Jacksonville a week from Sunday, and it's not too early to start the hype and speculation.

Last offseason, Jaguars owner Shad Khan was essentially the lone team employee who wanted to trade for Tebow. People around the league believe he still will, which will create an intriguing situation this offseason. If Khan wants to exercise his rights as owner, he could veto anyone in his path and pull off a trade for Tebow.

There still will be some in the Jaguars' organization who would be leery, knowing the type of issues Tebow brings. But no team in the league needs Tebow's presence, and possibly his play, more than Jacksonville, which has struggled this season to win games and draw fans. It will be up to Khan to change that. But, in the course of the next week, there will be endless speculation about whether Tebow's trip to Jacksonville on Dec. 9 is only the prelude of more trips to come.

2. Henne faces his past: Just when Jacksonville quarterback Chad Henne is playing well and escaping his past, he will run smack into it. Over the next four weeks, Henne is scheduled to face the four teams of the AFC East, the division that caused him issues in his time as the Dolphins' quarterback. The Jaguars play at Buffalo on Sunday before hosting the Jets in the Tebow homecoming. Jacksonville then plays at Henne's former employer in Miami and finishes the stretch by hosting New England.

In the past two games, Henne has thrown six touchdown passes and one interception and has made Jacksonville a more competitive team. Now, to take the lead in the race to be the Jaguars' starting quarterback next season, Henne will have to beat the teams that haunted him in previous seasons.

3. Parity takes a hit: One reason the NFL has been so incredibly popular is because it is so wildly unpredictable. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fact that at least five new teams have advanced to the playoffs every year since 1996. But this is the year that parity-proud streak is about to end.

Last year's AFC playoff teams were New England, Baltimore, Houston, Denver, Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. This year, the division winners will be the same and Indianapolis looks as if it will be the only new wild card. Last year's NFC playoff teams were the Giants, Packers, Falcons, 49ers, Saints and Lions. This year, at least three of those teams, and maybe all four, will win their division again, and the NFL could get two new NFC playoff teams. So, at best, the league is looking at three new playoff teams, snapping a streak that is just about as improbable as Brett Favre's streak of 297 straight starts.

Late November and early December is supposed to be separation time in the NFL. But the good teams already have separated themselves, taking some of the suspense out of the season.

4. Big Ben for MVP? In his absence the past three games, Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger showed why he deserves consideration for the NFL's MVP award. In the 10 quarters since Roethlisberger exited the Monday night game versus the Chiefs with rib and shoulder injuries, the Steelers have failed to throw a single touchdown pass. Byron Leftwich threw for 199 yards in his start against Baltimore, Charlie Batch threw for 199 yards in his start against Cleveland, and the two quarterbacks have combined to throw four interceptions and no touchdown passes.

But Pittsburgh still is well positioned to withstand the loss of Roethlisberger, even if it loses its third straight game Sunday at Baltimore. The Steelers' final four games are against San Diego, at Dallas, and at home against Cincinnati and Cleveland. By the time Roethlisberger returns, this team should be poised to pluck one of the AFC's wild-card spots.

Luck Chasing Rookie Mark

With five games left this season, Andrew Luck has a chance to break the record for most passing yards in a season by a rookie quarterback, which was set by Cam Newton last year.

**Most pass yards by rookie,
NFL history**

Quarterback	Yards
Cam Newton, 2011	4,051
Peyton Manning, 1998	3,739
Sam Bradford, 2010	3,512
Matt Ryan, 2008	3,440
Andy Dalton, 2011	3,398
Andrew Luck, 2012	3,205*

*Through 11 games

-- *ESPN Stats & Information*

5. Rookie QB history: From the moment this season kicked off until it ends, one of the central storylines has been and will continue to be the ascension of rookie quarterbacks. Five rookie quarterbacks -- Andrew Luck, Robert Griffin III, Ryan Tannehill, Brandon Weeden and Russell Wilson -- have led their teams to a combined 26 wins, the most in a season since the 1970 merger.

Luck is leading the way with seven wins, and he has a chance to make some significant history of his own when the Colts play at Detroit on Sunday. No quarterback drafted No. 1 has won more than seven games as a starter in his rookie season, and none has finished the year with a winning record. Luck is on the verge of doing both. And consider this: In the modern draft era since 1967 until the start of this season, all rookie quarterbacks combined to win only 55 games. This year's class will wind up coming close to matching that total in one year.

6. Dallas' RG3 problem: It was one thing for Griffin's Redskins to humiliate Jerry Jones' Cowboys on Thanksgiving Day. But the worst part had to be contemplating the prospect of its happening again in the future. Although 32-year-old Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo is headed into the last year of his contract, 22-year-old Griffin is under contract to Washington for years to come, and the Redskins won't let him go anywhere.

As long as Griffin stays healthy, he could be facing off against Jones' Cowboys for the next 12 to 15 years. Unless Dallas can develop consistency, it is going to struggle to beat Griffin later this year as well as in future years. Just last week, Jones admitted that he didn't know whether the Cowboys could get to 8-8 this season. But the real issue is how to catch and overtake Griffin in future seasons.

7. Built to last: When San Francisco and St. Louis square off Sunday, they will do so with the idea that both organizations are set up to succeed for seasons to come.

San Francisco has only two starters not under contract for next season, safety Dashon Goldson and nose tackle Isaac Sopoaga, who is not an every-down player. Other than that, every 49ers starter is locked and loaded for at least the next two seasons, and some for plenty more. Mike Iupati, Anthony Davis, Chris Culliver and

Frank Gore are signed through 2014. Aldon Smith, Ray McDonald, Vernon Davis, Alex Boone and Carlos Rogers are signed through 2015. Patrick Willis and A.J. Jenkins are signed through 2016. Joe Staley and Ahmad Brooks are signed through 2017. And NaVorro Bowman, who was awarded a five-year extension this week, and Andy Lee are signed through 2018. Even 49ers coach Jim Harbaugh has three more seasons after this year. These 49ers are not just good. They're good for years to come.

But the Rams should be, too. St. Louis has double first-round draft choices in each of the next two years, compliments of its blockbuster trade with Washington for the right to draft quarterback Griffin. The Rams are positioned to build the type of success San Francisco is enjoying.

8. Case for Kaepernick: After San Francisco beat New Orleans on Sunday, the 49ers' team plane landed in the Bay Area at 1 a.m. local time. Fortunately for the players, they were given Monday off -- Victory Monday. Yet when some 49ers employees rolled into the parking lot at 8 a.m. Monday, dreary from the late-night flight from New Orleans, they noticed a solitary figure on the practice field, running sprint after sprint, with what appeared to be 45-pound plates attached to his back. The employees got a little closer to see who it was doing this extra work. And when they got close enough to see, they noticed it was quarterback Colin Kaepernick, getting in more work on what was supposed to be his day off.

If there's another reason the 49ers are drawn to Kaepernick, this is it. The man loves to work. It has been only two starts, and there's a long way to go before anyone puts him in Canton. But Kaepernick is beginning to make Alex Smith look as expendable as Tom Brady once made Drew Bledsoe look. According to ESPN Stats & Information, the only quarterback to post a higher QBR in his first two NFL starts than Kaepernick's 85.0 is the Packers' Aaron Rodgers. It is the purest numerical evidence of how effective Kaepernick has been.

He adds an element of explosiveness to a 49ers team that looks like the toughest in football. Smith's most impressive numbers are the 20-6-1 record he has compiled over the past year and a half. He has been strong, better than the 49ers expected. But as long as Kaepernick plays the way he did in his first two NFL starts, Smith could be looking for work after this season.

9. Trading places: Two division rivals that square off Sunday, New England and Miami, have had something of a role reversal. Usually the Patriots are overloaded in draft picks and the Dolphins have traded them away for players such as Daunte Culpepper, A.J. Feeley and Brandon Marshall. But this offseason, for the first time in a long time, the Patriots are scheduled to be without draft picks and the Dolphins have a surplus of them.

The Patriots are missing their fourth-, fifth- and sixth-round picks (although they do have an extra in the seventh) thanks to trades for cornerback Aqib Talib, wide receiver Chad Johnson and defensive tackle Albert Haynesworth. Meanwhile, the Dolphins have extra picks in the second, third, sixth and seventh rounds thanks to

trades with the Colts, Bears and Cowboys for cornerback Vontae Davis, Marshall and center Kyle Cook. New England usually is a team to watch in January and again in April. But this spring, the Dolphins are a team to monitor.

10. Road relief for Browns? Coming off its biggest win of the season, Cleveland would like to snap one of its most ignominious streaks. As the Browns travel to Oakland for Sunday's game against the Raiders, Cleveland has not won a road game since Week 2 ... of last season. The stretch of 12 straight road losses ties a franchise record set in 1974-76 and is the longest active road losing streak in the NFL.

It's still well short of the road futility record Detroit set when it lost 26 straight away games from Week 8 of the 2007 season through Week 15 of the 2010 season. But if Cleveland wants to snap its streak this season, this would be the time. The Browns' final two road games are at Denver and Pittsburgh.

The Schef's specialties

- **Game of the week: Pittsburgh at Baltimore** -- The Ravens would like nothing more than to clinch a playoff spot and deal Pittsburgh's playoff hopes a blow.
- **Player of the week: Lions wide receiver Ryan Broyles** -- Detroit gets a glimpse of why it used its second-round pick on a wide receiver.
- **Upset of the week: St. Louis over San Francisco** -- The 49ers have looked unbeatable the past two weeks, but the team that almost beat them was the Rams, who now get San Francisco at home, in an early game.

AFC playoff races wrapping early

Three of conference's four division titles could be clinched Sunday

John Clayton
ESPN.com
November 30, 2012

All of a sudden, the AFC stands for "All For Champagne."

The Denver Broncos and New England Patriots can clinch division titles with wins on Sunday. The Baltimore Ravens can clinch the AFC North if they beat the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Cincinnati Bengals lose to the San Diego Chargers. The Houston Texans can't clinch the AFC South title this week, but they can lock up a playoff spot with a win.

Champagne in Week 13? I can't remember a time so many races have been wrapped up this early. And the weird part about it is the lack of change in the divisional lineup. All four teams are on the verge of repeating titles they won last year.

This is both good and bad. The good is planning. If they clinch, all of these teams have a chance to plan for the playoffs and make sure they enter the postseason healthy. The bad is the lack of drama and the potential that these teams could be flat when the playoffs begin.

The only mystery could be seedings. The Texans have the best chance to clinch home-field advantage. There is a pretty good battle for the No. 2 seed between the Baltimore, Denver and New England.

There are meetings among some of these playoff teams down the stretch, particularly Week 15. That might be the week to resolve some things. The Texans host the Indianapolis Colts, who are battling for a wild-card berth. The San Francisco 49ers visit the Patriots. The Broncos play the Ravens in a game that could determine the No. 2 seed.

It has been a strange season. The normal 50 percent turnover rate for playoff teams appears to be out this year. There may be as many as three new playoff teams, but that's about it. The "haves" remain the "haves."

Here are the 10 things we're watching in NFL Week 13:

Steelers Need Big Ben vs. Ravens

Since Ben Roethlisberger's rookie season in 2004, the Steelers are 0-6 against the Ravens when he doesn't start at quarterback and 9-4 when he does.

Steelers vs. Ravens, since 2004 (including playoffs)

Category Big Ben starts Doesn't start

W-L	9-4	0-6
PPG	18.3	14.7
Pass YPG	212.6	182.2
TD-Int.	19-14	6-8

-- *ESPN Stats & Information*

1. It's all about Ben: No matter what you hear, don't rule out Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger for Sunday's game against the Ravens. Odds are against it, but Ben's trying. He has been throwing short passes, and the pain has been going away. But head coach Mike Tomlin isn't taking chances. He is preparing Charlie Batch for the start. If Roethlisberger is available, it's a bonus.

The problem facing the Steelers is location, location, location. The Steelers can't expect the 13-10 type of game played against the Ravens in Pittsburgh. At Baltimore, the Ravens' offense is king. The Ravens have won 15 consecutive games at home. The Ravens average 36.8 points a game at home compared to 16.5 on the road. Joe Flacco throws for 9.28 yards an attempt at home compared to 5.65 on the road. The no-huddle works at home. It struggles on the road.

The Ravens have enough distance on the Steelers in the standings not to worry about losing the AFC North to them. The Steelers are scrambling for a wild card, but they know they can't do anything without Roethlisberger.

2. Padding schedule in AFC East: A few years ago, the NFL's competition committee and commissioner Roger Goodell wanted more competition at the end of the season. He was concerned too many teams benched starters in the final two weeks after clinching playoff spots, so he moved more division games into the latter part of the schedule.

The Patriots can't complain. They have dominated the AFC East for more than a decade. Having more division games later in the season means more wins for them. On Sunday, they can wrap up the AFC East with a victory over the Miami Dolphins. The Pats have a 19-game winning streak in the second half of the season, the longest second-half streak since the merger. The Pats are 4-0 in the division this year and have dominated. They've averaged 47.5 points for the past four games and figure to put up good numbers against the Dolphins.

For the Dolphins, it's last call. They need to get to .500 to even think about the playoffs. A loss would drop them to 5-7 and pretty much finish their season.

3. Giant weekend for NFC East: With no more byes, the league is back to the 16-game weekly schedule, featuring eight divisional games. The best divisional race -- one of the few remaining -- resides in the NFC East.

The New York Giants hold a two-game lead over the Washington Redskins and Dallas Cowboys, but this week will determine whether there is a race or a lark. Fittingly, the NFC East games this weeks are in prime time. The Cowboys host the Eagles on Sunday night. The Giants visit the Redskins on Monday night.

By beating the Cowboys last week, the Redskins made the division race slightly interesting. Even though they are 5-6, the Redskins could move within a game of the Giants with a victory. The Giants know it won't be easy. Robert Griffin III put Washington ahead of the Giants 23-20 with a late touchdown pass Oct. 21. Eli Manning deflated the Redskins with a 77-yard touchdown pass to Victor Cruz with 1:13 remaining to win the game. Since then, RG3 has gained more confidence and become more effective.

As for the Cowboys, they are barely hanging on, and that must infuriate Jerry Jones. The Cowboys' owner is even admitting publicly his team might have to settle for an 8-8 season, not what he was anticipating. He was thinking Super Bowl. Wait until next year, I guess.

4. Secondary a primary problem: The Tampa Bay Buccaneers traded away cornerback Aqib Talib and have cornerback Eric Wright sitting out a four-game suspension. That's bad enough for a defense that is giving up 315.5 yards a game through the air. The bigger problem is the upcoming schedule.

This Sunday, Tampa Bay travels to Denver to face Peyton Manning. Over the final part of the season, the Bucs have to face Drew Brees, Sam Bradford, Matt Ryan and maybe Michael Vick, if he's healthy. The Bucs easily could become the first team in NFL history to give up more than 4,800 passing yards in a season.

Last year, the Packers gave up 4,796 and won 15 games. The Patriots surrendered 4,703 and went to the Super Bowl. The Bucs are 6-5 and in the wild-card race in the NFC, but they know it's hard to stay up with these passing teams just running the football and getting timely completions from Josh Freeman. Freeman is having a great season, but he is learning it's hard to keep up with these 300-yard passing teams with a slower developing offense.

5. Dead coach walking tour: The Bengals have rebounded from a bad October and have put themselves back in the wild-card race. Their next three games are against head coaches who are on the hot seat.

On Sunday, the Bengals travel to San Diego to face Norv Turner, who is all but assured to lose his head coaching job with the Chargers. Next week, the Bengals host the Cowboys. Jerry Jones keeps saying he's going to keep Jason Garrett, but Dallas could be on the verge of falling out of playoff consideration by kickoff.

On Dec. 13, the Bengals face Andy Reid, who is expected to be let go by the Philadelphia Eagles after the season. In the cases of the Chargers and the Cowboys, the Bengals could deliver the final blow to those coaching tenures.

6. Survivor, Windy City: The Bears and Seattle Seahawks head into Sunday's game with lots of questions.

The Seahawks know cornerbacks Richard Sherman and Brandon Browner, who are appealing four-game suspensions for allegedly violating the league's performance-enhancing drug policy, are going to be able to play this week. But they don't know if or when they could lose them in the future. Losing two Pro Bowl-caliber cornerbacks could kill the Seahawks' chances of making the playoffs. Winning this game is vital for the Seahawks.

The Bears have their own problems. Six starters were injured on Sunday. They've lost guard Lance Louis for the season. Guard Chris Spencer is hurt, and things are so bad along the line that they moved benched tackle Gabe Carimi to guard. Wide receiver Devin Hester has a concussion. Halfback Matt Forte has a sore ankle. Linebacker Lance Briggs has a bad ankle, as does tight end Kellen Davis. The Bears hold a big edge at home, but the injuries could make life tough.

7. Worried about the line: The Packers should feel confident about hosting the Minnesota Vikings on Sunday because Aaron Rodgers should be able to outduel Christian Ponder, but Mike McCarthy has to worry about his offensive line.

Vikings defensive end Jared Allen will be lining up against left tackle Marshall Newhouse, who has given up 6½ sacks. T.J. Lang is filling in for the injured Bryan Bulaga at right tackle, and he has given up nine sacks this season. It's a worry. Rodgers has been sacked 37 times this season. McCarthy may have to do more max protection down the stretch.

8. Settling into Kaepernick era: The mystery is over. Jim Harbaugh has gone with Colin Kaepernick over Alex Smith and isn't looking back. Opposing defensive coordinators have two games of tape on Kaepernick, who has outdone the Bears' and Saints' defenses. This week, he visits the Rams.

We'll see whether Jeff Fisher can figure out ways to contain Kaepernick's running and ability to work the play-action game. The Rams managed to tie the 49ers in their previous meeting, the game in which Smith was injured. Harbaugh figures Kaepernick will maintain the magic.

Luck Chasing Rookie Mark

With five games left this season, Andrew Luck has a chance to break the record for most passing yards in a season by a rookie quarterback, which was set by Cam Newton last year.

Most pass yards by rookie, NFL history

Quarterback	Yards
Cam Newton, 2011	4,051
Peyton Manning, 1998	3,739
Sam Bradford, 2010	3,512
Matt Ryan, 2008	3,440
Andy Dalton, 2011	3,398
Andrew Luck, 2012	3,205*

*Through 11 games

-- *ESPN Stats & Information*

9. Take the over: Andrew Luck and the Colts have a showdown against Matthew Stafford and the Detroit Lions on Sunday at Ford Field in what should be a high-scoring game. Luck knows winning on the road isn't easy, even though he figures to throw for more than 300 yards. Stafford has a desperate group of Lions who were beaten on Thanksgiving and could lose all playoff hope if they get that eighth defeat of the season.

The Colts have been the league's best surprise team, in line to become the lone new entry to the AFC playoff picture this year. They are 7-4 and having a blast with Luck. They know the schedule gets more difficult, but so far they have been both lucky and good.

10. Bottom feeders: It's that time of the year when teams are playing out the string. In the Jacksonville-Buffalo game, Jaguars quarterback Chad Henne continues to try to prove he should be the quarterback of the present and future in Jacksonville. At 4-7, the Bills are just trying to keep a disappointed fan base interested.

The Tennessee Titans fired offensive coordinator Chris Palmer in hopes of sparking their offense. They host the Texans this week. Good luck on that one. There is little to say about the Cleveland Browns-Oakland Raiders game. The Browns aren't the easiest team to beat. The Raiders have been an easy target.

The New York Jets have the league's easiest schedule over the final five weeks, starting with Sunday's game against the Arizona Cardinals, but they haven't played well enough to make anyone think these games could be easy to win. Losing would cause more push for change in New York.

Final Word: AFC West

Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

November 30, 2012

Five nuggets of knowledge about Week 13:

Could be a special weekend for John Elway: The Broncos, 8-3, can clinch their second consecutive AFC West title with a victory over visiting Tampa Bay or a San Diego home loss to Cincinnati on Sunday afternoon. The last time Denver won back-to-back division titles was 1986-87, when Elway was the team's star quarterback. The Broncos also are looking for their seventh straight win. The last time they had a streak that long was when they won 14 straight spanning 1997-98, Elway's final two seasons as a player.

Chiefs need to look to Charles on third down: Despite their big problems on offense, the Chiefs haven't been horrible on third down this season. Going into last week's loss to Denver, Kansas City was 14th in the NFL on third downs, with a 38.7 conversion percentage. Running back Jamaal Charles has converted 38.5 percent of the time on third down with the ball in his hands, according to ESPN Stats & Information. However, against Denver, Charles didn't touch the ball on third down. The Chiefs went 3-for-14 on third down -- just 21.4 percent. The Chiefs need to get Charles involved on third down Sunday against Carolina.

Will another rookie run over the Raiders? In Week 9, Oakland's home crowd saw Tampa Bay rookie Doug Martin run all over the Raiders in a 42-32 Oakland loss. Martin had 251 yards rushing on 25 carries, with four long touchdown runs. Now, four weeks later, Oakland hosts Cleveland and running back Trent Richardson, the No. 3 overall pick in this year's draft. Richardson has not been as good as Martin, rushing for 755 yards on 3.6 yards per carry. But you know he is going to be motivated by Martin's performance against a defense that has struggled all season.

Can Ryan Mathews get a 100-yard game? The Chargers' offense needs a boost as San Diego clings to faint playoff hopes. If the Chargers have any hope of beating the smoking-hot Bengals on Sunday, their offense will need to come alive. That means running back Mathews must have a big game. San Diego hasn't had a 100-yard rusher all season. So much was expected from the No. 12 pick of the 2010 draft in his third season. But Mathews has been slowed by injuries once again, compiling 594 yards and averaging 4.1 yards per carry. He certainly has showed flashes, but he hasn't been dominant. Mathews hasn't had a 100-yard rushing game since Week 14 of last season. It's time for another.

Freeman-Denver battle brewing: Tampa Bay quarterback Josh Freeman likes to go deep; Denver's defense is equipped to stop him. Something will have to give. According to ESPN Stats & Information, Denver has allowed eight completions and

a completion percentage of 17.9 on passes longer than 20 yards this season -- both league lows. Freeman, meanwhile, has completed 22 such passes to lead the league.

AFC West coaching possibilities

Bill Williamson
ESPN.com
November 30, 2012

We are exactly a month from the end of the NFL regular season. Thus, we are a month and one day from the start of the first process of the 2013 season: The firing of head coaches.

With five games remaining, both the Kansas City Chiefs and San Diego Chargers have to be considered as prime candidates to make a coaching change. The Chiefs are 1-10, and Romeo Crennel has to be in danger even though he is in his first full season as coach. In San Diego, Norv Turner's team is 4-7. It was a major surprise that the team kept Turner after last season. I don't see any way he makes it to another season barring an unlikely playoff berth.

The coach firings might not be the end in both cities. If Crennel is fired, general manager Scott Pioli will likely suffer the same fate. I get the feeling Kansas City owner Clark Hunt wants to keep both Pioli and Crennel, but the fan fury is so great, I doubt he'll be able to. San Diego general manager A.J. Smith also may be on the firing line, but I can see a situation where he is kept and Turner is not.

There is always a chance Oakland owner Mark Davis can lose patience and end the Reggie McKenzie-Dennis Allen (or just get rid of coach Allen) tandem after one season. But I believe Davis will stick with the current situation despite a disappointing first year.

With potential change in the air, let's look at some of the head-coaching candidates, in alphabetical order, who could be available:

Bruce Arians, interim Indianapolis head coach: I'm intrigued by Arians. The longtime offensive coordinator is doing a fantastic job with Colts coach Chuck Pagano out because of his fight with cancer. This is a unique situation. Teams could hire a coach who may lead a team to the playoffs without any restrictions -- and what an audition Arians is having. He has worked with Ben Roethlisberger in Pittsburgh and Andrew Luck in Indianapolis. I could see the Chargers being interested in pairing him with Philip Rivers. The Chiefs could also be a fit for Arians.

Brian Billick, former Baltimore head coach: Billick is interesting because he is a Super Bowl-winning coach who might be reasonably priced. He has a reputation for being a strong offensive mind and a strong leader. He could fit in both San Diego and Kansas City, and I think he could work with an established general manager.

Bill Cowher, former Pittsburgh head coach: When Cowher decides he wants to come back, he will likely have his pick of jobs. I'm not sure if any of the AFC West jobs would be more attractive to him than others. Still, Cowher has a history in

Kansas City and is the dream coach for many Chiefs fans. But he may be way too pricey for the team.

Jack Del Rio, Denver defensive coordinator: Del Rio has done a terrific job in Denver and had lots of head-coaching experience in Jacksonville. I have a feeling he may remain Denver's defensive coordinator, but he could be a reasonably priced option for both the Chiefs and Chargers.

Jon Gruden, former Oakland and Tampa Bay head coach: The most frequent question I get from readers is this: Is there a chance Gruden could come back to coach the Raiders? I've heard that countless times since Gruden was fired by Tampa Bay after the 2008 season. My answer now is the same as always: "Probably not." There have been plenty of opportunities for Gruden to come back to Oakland and it has not happened. Never say never, but I'd be surprised. If there is a fit this offseason in the division, I'd say it would be San Diego. I think Gruden -- there have been reports the University of Tennessee wants to hire Gruden -- would love to live in San Diego, and he'd love to work with Rivers. I'm not saying Gruden is a favorite to end up in San Diego, but it wouldn't shock me.

Chip Kelly, University of Oregon head coach: See Cowher. Kelly will get his pick of jobs and he will cost a ton. I'm not sure he'd fit in the AFC West, although working with Rivers could be intriguing to him.

Mike McCoy, Denver offensive coordinator: He is going to be a hot candidate. I think the preferred destination for McCoy, a former Panthers assistant, is to go to Carolina if the Panthers fire Ron Rivera; he is highly regarded there. I could see him getting interest from the Chiefs as well. He is young, bright and won't break the bank.

Wade Phillips, Houston defensive coordinator: The only reason I put Phillips on this list is if Smith remains in San Diego. Smith admires Phillips from Phillips' days as the Chargers' defensive coordinator. I think he'd be a candidate if Smith is making the choice.

Andy Reid, Philadelphia head coach: Reid is very likely entering his last month in Philadelphia after a tenure that started in 1999. The word around the league is that he will get instant interest. If Reid doesn't opt to take time off, I could see San Diego being a fit. He has a home in the area and he'd work well with Rivers. But would the Chargers want to replace Turner with a veteran coach who just flamed out after a long stay with a team?

Rex Ryan, New York Jets head coach: It is no sure thing he will be fired, but there's a chance. I think he could get some interest in the AFC West. He was a finalist in San Diego when Turner got the job. I think the Chiefs could also be interested. They have the makings of a good 3-4 defense -- Ryan's specialty. Putting him in a small media market could also save Ryan from himself occasionally.

David Shaw, Stanford University head coach: This is one my favorites. I can really see Shaw ending up in San Diego. He was born there and may be one of the hot young coaches available. I think he'd be perfect for San Diego whether Smith is there or not. His father, Willie Shaw, was a longtime NFL assistant. David Shaw played for Bill Walsh. He worked for Al Davis. He was an assistant to Jim Harbaugh and he's coached Luck. And he has won as a head coach. If I was hiring a coach next month, I'd seriously investigate this 40-year-old.

AFC West HOF semifinalists

Bill Williamson
ESPN.com
November 30, 2012

The Pro Football Hall of Fame announced its 27 semifinalists for enshrinement in 2012. The list of 27 will be pared to 17 finalists in January, and the enshrinement vote will be held in February.

Let's take a look at the nine candidates among the 27 who spent significant portions of their careers in the AFC West. Here they are:

Steve Atwater, S -- 1989-98 Denver Broncos

Will he get in? He might be getting closer, but this year might be tough.

Tim Brown, WR -- 1988-2003 Los Angeles/Oakland Raiders

Will he get in? Brown will get in, but it might take some more time because of the logjam at receiver, whether it's right or not.

Don Coryell, coach -- 1978-86 San Diego Chargers

Will he get in? The late coach has his supporters, but it won't be easy.

Terrell Davis, RB -- 1995-2001 Denver Broncos

Will he get in? Davis' short career remains his biggest challenge.

Albert Lewis, CB -- 1983-93 Kansas City Chiefs, 1994-98 Los Angeles/Oakland Raiders

Will he get in? Nice to see him make this list for the first time, but it might be tough.

John Lynch, S -- 2004-07 Denver Broncos

Will he get in? Hard hitter will likely get in soon, if not this year.

Karl Mecklenburg, LB -- 1983-1994 Denver Broncos

Will he get in? I'd call him a big longshot to make it in 2013.

Warren Sapp, DT – 2004-07 Oakland Raiders

Will he get in? I'd be surprised if he doesn't make it in his first year on the ballot.

Will Shields, G -- 1993-2006 Kansas City Chiefs

Will he get in? I have a good feeling about Shields in his second year of eligibility.

Peek at the Week

Clark Judge
CBSsports.com
November 30, 2012

Games I'd like to see

Tampa Bay at Denver, 4:05 p.m. ET

The line: Broncos by 7½

The story: The betting line for this game moved up this week, despite Tampa Bay's recent run of success, and there's a reason: Peyton Manning. The guy is unconscious at home, with 13 touchdowns and one interception. Of course, there's also this: Tampa Bay has the league's worst pass defense.

Put the two together, and you have oddsmakers predicting a relatively easy victory for Denver, the team's seventh in a row, and an AFC West championship for the Broncos.

And that might happen. But I would be careful. Tampa Bay hasn't been blown away by anyone this season, with the Bucs never more than seven points behind an opponent. In fact, the average margin of their losses is 4.6 points, with Tampa Bay falling one point short to Atlanta last week.

But there's more: The Bucs are 3-2 on the road, winning their past three there, including an impressive 35-17 blowout in Minnesota.

Tampa can run and it can pass. What it can't do is play pass defense, and that's why the spread is so high here. Basically, oddsmakers believe the Bucs will have trouble covering -- and I don't just mean the 7½ points. But Tampa Bay still believes it's in the middle of the playoff picture, and it is. But it has road games with Denver, New Orleans and Atlanta, which means getting there will be a climb -- unless, of course, the Bucs pull the upset here, and good luck. The Broncos haven't lost at home since Houston beat them 31-25 the third week of the season.

The back story: Since Week 6, the Bucs lead the NFC with an average of 32.6 points per game. During that streak quarterback Josh Freeman has 16 touchdowns, three interceptions and a passer rating of 104.1.

Buccaneers Game Preview vs. Broncos: Analysis, prediction, TV info

Patrick Southern
CBSsports.com
November 30, 2012

Buccaneers at Broncos -- Week 13

Where: Sports Authority Field at Mile High, Denver (grass, outdoors)

When: Sunday, 4:05 p.m. ET (Fox)

Spread: Broncos by 7

Forecast: Mostly sunny. Projected kickoff temperature is mid-60s.

Records: Buccaneers (Overall: 6-5, NFC South: 2-2); Broncos (Overall: 8-3, AFC West: 4-0)

Past results: Two most recent meetings -- Oct. 5, 2008: Broncos 16, Bucs 13; Oct. 3, 2004: Broncos 16, Bucs 13. **Series record:** Denver leads 5-2, with Tampa Bay last win in 1999.

What matters: There are playoff implications aplenty heading into Sunday's game in Denver. The Broncos would clinch the AFC West title with a win or a Chargers loss. The Bucs are fighting to stay in wild-card contention with Atlanta all but sewing up the NFC South. Tampa Bay is tied for the final wild-card spot with Seattle and Minnesota, but the Seahawks hold the tiebreaker. Each game is absolutely vital down the stretch.

Who matters: Denver QB Peyton Manning, WRs Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker. On paper, this matchup seems almost too good to be true for the Broncos' passing game, which ranks fifth in the NFL, averaging 287.5 yards per game. If they play well, this game might never be close considering the Bucs' secondary, battling attrition issues, is statistically the NFL's worst, allowing 316 passing yards per game.

Key matchups: RB Doug Martin vs. the Denver run defense. The Broncos have a stingy pass defense that allows 210 yards per game -- fifth-best in the NFL. They have standout pass rushers in Von Miller and Elvis Dumervil. To take some pressure off QB Josh Freeman and the passing game, Martin will need to be productive. It won't be easy -- even for the league's fourth-leading rusher -- as Denver allows 98.7 rushing yards per game, ninth in the NFL.

Injuries of note: The Broncos lost RB Willis McGahee for the season with a knee injury, but Knowshon Moreno fared well in his stead last week, carrying 20 times for 85 yards. Bucs DT Roy Miller had missed time in practice this week due to illness but returned to action Friday and is expected to play. CB Eric Wright battled through an Achilles injury to play last week, but his suspension for Adderall use was upheld and begins Sunday.

Inside stuff: When it comes to Tampa Bay's rookie class, much of the attention rightly goes to Martin, who has been outstanding in his first NFL season. Much of the remaining focus is spent on fellow first-round pick Mark Barron, a safety who has been inconsistent. But quietly, LB Lavonte David may be playing as well as anyone. With 47 tackles and five tackles for loss in November, David earned NFL defensive rookie of the month honors. His speed and sure tackling ability has been a huge asset for the Bucs' defense.

Stat you should know: When Tampa Bay's receivers catch the ball, they gain yards in large chunks. WR Vincent Jackson is third in the NFL in yards per catch (20.4) and teammate Mike Williams is eighth (16.9). They are the only teammates in the top 10 in that category.

Looking ahead: The Bucs' beleaguered secondary may finally get a bit of respite next week against the Eagles -- assuming, of course, that Philadelphia QB Michael Vick is still injured and rookie Nick Foles continues to struggle. That game will be an absolute must-win for Tampa Bay's playoff hopes if the team loses to the Broncos.

Prediction: Denver 38, Tampa Bay 24

Week 13 Sunday Picks: Ravens poised to complete season sweep of the Steelers

Brian McIntyre
Shutdown Corner
November 30, 2012

Tampa Bay Buccaneers at Denver Broncos

Losing cornerback Eric Wright to a four-game PEDs suspension couldn't have come at a worse time for the Buccaneers, who are clinging to life in the NFC playoffs race and have to make the cross-country trip to Denver to face a Broncos a team that was held under 20 points for the first time this season in their 17-9 win over the Chiefs last Sunday. Peyton Manning remains a favorite to hoist the NFL Most Valuable Player and Comeback Player of the Year awards, but he's completed less than 60 percent of his passes — a rare occurrence for him this season — and has been sacked five times (nearly a third of his season total) over the last two games.

Pick: Broncos 24, Buccaneers 14

Broncos' Bailey still a champ at cornerback

The Sports Xchange
November 30, 2012

Another week, another one-on-one matchup for Champ Bailey against one of the league's best wide receivers, with Tampa Bay's Vincent Jackson lurking on the horizon Sunday. Lather, rinse, repeat.

After being occasionally placed solely at left cornerback, where teams could avoid him by simply shuttling their lesser receivers to that side, Bailey returned to his lock-down, singular-focus role of being primarily assigned to the opponent's top receiver to shut him down in one-on-one coverage this season.

The results have been what one would expect from a perennial Pro Bowler like Bailey who appears destined for a quick induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame -- but not what one would expect from a 34 year old who has been the subject of speculation the last two years that he would move to safety at some point before the end of his career.

Sure, Rod Woodson did it, and Tampa Bay's Ronde Barber is doing it now after spending 16 years at cornerback. Neither did anything to damage their reputations; if anything, they were enhanced.

"I kind of look up to them," said Bailey. "They show me how it's done as far as the move or taking care of themselves, just little things like that."

But Bailey sees their move as being the wrong one for him -- although he didn't say he would never accept a shift to safety.

"I don't plan on doing that," he said."

And why would he? In spite of facing a succession of receivers that has included New Orleans' Marques Colston, Carolina's Steve Smith, Kansas City's Dwayne Bowe and Houston's Andre Johnson after a mid-game reassignment in Week 3, Bailey has only surrendered one touchdown in the Broncos' last 17 games, including the playoffs. That touchdown was scored by Cincinnati's A.J. Green, and Bailey responded by squaring the duel with an interception one quarter later.

Furthermore, Bailey has taken the better of Jackson more often than not. In 12 career games against the Broncos, Jackson has never broken the 100-yard mark and has averaged 3.1 receptions for 49.8 yards. Not bad, but nothing dominant, either.

"You know, I think I got lucky a lot," Bailey said. The guy's a great player and he's proved it. You look at him this year, he looks different, he looks more motivated, like re-energized. He's playing at a higher level."

The numbers bear that out; Jackson is on pace for career highs in every major statistical category for a wide receiver.

"I think he battled some things the last couple of years in San Diego, so he looks fresh as can be," Bailey said.

So does Bailey, who has seen everything -- including 11 different defensive coordinators. He's seen so many changes that he saw the same coordinator, Mike Nolan, in two seasons a decade apart (1999 with Washington, 2009 with the Broncos).

But he hasn't seen life from the safety spot. And he hopes that remains the case for years to come.

Peyton Manning meets Colorado boy with same name

Dan Hanzus

NFL.com

November 30, 2012

You might remember our post in which we dug into the plight of young Peyton Manning, a 14-year-old Littleton, Colo., boy who was dealing with identity problems caused by his super-famous namesake.

In a storyline that sounded ripped from the plot of a straight-to-video sequel to "The Social Network," young Peyton Manning couldn't even get Facebook to let him use his own name in creating a profile. You're better than that, Zuckerberg.

Well, we suppose this story has a happy ending, because young Peyton Manning met the, um, old Peyton Manning on Friday at Denver Broncos practice. The visual proof was provided by a Broncos PR guy.

Patrick Smyth @psmyth12

Image of Broncos QB Peyton Manning meeting 14-year-old Littleton native Peyton Manning post practice. pic.twitter.com/TBvtm0H3

According to The Associated Press, the quarterback signed a football that read: "To Peyton, great name. All my best, your friend, Peyton Manning, 18."

The lesson? Name your kid after a famous contemporary athlete. He'll probably meet him one day.

Brandon Stokley knows it's good to be Peyton Manning's friend

Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
November 30, 2012

When Brandon Stokley canceled his 10-year anniversary trip with his wife to spend a week in February with Peyton Manning, neither the wide receiver nor the quarterback could have imagined what would come next.

How could they, back in February, have pictured that come November they'd be connecting for touchdowns during a run toward the playoffs with the Denver Broncos?

Back then, Manning was an Indianapolis Colt and in the early stages of working back into playing shape after a series of neck surgeries. Stokley was unemployed, injured and on the verge of retirement. His wife, Lana, was telling friends and relatives Stokley's football career was over.

While Manning is an MVP candidate in his comeback season, Stokley's comeback is just as remarkable, if not even more improbable. At 36, and with five regular-season games left, Stokley has 36 catches for 449 yards — his best numbers since 2008 — and five touchdowns.

He has become the 11th player in NFL history 36 or older with at least 30 catches and five touchdowns in a season.

Stokley's most recent touchdown came two weeks ago in Denver, as he lined up in his familiar slot position, faked out a San Diego Chargers defensive back and sprinted, uncovered, to the end zone. It was an easy throw for Manning and an easy catch for Stokley.

As Stokley celebrated in the end zone, he looked up, seeking eye contact with his 8-year-old son, Cameron. Even through the crowd, Cameron was easy to find: He was the only kid so happy he was crying.

"To see the smile on his face is priceless," Stokley said. "He's so emotional. He's bawling his eyes out."

Moments like that, Stokley reminded himself, were why he chose to turn back from the brink of retirement.

It wasn't for money (he signed a one-year deal for the veteran minimum), and it wasn't to chase a title (he has two Super Bowl rings, one each with the Baltimore Ravens and Colts). Stokley wanted one more chance to play alongside Manning, in

the city Stokley has adopted as home now that his kids are old enough to remember it.

When the final seconds expired on that win, Cameron and a third-grade buddy joined Stokley on the field. The boys took pictures with the Broncos' mascot and followed Stokley into the locker room, where Cameron grabbed Stokley's team-issued iPad and started flipping through game film.

Stokley's favorite memories from his childhood are of the times he spent on the field and in the locker room with his dad, Nelson Stokley, the coach at Louisiana-Lafayette from 1986 to 1998. Nelson Stokley died from complications of Alzheimer's disease in 2010.

"Those are the best memories I have with my dad. They're all from football, and I want my son to be able to have those, too," Stokley said.

When the Stokleys returned to their home south of Denver, Stokley was able to share the moment with his other son. Carson, 6, is autistic and doesn't have the attention span to sit through a game. So he watches on TV and cheers for his dad. He doesn't understand the intricacies, but he knows the guy in the No. 14 jersey.

"He'll say, 'Go, Dad!' I guess he thinks I'm on TV all the time," Stokley said. "Nobody can put a smile on my face like he can."

The Stokley family chose to stay in Colorado after Stokley's release by the Broncos in 2010 in large part because Carson was attending school at Denver's Firefly Autism, where he is enrolled in a kindergarten program.

"We wanted him to have the best possible care so he could try to be as normal as possible," Stokley said. "It's great to see him overcome obstacles and watch him grow.

The normal child picks things up so easy and so quick. What it might take a normal kid one day, it'll take my son six months to pick up, but when he does, it's so rewarding and nice to see because he's so proud of himself."

Unlikely return

Stokley was settling into his role of ex-football player and full-time dad — coaching flag football and baseball, driving the boys to and from school — when Manning kick-started his comeback with that February call.

Manning promised Stokley tickets to the Duke-North Carolina basketball game if Stokley would come to Durham, N.C., to play catch. Stokley, after promising Lana they would reschedule the anniversary trip, accepted, even if he didn't feel like he had much to offer.

Stokley, who had 31 catches for the Seattle Seahawks in 2010, played in two games for the New York Giants last season before he suffered a torn quadriceps. He

was released from injured reserve after reaching a settlement with the team, and he had given up on his intensive, NFL-level rehab by early December.

"I hadn't run in three, four months, and the last time I did it didn't feel good," Stokley said.

To his surprise, as Stokley ran through routes on the Duke practice field, he felt like an NFL player again, albeit one who was, he said, "terribly out of shape."

Stokley and Manning reconnected a few weeks later when Manning made Denver the first stop on his free agent tour. Manning slept in the guest room at Stokley's house, and Manning, Stokley and Cameron went to a nearby park to throw and catch between visits with the Broncos.

"I never thought I would be part of the deal. I really didn't. I never asked him for that," Stokley said.

"That's not why I wanted him to come here, so that I could come back. I wanted him to come here because I love watching him play, and I wanted my son to go to games and watch Peyton Manning play. I tried to sell him on the organization and the city, let him know it's a great place to play football and raise a family."

Stokley's sales pitch obviously worked, with Manning picking the Broncos over Tennessee, San Francisco and Arizona. When voluntary workouts began in April, Manning helped bring Stokley back to the Broncos. Manning told Denver's coaches what he saw from Stokley in their workouts together.

The Broncos needed a slot receiver, and they needed help in teaching a young receiving corps about what it would take to play with Manning. As Stokley began working with the first-team offense in practice not long after he signed Soon it became clear that Stokley had come back to contribute, not just to be a mentor to Eric Decker and Demaryius Thomas or a security blanket for Manning.

"Brandon is one of my favorite teammates of all time," Manning said. "For a guy his age to be able to keep his quickness is pretty rare for a wide receiver. He can be a matchup problem for teams."

Decker, who was a rookie when Stokley was in his last stint with the Broncos, has keeps film of those 2003-2005 Indianapolis teams on his iPad, and pays particular attention to Stokley. Decker said the Stokley he sees now for the Broncos looks remarkably similar.

Stokley appreciates the compliment from his buddy, but he says, "I don't want to play good for a 36-year-old. I want to play good for a football player."

Eric Decker not related to Minnesota officer killed in line of duty

Mike Florio

Pro Football Talk

November 30, 2012

We've been flooded with questions today regarding whether Broncos receiver Eric Decker, a native of Cold Spring, Minnesota, is related to Tom Decker, a 31-year-old Cold Spring police officer who was killed Thursday night in an apparent ambush.

Eric Decker's agent, Todd France, tells PFT that Eric Decker is not related to Tom Decker.

It makes the situation no less tragic. Tom Decker has four young children. He and his partner were responding to a call regarding a potentially suicidal man. When they arrived, the man shot and killed Decker.

It's a reminder of the risks law-enforcement personnel take every day. We extend our condolences to Officer Tom Decker's family, friends, and colleagues.

Bucs to face 4-time MVP Manning

Rick Brown
The Lakeland Ledger
November 30, 2012

TAMPA - If the other games were quizzes for the Tampa Bay Bucs secondary this is its biggest test as it faces future Hall of Fame quarterback Peyton Manning and the high-powered Broncos' offense. And Manning doesn't grade on a curve.

Manning has returned from a year off after neck surgery and seemingly hasn't skipped a beat.

The league's only four-time MVP has completed nearly 70 percent of his passes (277-of-409) for 3,260 yards, 26 touchdowns and just eight interceptions and has the Broncos one victory from clinching the AFC West Division title.

While others may have worried about Manning returning from injury, he wasn't one of them.

"If the doctors recommended that I didn't play, that would have been the end of it," Manning said. "That just wasn't the scenario. I got second opinion after second opinion. It became a performance issue for me."

Some analysts have said Manning's throws don't have the same zip as they did in the past. That's OK, Manning said.

"I really feel like I am a different quarterback," he said. "I don't think I'm trying to be the quarterback I was when I was 28, 29. I'm 36-years old. I'm coming off a season off. I'm with a new team (with) new teammates. I'm kind of reestablishing myself as a quarterback at this time. It's a totally new chapter in my football career and I'm trying to be the best quarterback I can in this chapter. I'm really not trying to outdo the player I was earlier in my career."

The Broncos are OK with it as well, that's why despite making the playoffs last year, they wanted the future hall of famer.

"It's been all positive," said Denver coach John Fox. "Our expectations obviously were high. I don't think it's any doubt when Peyton is done playing he's a first-ballot hall of famer. Anytime you can acquire a guy like that you have high expectations. He was coming off of an injury, an injury that was going to take a lot of hard work on his part. I think it's pretty historical what he's done and what he had to overcome to do it."

Manning said he still goes through rehab but is OK.

That has been bad news for teams.

The Broncos are riding a six-game winning streak. Manning has passed for 300 or more yards in six games this year. He has six games of at least three touchdown passes and seven games with a passer rating of 100 or higher.

With nine completions against the Bucs on Sunday, he will move into second place in the all-time list.

Now, Manning is going to face a defense that is last in the league in passing yards allowed and who lost top corner Eric Wright to a four-game suspension for violating the league's policy on performance enhancing substances.

"I don't give a whole lot of credit to statistics," Manning said. "I kinda go by what I see on film and I see a defense that is playing fast, playing hard and creating some turnovers."

The Bucs defense, however, know it has to play better this week, starting with the defensive front.

"You've got to get your hands up," said Tampa Bay defensive lineman Gerald McCoy. "If you don't faze him, he can play 7-on-7 and that's not good. If you're not going to get there, you can get your hands up, you can get in his face and you can bat the pass. So there's a lot of ways you can affect him and we're going to have too."

Defensive end Michael Bennett, who leads the Bucs with seven sacks, agrees.

"We've got to find a way," he said. "This is the NFL. It's our job to get to the quarterback. We've got to find a way to be better at doing it."

Meanwhile, Manning said he is still trying to get comfortable.

"I did not know what to expect," he said. "It was obviously uncharted territory for me being with a new team and missing an entire season; two things I never experienced. It was an adjustment process and it continues to be an adjustment process. Every day I learn something new about my teammates, our system here, how the Denver Broncos operate or something about myself physically. I continue to do rehab. It's very much been a process. It's a challenge but it's one that I try to attack every day."

NOTES: Tampa Bay linebacker Dekoda Watson was named NFC Special Teams Player of the Month for November. Also, linebacker Lavonte David was named NFC Rookie of the Month. Bucs become just the fourth team to have a player claim rookie honors on offense and defense in the same season.

Broncos Game Preview vs. Buccaneers: Analysis, Prediction, TV info

Andrew Mason
CBSSports.com
November 30, 2012

Broncos vs. Buccaneers -- Week 13

Where: Sports Authority Field at Mile High, Denver (grass, outdoors)

When: Sunday, 4:05 p.m. EST (CBS)

Spread: Broncos by 7

Forecast: Mostly sunny, 63 degrees

Records: Broncos (8-3; AFC West 4-0), Buccaneers (6-5; NFC South 2-2)

Past results: Two most recent meetings -- Oct. 5, 2004: Broncos 16, Bucs 12; Oct. 3, 2004: Broncos 16, Bucs 13. **Series record:** Broncos lead 5-2.

What matters: The Broncos face a team with a winning record for the first time since Oct. 15. Although the Bucs come in after a 24-23 loss to the Falcons last week, they have plenty of momentum, averaging 33 points a game since their Week 5 bye. Tampa Bay is one of only two teams (New England is the other) to score more points in its past seven games than the Broncos, which could set up a shootout.

Denver is a win -- or a Chargers loss -- from clinching the AFC West, which would give them back-to-back division championships for the first time since 1986-87. But their sights are set on a first-round bye. They have the fourth seed now but face AFC North leaders Baltimore in two weeks and already lose head-to-head tiebreakers to New England and Houston, so the Broncos can't afford a stumble if they want to avoid a potentially dangerous wild-card date with Indianapolis. If the Broncos stumble Sunday, they'll likely be left needing plenty of help to be one of the top-two seeds.

Who matters: LB/DE Von Miller and DE Elvis Dumervil will be counted on to not only pressure Bucs QB Josh Freeman but contain RB Doug Martin. Since Week 6 -- when Keith Brooking became the starting middle linebacker -- the Broncos have the league's best rushing defense in yardage per game, yardage per carry and first-down percentage against. The Chiefs ran for 148 yards and 4.8 yards per carry last week, including 107 yards by Jamaal Charles.

QB Peyton Manning could be poised for a big day. The Bucs rank last in the league in passing yardage allowed and are third-worst in completion percentage against. But Manning has thrown four interceptions in the past four weeks, and the Bucs are third in the league with 16 interceptions and have six in their past four games.

Key matchup: Vincent Jackson and Champ Bailey have plenty of experience against each other from Jackson's seven seasons with the Chargers, but Bailey more often than not had the upper hand in the one-on-one duel. The Broncos have held Jackson to per-game averages of 3.1 receptions and 49.8 yards and three total touchdowns in 12 games.

But Bailey downplays his success and sees a different Jackson on tape this year than the one he faced during those divisional duels.

"You know, I think I got lucky a lot," Bailey said. "The guy's a great player, and he's proved it. You look at him this year, he looks different, he looks more motivate, like re-energized. He's playing at a higher level."

Injuries of note: Broncos WR Brandon Stokley was limited in practice this week because of wrist and hip injuries and is listed as questionable. ... C/G Manny Ramirez (back) and OT Chris Clark (illness) are also questionable. Ramirez practiced all week and fully participated in Friday's work, and Clark was ill Friday after practicing the previous two days. ... DE Robert Ayers isn't injured but was away from the team all week after the unexpected death of his father at age 52. He is listed as questionable. He was excused from work all week and "he's where he should be right now," Broncos coach John Fox said.

Inside stuff: The Bucs were in position to draft Martin because of a draft-day trade with Denver. The Broncos traded down to the No. 31 slot, then dealt that pick to Tampa Bay for the No. 36 and 101 selections, which became DE/DT Derek Wolfe and CB Omar Bolden, respectively. Wolfe is a promising starter and Bolden is a special-teamer, but the early judgment on the deal would give the edge to Tampa Bay, considering Martin is on pace for the best season by a rookie running back since Indianapolis' Edgerrin James in 1999.

Connections: Broncos QB Peyton Manning and TE Jacob Tamme were teammates of Buccaneers TE Dallas Clark in Indianapolis before the three moved on in the offseason. ... Broncos DT Justin Bannan and Buccaneers DT Gary Gibson were teammates last year with the Rams. ... Broncos C Dan Koppen and Bucs WR Tiquan Underwood were together with the Patriots last year. ... Bucs WR Vincent Jackson is from Colorado Springs. ... Broncos WR Andre Caldwell is from Tampa ... Hall of Fame semifinalist John Lynch, who will call Sunday's game for Fox, played for the Bucs (1993-2003) and Broncos (2004-07).

Stat you should know: The Bucs are third in the NFL with 16 interceptions, and the Broncos have a turnover in 18 consecutive games, including playoffs.

Record watch: Manning is a touchdown pass from the Broncos' single-season record of 27, set by John Elway (1998) and Jake Plummer (2004). ... Miller is three sacks from tying the Broncos' franchise record of 27, set by Dumervil in 2009. ... Dumervil is a forced fumble from matching the club single-season record of six, set by Dennis Smith in 1989.

Looking ahead: The Broncos make their requisite Thursday night appearance four days later, traveling to Oakland before a trip to Baltimore the following week. Those two games -- particularly against the Ravens -- will determine whether the Broncos are playing for a first-round bye when they close the season against the Browns and Chiefs at home, teams that are a collective 4-18.

Prediction: Broncos 31, Buccaneers 23.

Notes: Broncos welcome Aussie rules club St. Kilda

Andrew Mason

Mile High Sports

November 30, 2012

ENGLEWOOD – John Fox and the Broncos welcomed the St. Kilda Football Club to their headquarters on Friday afternoon, and Fox took a break from practice to explain the nuances of American football and high-altitude training to the Australian Rules football team.

St. Kilda is in the midst of a high-altitude training period in Boulder, which includes an open practice session tomorrow morning at 9:15 a.m.

The Saints' season starts March 30. Australian rules football plays on a fall-winter schedule in the Southern Hemisphere.

Fox said one of his sons recently returned from studying in Melbourne, so he relished the chance to catch up on happenings in that part of Australia.

The St. Kilda players and coaches also met with kicker Matt Prater, punter Britton Colquitt and safety Mike Adams after practice.

AYERS QUESTIONABLE: Robert Ayers missed a third consecutive practice following his father's death and is listed as "questionable" for Sunday. Ayers played last week, less than 24 hours after hearing the news, but returned to the East Coast on Monday.

"He's where he should be right now," Fox said.

If Ayers can't play, rookie Malik Jackson would likely see more playing time in the defensive-line rotation.

Also listed as questionable are tackle Chris Clark (illness) guard/center Manny Ramirez (back) and wide receiver Brandon Stokley (hip/wrist). Clark was added to the injury report Friday after not practicing because he was sick. Ramirez and Stokley practiced all week, although Stokley was limited each day.

No other Bronco is any worse than probable.

Tampa Bay Buccaneers Bring Great Offense To Mile High City

Rich Kurtzman
CBS Denver
November 30, 2012

The Bucs stop here?

Denver's defense hopes it's the case when Tampa Bay comes to Sports Authority Field at Mile High Stadium this week. The Buccaneers boast a balanced offensive philosophy, asking Josh Freeman to throw for big plays and for Doug Martin to run all over the field. To wit, Tampa's 28.2 points per game are the fourth-most of any team and against the best offenses—Atlanta, Houston, New England—the Broncos were bested. It's why defense is the first and foremost key to victory this week for the orange and blue.

Fourth-year man Freeman has developed into a fantastic young quarterback, with a strong arm, solid decision-making and escapability. Freeman's 21 touchdowns are good for sixth-most and he's only thrown seven interceptions; protecting the ball and taking advantage of his scoring opportunities. He's got tall and strong receivers to get the ball to in Vincent Jackson and Mike Williams. Jackson, a former star in college at Northern Colorado, has always enjoyed playing against the Broncos, with many big games in a San Diego Chargers uniform. He leads the team with 959 yards and seven touchdowns and his teammate Williams (625 yards, five TDs) is no slouch either. Both of them love the huge play and each are averaging over 16 yards per catch this season. If anyone can match up with those receiving threats it's Denver's smart secondary including Champ Bailey, Chris Harris and Tony Carter at cornerback.

Where Tampa Bay is the biggest threat against the Broncos is in the run game, with Martin and LaGarrette Blount. Martin, nicknamed the "Muscle Hamster," has already gained 1,050 yards and seven TDs this season. He's smallish, at 5'9" 215 pounds, but it's a bit deceptive as he's shown the ability to bust runs through the tackles. Maybe his most valuable asset, though, is his speed and elusiveness. If Denver's D doesn't show up early for a second straight week, Martin—and Blount too—will run to their hearts' content. Although, the Broncos' allow a second-best 3.6 yards per carry, and if they tackle more soundly this Sunday, it'll turn the Tampa offense one-dimensional.

On defense, the Buccaneers bring the NFL's best rush defense, allowing only 82 yards per game and 3.4 yards per rush to opponents. Denver lost their starting running back Willis McGahee two weeks ago, and Knowshon Moreno stepped up his game last week to run for 85 yards. The Broncos need a repeat performance from Moreno to keep the Bucs' defense honest, but where their offense will make the most gains is through the passing game.

Peyton Manning is arguably the NFL's MVP through 11 games, as he continually proves he's one of the greatest quarterbacks to ever play football. Manning's got to be licking his chops leading up to this contest, as the Tampa Bay pass defense is the league's worst in yards and yards per attempt given up. Conversely, Manning's 7.4 yards per attempt are No. 1 among qualifying QBs—odds are, he's going to have a huge day. Demaryius Thomas surpassed 1,000 yards receiving last week, and he'll look to only build on that mark, while his receiving mate Eric Decker leads the team in touchdowns with eight. What could possibly hurt the Broncos passing game is if slot man Brandon Stokley cannot play due to an injured wrist and hip. But, playing in Denver's favor is Buccaneers' cornerback Eric Wright being suspended for using Adderall, meaning ageless wonder Ronde Barber may have to be moved to corner.

On special teams, the Broncos look to again have the advantage, as Trindon Holliday has now returned two kicks (one punt, one kickoff) for a touchdown in only six games with the team.

The game kicks off at 2 p.m. MT and can be seen on CBS.

BRING THE SUPER BOWL TO DENVER

Why Roger Goodell ought to do it

Chris Bianchi
Mile High Sports
November 30, 2012

To: Roger Goodell
Commissioner, No (snow)Flakes League
280 Park Avenue, 15th floor
New York, NY 10002

Dear Roger,

So, I know you've got a lot on your plate, from Adderall to those gosh-darn zebras, but I need you to hear me out for a quick-ish minute. You see, I'm writing from Denver, and as you probably know, we want the Super Bowl in about six years. And the truth is, we really should get it.

Before you flip this aside and comb your hair again (great locks, by the way), consider this: It might be the best Super Bowl you've ever had, from the weather (like, for real) to making some of your best customers even happier and more willing to cough up even more dough.

You're probably thinking from those warm and cozy offices there on Park Avenue in the Big Apple, "Oh yeah, Colorado. I take my twin daughters skiing there. Love me some Vail!"

Believe me, I know. Last week, I was back in the New York suburb where I grew up and I always get the same response when I say I live in Denver.

"Whoa, Denver! Cool, dude! You ski or board?"

Well, dude, I don't really do a whole lot of either. It's fun, but that's beyond the point. People, like you (and before I moved here, me) tend to think of Denver as a winter wonderland, filled with blizzards and thick parkas. Kind of like Canada, except a smidge further south.

It's not your fault. Our hockey, basketball and baseball teams all have mountains in their logos, and that hockey team is called the "Avalanche." Even our damn license

plates have mountains on them.

But here's the thing: Denver's not that cold, or snowy.

If you put a Super Bowl in Denver, chances are, you're going to have a clear and cold (but not that cold) night. There's double the chance (Denver gets 5.6 precipitation days in February as opposed to about 10 precipitation days in eastern New Jersey in the same month) that you're going to have to deal with an annoying snowstorm during your 2014 Super Bowl than a potential 2018 Super Bowl here at a mile high.

Okay, so it might be a little chilly, about the same temperature as the 2014 Super Bowl, by the way, but yes, it'll probably be in the 20s and 30s. But really, what's the big deal about the cold?

Perhaps the NFL should outlaw NFC Championship Games in Green Bay (average January temperature: 15.6 degrees Fahrenheit) or Chicago (average January temperature: 25 degrees), or AFC title tilts in New England (average Foxboro temperature in January: 27 degrees) or Cleveland (average January temperature: really bleeping cold) if that's the big concern.

Chances are, you're looking at a game that'll be played between 25 and 35 degrees. That's, on average, warmer than Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Baltimore, New England, Chicago, Green Bay, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Detroit, Philadelphia, Kansas City, Minneapolis and St. Louis.

That's almost half the league - and only four of those stadiums are indoors. Bet you didn't know that.

Fans will still enjoy the game, perhaps even more so with the added nip in the air. And remember, fans put up with way worse two years ago at Jerry World, where in the lead-up to Super Bowl XLV; they had to maneuver around an ice storm, which turned the streets of Dallas into a skating rink for three days. And then some of those same fans couldn't even get into the Super Bowl with valid tickets.

Sorry, don't mean to be too critical, Rog. But that seriously had to suck for those guys.

When you think of football, you don't think about playing in short sleeves and 80-degree weather. You think about those snow-covered, January games where tackles hurt that much more on the cold surface and where each player's breath looks like he just smoked two cigarettes at once.

It's hard to refer to Green Bay as "The Frozen Tundra" if you're playing indoors. Maybe one of the best AFC Championship (albeit controversial) Games in recent memory was the "Tuck Rule" game in 2001, where the Pats topped the Raiders 16-13 in dumping snow and 20-degree temperatures, with Adam Vinatieri sending the game to overtime on a 45-yard field goal in six inches of snow. The weather made that game.

And remember, this is Denver, home of John Elway and now, Peyton Manning. Denver has been hogging *SportsCenter* for two-and-a-half years now, from Tim Tebow to Manning to all the side drama in between. Denver is one of your best markets, currently enjoying its 43rd straight year of selling out Mile High. This town lives and breathes through the performance of the local pigskin team. And hey, it's always good to give a little love to your best customers, eh?

Finally, you probably point out that, well, I'll take a shot on a cold weather Super Bowl in New York, the top market in the country; Denver's just the 18th biggest market. But as far as you're concerned, Roger, Denver's a top-five market. Only the Giants, Packers, Redskins and Steelers have sellout streaks that even compare to what Broncos fans have done here. And, oh yeah, our college football is a train-wreck around here, so all eyes on you, bud.

So, Rog, whaddya say?

Love,
Chris in not-so-cold Denver

Four Broncos Named Hall-of-Fame Semifinalists

Sam Davis
DenverBroncos.com
November 30, 2012

Four Broncos are closer to Canton. DenverBroncos.com sat down with one of them, John Lynch.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- On Friday, the Hall of Fame Selection Committee announced 27 modern-era semifinalists. **Four of them are former Broncos.**

Running back Terrell Davis (1995-2001), safety John Lynch (2004-07), linebacker Karl Mecklenburg (1983-94) and safety Steve Atwater (1989-98) all advanced from the previously announced list of 127 preliminary nominees.

"I'm just humbled to be amongst 27 terrific players, coaches and even general managers," **Lynch told DenverBroncos.com shortly after hearing the news.** "It's always an awkward thing to talk about because there's nothing I can do about it. My job interview was the 15 years I played."

Lynch joins Atwater as one of two former Broncos safeties that move one step closer to enshrinement into Canton, Ohio's Pro Football Hall of Fame. As a young player, Lynch modeled his game after the 10-year Bronco. Years later, Lynch is on the same list as Atwater as a Hall-of-Fame semifinalist, which makes the honor even greater.

"I was a fan of Steve Atwater from the time I moved to safety in college," Lynch said. "Early in my career, (former Buccaneers coach) Herm Edwards made me a tape when he first got to Tampa Bay. He said, 'This is the guy I want you to be.' It was a highlight tape of Steve Atwater. So it's really humbling."

Lynch also recalled playing against and watching Davis, who compiled 7,607 rushing yards and 60 rushing touchdowns as the Broncos' back. He felt strongly that Davis belonged in the Hall.

"When he played, he was if not the best player in the league, one of the best," Lynch said. "I've got my own opinions that he definitely should be in. When he played, he was so darn good."

The safety that racked up 490 tackles and 26 interceptions also discussed his respect and admiration for Mecklenburg, a linebacker that played all over the field. Lynch admired the impact that Mecklenburg made on the city and the organization during his time in Denver.

"I know what he means to this place," Lynch said. "He is a good guy on top of being a tremendous player. You talk about versatility, that guy played every position on the front seven and he probably could have played safety."

The 27 semifinalists will be reduced to 15 finalists in early January.

"Now, you sit back and you're humbled that you are in the company of these names," Lynch said.

Lynch Learns He Is Closer to Canton

Sam Davis

DenverBroncos.com

November 30, 2012

Former Broncos safety, now FOX broadcaster John Lynch was sitting in a conference room at Dove Valley waiting to speak with quarterback Peyton Manning as part of his preparations for his broadcast of Sunday's game against Tampa Bay, when he received some unexpected news.

Vice President of Corporate Communications Jim Saccomano, a friend of Lynch from their time spent together in the Broncos organization, walked in and happily informed him that he is one of 27 semifinalists for the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

"He made me a little nervous because he said, 'Congratulations — but let me check,'" Lynch laughed. "And he backtracked a little bit. But then he brought the sheet in (to prove it), and it's all good."

Saccomano didn't mean to make Lynch nervous, but the pair laughed about it afterwards.

"I had looked at it and saw his name, so I immediately ran in and told him," said Saccomano, a part of the Broncos for more than three decades. "And then I joked with him, and said I hope it wasn't John something else that started with an L. And then I ran and got the full list and gave it to him."

Lynch said he was humbled by the news, and will cherish the accomplishment as he waits for the Selection Committee to narrow the group down to 15 in January. As Lynch said, it's out of his control.

"My job interview was the 15 years I played," Lynch said. "Now, you sit back and you're humbled that you are in the company of these names."

Peyton Meets Peyton

Tyler Everett

DenverBroncos.com

November 30, 2012

The Broncos quarterback wasn't the only person named Peyton Manning in attendance at Friday's practice.

The team was joined by an eighth grader with the same name as the famous signal caller. The younger Manning said the introduction was one he had looked forward to his entire life.

"It was a great experience," the eighth grader said. "It was really good to meet somebody who's been my idol my whole life and such a classy guy. It was just really good to meet him."

The boy's parents named him after Manning when he made the decision to return to the University of Tennessee for his senior season. He said that aside from people's skepticism that his name is really Peyton Manning, he's always enjoyed having the same name as one of his heroes.

"There's been no limitations," the boy said. "The biggest problem is nowadays people don't believe me about my name. They're all like, 'Oh, you're kidding around.' Or substitute teachers will think I'm just playing a joke on them, but I'm always serious."

The younger Manning has been a fan of No. 18 since the quarterback's days with the Indianapolis Colts, as evidenced by a 2006 family Christmas card with the young Peyton and both his siblings in Manning jerseys.

In addition to watching practice and touring the Broncos' Dove Valley practice facility, the younger Manning posed for a picture with his longtime idol and received an autographed football. He also left with a bit of advice for his young hockey career, and as a captain of his youth travel team, the elder Manning's words made an impact.

"We just talked and he gave me great advice on how to be a good leader in life and in hockey," the eighth grader said. "He said to lead through examples, always be working hard and make sure to set the bar high, work as hard as you can whenever you can."

Broncos Host AFL's St. Kilda Saints

Tyler Everett

DenverBroncos.com

November 30, 2012

On Friday, the St. Kilda Football Club of the Australian Football league visited Dove Valley, touring the Broncos' facilities and taking in practice from the sidelines.

The visit gave the players an up-close look at a sport many of them admire from afar.

"It's a wonderful experience for us to be able to come over here," team captain and center half-forward Nick Ryewoldt said. "We're at the top of our game in Australia, but we've got a population of 25 million. To be able to come over here and witness firsthand one of the great teams of American sport is wonderful."

Ryewoldt, who said his American wife has converted him into a football fan, has attended NFL games before, but said he looked forward to seeing his first NFL practice.

"First time seeing a team practice live, which will be great," Ryewoldt said. "It's a team sport obviously and we play the same. But a very different sort of athletes. Our game is more endurance-based and every player has to be skillful and handle the ball, whereas this is obviously a big power sport and a lot more specialized sort of skills. I'm just excited to see how they go about it, how they approach their training sessions."

Ryewoldt and his teammates will also be in attendance at Sunday's game against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, where they'll be able to see how the Broncos' work in practice has prepared them for game day.

"I know they've got one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time, and a good set of receivers, some really exciting defensive players and pretty good on special teams, so I follow it pretty closely," Ryewoldt said. "We're going to the game on Sunday, so we're excited to watch the whole process unfold, the training and the practice and how they transfer that into a real-life game situation."

The Saints have kicked off their preseason in Boulder, where they are holding a 16-day High Performance Altitude Training Camp at the University of Colorado in preparation for the 2013 AFL Premiership Season. The training will include hikes through the Rocky Mountains and other activities that the Saints and a handful of other AFL teams are doing to get ready for the upcoming season.

On Sunday, the game against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers will be televised on Australia on Network TEN's One HD channel.

All Eyes on the Bucs

Eric Decker

DenverBroncos.com

November 30, 2012

We know where we are in the standings, but you won't hear us talking about it in the locker room. Our ultimate goal is to win one week at a time. Tampa Bay is a very tough team. They've got a good back in Doug Martin and an explosive offense. We've got to be able to play with them and make sure we don't turn the ball over, because their defense is very good at creating turnovers. Right now our goal is to win this one, move forward and win the next, and hopefully position ourselves in a good spot where we want to be come playoff time.

In the Bucs secondary, Ronde Barber covers their youth. He's a very smart player. He's around the ball a lot and making plays. That's something that's going to be a challenge for us as receivers. We've got to make sure that we're sound with our technique and we're getting to the right spots for Peyton.

Like I said, turnovers determine games. We always talk about giving it away versus taking turnovers — if you're always in the positive, you'll have success. You'll see more wins. That's why our goal is to eliminate them on offense and make sure we get a few defensively.

One thing is it's always nice to be home. I know we've got a stretch here, I think three of the last five are at home. So it's nice to have that home field advantage, especially at this time of year when it's so crucial to set yourself up for a playoff run.

Talk to you next week.