

Broncos aim for No. 2 seed, with key game at Baltimore on Dec. 16

Mike Klis
The Denver Post
December 4, 2012

There is hope for the Broncos to gain the No. 2 AFC playoff seed because, believe it or not, there will be hope they can beat the Baltimore Ravens at M&T Bank Stadium in two weeks.

True, the Broncos have been historically awful in Baltimore since a franchise was transplanted to the Inner Harbor from Cleveland in 1996. The Broncos not only are 0-5 in road games against the Ravens, they have lost by an average of 17 points.

So where is the hope? In Peyton Manning, of course. Manning has won four consecutive games at Baltimore. His personal winning streak was put together while he was with the Indianapolis Colts, but he's the Broncos' quarterback now.

And, as the Broncos have steadily learned throughout this season, whatever trend that's been established from their past doesn't mean squat now that they have Manning in the present. And so the Broncos will not necessarily be doomed from the moment they step on the field Dec. 16 in Baltimore.

Wait a minute. What's that? Is that looking too far ahead?

Everybody knows Broncos coach John Fox doesn't want his players to look past Thursday's game against the rival Oakland Raiders in the Black Hole. And everyone has heard how Broncos players come out of meetings parroting what their coach just told them.

But where's the fun in that?

"We still want to keep getting better throughout the season," Manning said. "Not a whole lot of time to think about it with a game on Thursday."

The Broncos say their only focus in the next three days will be on trying to beat the Raiders in Denver's fifth and final prime-time game of the regular season. But if the Broncos are going to play multiple prime-time games in the postseason, don't they have to slip past Baltimore and the New England Patriots and gain the No. 2 seed?

"We win the rest of them, chances are we'll like the result," Fox said after his news conference Monday. "We can't win the rest of them if we don't win this one (against Oakland)."

By running away with the AFC West Division title, the Broncos have clinched a first-round home playoff game. The No. 2 seed, though, would bring the added benefits of a first-round bye and a home playoff game in the second round.

It also would reduce their chances of having to win a mid-January playoff game against the Ravens in Baltimore or Tom Brady and Bill Belichick in New England.

Even Manning has had a tough time beating Brady and Belichick in New England.

"We've still got a lot of business to take care of," said Broncos defensive end Elvis Dumervil. "How that other stuffs falls out, we'll see how it plays out."

Compared to the Ravens and Patriots, the Broncos easily have the weakest remaining schedule, at least on paper. The Ravens' final four opponents are so difficult, they will have to play well merely to finish 2-2. The Patriots are getting ready for a two-week gauntlet against the current No. 1 AFC seed, the 11-1 Houston Texans this Sunday, then 8-3-1 San Francisco on Sunday night in two weeks.

On paper, the Broncos appear to have just one toughie remaining — at Baltimore. Looking ahead, should the Broncos, Ravens and Patriots all wind up with the same record, the tiebreaker of conference record would not favor Denver. New England also has the head-to-head tiebreaker against the Broncos because the Pats won an earlier meeting this season, 31-21.

So the Broncos will have to earn the No. 2 seed by finishing with a better record than New England and by beating Baltimore. That's why their game Dec. 16 in Baltimore will be huge.

Providing, of course, the Broncos don't get caught looking past their Thursday night game in Oakland.

-

Trying hard to be No. 2

The Houston Texans are in good shape for the No. 1 AFC playoff seed. The No. 2 seed, though, is possible for the Broncos. Denver would most likely need to win the No. 2 seed outright. A three-way tie between Denver, Baltimore and New England would not favor the Broncos because of conference record in the tiebreaker. The Broncos have the easiest remaining schedule of the AFC's current top five teams:

1. Houston (11-1)

at New England (9-3)

vs. Indianapolis (8-4)

vs. Minnesota (6-6)

at Indianapolis (8-4)

Opponent record: 31-17 (.646)

2. New England (9-3)

vs. Houston (11-1)

vs. San Francisco (8-3-1)

at Jacksonville (2-10)

vs. Miami (5-7)

Opponent record: 26-21-1 (.552)

3. Baltimore (9-3)

at Washington (5-6)

vs. Broncos (9-3)

vs. New York Giants (7-4)

at Cincinnati (7-5)

Opponent record: 28-18 (.609)

4. Broncos (9-3)

at Oakland (3-9)

at Baltimore (9-3)

vs. Cleveland (4-8)

vs. Kansas City (2-10)

Opponent record: 18-30 (.375)

5. Indianapolis (8-4)

vs. Tennessee (4-8)

at Houston (11-1)

at Kansas City (2-10)

vs. Houston (11-1)

Opponent record: 28-20 (.583)

Inside the game: Broncos' versatility in passing game makes trouble for opponents

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
December 4, 2012

EDITOR'S NOTE: NFL reporter Jeff Legwold analyzes the Broncos' 31-23 victory over the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on Sunday and looks ahead:

There is one question, about fourth in the order in all of those tossed at quarterback Peyton Manning earlier this season. It usually came after "How's the neck?"

"Are you all the way back?"

And "Are you concerned about your arm strength, given (insert specific pass here)?"

It was the question about how long it would take Manning to develop chemistry with the Broncos' receivers. At least the chemistry that went beyond Brandon Stokley and Jacob Tamme, two of Manning's former teammates in Indianapolis, now running pass routes in Denver.

Well, consider better living through offensive chemistry underway. And the chief beneficiaries are most anyone who can catch a pass for the Broncos, but most notably Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker, Joel Dreessen and Tamme.

All four are headed for career years.

Thomas, seemingly growing each day in his ability to link up with Manning on the fly, has set single-season career bests in catches (69), yards (1,114) and touchdowns (eight). His two touchdown catches Sunday in the victory over the Buccaneers came into windows roughly the size of the ball.

Decker has set career bests in catches (56) and yards (702) and tied his career best in touchdown catches (eight). Dreessen needs only seven receptions over the last four games to set a career-best there and Tamme has 47 receptions with four games to play, 20 away from his career-best of 67, set when he last played with Manning, in 2010.

"We want Peyton to feel like he's got a lot of options," Dreessen said. "Whatever your job is on a particular play, wherever you're supposed to be, that's where you

go, and if what the defense is doing makes you the one to get the ball, you'll get the ball."

The results have been a quality mix of completions for Manning and his new team as they have been able to adjust to a variety of defensive approaches. Receivers have caught 56.3 percent of the passes, tight ends at 26 percent and running back 17.4 percent.

Manning always has used all available options in the passing game with 62 percent of his completions going to wide receivers in his last year as a starter in Indianapolis (2010), but that figure was as low as 48.7 percent to the wide receivers in the Colts' 13-3 finish in 2007.

In 2006, the year the Colts went on to win the Super Bowl, Manning completed 53 percent of his passes to the wide receivers and in the 2009 season, when the Colts went on to lose the Super Bowl to the Saints, Manning completed 54.5 percent of his passes to wide receivers.

Key matchup

The Raiders have had plenty of on-field struggles this season, especially on defense. But with running backs Darren McFadden and Mike Goodson expected to play Thursday night, the Raiders could try to take a page out of the Chiefs' plan against the Broncos.

The Chiefs held the ball as much as possible in the run game and limited the Broncos' possessions. It's been an injury-riddled year up and down the roster, including McFadden and Goodson, and offensive coordinator Greg Knapp's zone-run scheme hasn't been quite the fit for McFadden the Raiders had hoped.

But given the rest of their on-field troubles — the Raiders are last in the NFL in scoring defense — a little old-school approach on offense may be their only chance.

Comparison shopping

The Broncos have 38 sacks this season, second in the NFL, so with a three-sack night in Oakland on Thursday, they would tie their total of 41 for last season.

Their 14 interceptions this season — tied with several teams for sixth in the league — are well ahead of the nine they had last season.

-

Difference makers

Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker have put up career-year numbers and are well ahead of last season's results.

2011**Player catches yds td's**

Thomas, 32 551, 4

Decker, 44, 612, 8

2012*

Thomas, 69 1,114, 8

Decker, 56, 702, 8

**Through 12 games*

Mitch Unrein's catch still some must-see TV for Broncos

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
December 4, 2012

So, how would Champ Bailey, an 11-time Pro Bowl selection at cornerback, defend the Broncos' latest player to score a touchdown?

"Well, he's got that size," Bailey said. "I don't want to get all tangled up. I'd probably play off and just let him run a little bit. Just sit on the route. I think he'd get tired in a little bit."

Bailey was smiling when he said it, because chances are he won't get locked up on 6-foot-4, 291-pound defensive tackle such as Mitch Unrein in coverage anytime soon. But the Eaton native's touchdown, on a 1-yard reception, in Sunday's victory over the Buccaneers was still making the highlight rounds Monday.

Unrein previously lined up as a lead blocker on a rushing touchdown this season.

Asked how he picked Unrein for receiving duties from the other defensive linemen, Broncos coach John Fox said, laughing: "We take a little poll, and he got the most votes, so he is the guy we've been working with. He has good hands, so that helps. He can be a dual-threat, a blocker. You never know. He might be able to run it a little bit."

Asked if Unrein would throw a pass, Fox added: "I haven't had much success with that. (Kicker) Matt Prater is 0-for-1."

Prater misfired on a fake field-goal attempt this season.

Making adjustments. The Broncos started planning for the quick turnaround for Thursday's game in Oakland before Sunday's game ended. Bailey was among a selection of veteran players who were removed from the game in the final minutes, including the Buccaneers' last scoring drive.

Fox said the team will not put the players in full gear for practice this week and that he may shorten some of the on-field work slightly.

"To answer the bell of a physical game that quickly, you have to modify your schedule," Fox said. "Everybody has a schedule just like any weekly schedule. I'm sure if you talk to 32 different coaches, they'll give you 32 different types of practices, but we will obviously not be in pads any this week.

"We'll tone down the on-the-field time and spend more time in the meetings."

In their favor is that the Broncos have faced the Raiders this season — a 36-6 victory Sept. 30.

Still have confidence. Fox said he has plenty of confidence to send out Prater for any potential game-winning field goals, but Fox wants the kicker's mini-slump to end.

Prater has missed at least one field goal in each of the past four games, including two misses at Kansas City. Three of the past four misses have come from 40-49 yards, a traditional trouble spot for Prater.

Four of Prater's six misses last season were from that same range.

"It's something we'll continue to work with, but we have all the confidence in the world in Matt Prater," Fox said. "He's made a lot of big kicks for us. I've seen that happen to many kickers before, and you just go back and work on it."

Injuries. The Broncos will evaluate linebacker Wesley Woodyard (ankle) Tuesday when the team returns to practice. Woodyard left Sunday's game and did not return, and was in the team's Dove Valley complex Monday for treatment.

Woodyard leads the team in tackles and interceptions and plays in a variety of defensive packages as well as being a regular on special teams.

"He has played really good football for us," Fox said. "It's an ankle sprain. It's not anything serious as far as if it will require a lot of time. We'll see how he feels (Tuesday)."

The Broncos also hope to have wide receiver Brandon Stokley (hip, wrist) available. Stokley was a game day inactive Sunday.

Footnote. The Raiders have won six of the past 10 games against the Broncos, but the Broncos have won the past two, including earlier this season. ... Raiders coach Dennis Allen is not expected to oversee the team's practices this week, he has returned to Texas to be with his ailing father.

Broncos quietly dwell among league leaders in scoring offense

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
December 4, 2012

Perhaps it is the efficiency of it all. Perhaps it is how easy it all looks at times. Or perhaps it is simply Peyton Manning being so good for so long, what's happening now doesn't really move the needle.

Last season, the Broncos concluded a Dec. 4 win at Minnesota at 7-5. At the time, despite the frenzy both near and far about Tim Tebow at quarterback, the Broncos had scored more than 24 points just two times in those 12 games and had topped 31 points just twice — a 38-24 win over a Raiders team that eventually finished 8-8 (like the Broncos) and the 35-32 overtime win over a Vikings team that finished 3-13 with the league's No. 26-ranked pass defense.

And when it was all said and done, the Broncos finished the season as the 25th-ranked scoring offense in the NFL, ahead of seven teams that didn't make the playoffs.

Over their last nine games of the 2011 regular season, the Broncos scored 17 points or less six times. So, in short, there wasn't much offensive history in the euphoria.

And this season there is almost seemingly less euphoria about the history.

The Broncos scored at least 31 points for the seventh time this season in the win over the Buccaneers on Sunday. That puts them on the doorstep to the franchise's record book.

They are currently on pace for 466 points, which would be the fourth-highest, single-season total in team history.

But also, in all of the seasons the Broncos have played through the years, they have scored at least 31 points in at least eight games in only three previous seasons.

1997. A Super Bowl winner.

1998. A Super Bowl winner.

2000. An 11-5 team that lost to the NFL's modern-era scoring defense leader in the playoffs.

In 1997, they scored at least 31 points eight times and were 8-0 in those games on the way to a 12-4 finish. You know the rest, that as the wild-card team — Kansas City had won the AFC West that season at 13-3 — the Broncos defeated the Chiefs and the Steelers on the way to defeating the Packers in Super Bowl XXXII for the franchise's first title game win.

In 1998, they scored at least 31 points nine times and were 9-0 in those games. They were the NFL's best team that season (14-2) and powered through the postseason for the second consecutive Super Bowl win.

In 2000, they scored at least 31 points nine times before the Broncos ran into the Ravens in the wild-card round, a team that set the record for fewest points allowed in a 16-game season (165) with four shutouts.

John Elway quarterbacked two of those teams and signed the quarterback of this one.

The current Broncos have scored at least 31 points in seven of their first 11 games. They are 7-0 in those games, a total that includes five wins in the current seven-game win streak.

Thursday night, they play the Raiders, who are currently ranked last in the NFL in scoring defense. They have allowed 31.3 points per game this season, and opponents have scored at least 34 points in four of their last five games.

They follow that with the Ravens, who are eighth in the league in scoring defense (20.2 points allowed per game), the Browns at 16th in scoring defense (22.1) and the Chiefs at 27th in scoring defense (26.8 points per game).

It is a sign of what the team has grown into, with this division title looking starkly different than the one that was earned last season when the Broncos lost their last three games of the regular season to do it.

But it seems as if some folks will simply wait to see what becomes of it all after they enjoyed the roller-coaster ride last year.

Champ Bailey plays pivotal role in Broncos' victory over Buccaneers

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
December 3, 2012

Coming into Sunday's game against the Broncos, Buccaneers quarterback Josh Freeman had targeted wide receiver Vincent Jackson 95 times this season, or just over 20 more times than any other player in the team's offense.

So, the Broncos did what the Broncos do in those kinds of cases. They asked Champ Bailey to cover somebody who is often bigger and younger to take that option off the quarterback's wish list.

And while Peyton Manning's touchdown passes and Von Miller's quest for the NFL's defensive player of the year award are front and center these days, Bailey's work continues to be the stuff of a team with designs on much more than a division title.

When Bailey was matched up on Jackson in one-on-one situations, which was for most of the game, Jackson had one reception for 12 yards Sunday. And that catch didn't come until the third quarter was drawing to a close.

Jackson had another catch in zone coverage, away from Bailey, and his third and final catch of the game came with Bailey having already been taken out of the game because the Broncos were protecting a two-touchdown lead facing a three-day turnaround to play in Oakland on Thursday night.

"Vincent's one of the toughest matchups because he plays hard all the time," Bailey said. "He's not one of those guys where if he's not getting the ball, he's out there running slower or anything. He's a beast."

Asked if a younger quarterback — Freeman is in his fourth season — gets more frustrated when his favorite option isn't an option any longer, Bailey said:

"Probably, if you don't have your best player involved early it does get a little frustrating, because that's when those guys want to get something going. I don't count on that to help me so much, but that's the goal to take it out early, but I just try, every play, not to let him catch it on that play and then go on to the next one."

The Broncos are currently third in the NFL in total defense (yards allowed per game) and ninth in points allowed. That means statistically the group is not yet the best Manning has played alongside of in his career. The Colts were No. 3 in yards allowed and No. 1 in scoring defense in 2007 to go with No. 11 in yards allowed and No. 2 in scoring defense in 2005.

But the Broncos have the explosiveness in the pass rush to create defensive touchdowns — five this year and counting — and they have Bailey.

And that's the kind of combination Manning has never had.

Wesley Woodyard's injury could affect both defense and special teams

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
December 4, 2012

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

Q:How much will (Wesley) Woodyard's injury affect the Broncos on a short week?

A:George, Woodyard suffered a sprained ankle in the second half of Sunday's win over the Buccaneers and did not return to the game.

He remained on the sideline for the remainder of the win, however, but his ankle was not re-taped after the team's training staff had examined it. The Broncos face a condensed timetable this week as they will practice for the first time this week on Tuesday, have another workout Wednesday and then leave for Oakland where the Broncos play Thursday night.

Woodyard received treatment following the game. He was in the team's Dove Valley complex Monday for treatment as well. Broncos coach John Fox said Monday he wouldn't know how much Woodyard would practice until he arrived to the team's complex Tuesday.

"He has played really good football for us," Fox said. "We'll just evaluate. It's an ankle sprain. It's not anything serious as far as if it will require a lot of time. We'll see how he feels (Tuesday)."

But Woodyard's value to the team could be seen in the moves the Broncos had to make once he left the lineup Sunday.

Woodyard, since being placed into the starting lineup because of D.J. Williams' suspensions to open the season, has been one of the most active players in the defense.

After missing a portion of Sunday's game, Woodyard has still played the seventh-most snaps on defense this season, trailing only Rahim Moore (765), Champ Bailey (745), Mike Adams (711), Von Miller (696), Elvis Dumervil (663) and Derek Wolfe (658).

Woodyard has played 646 snaps on defense to go with 107 additional plays on special teams. That makes him one of the busiest players on game day.

When he left the lineup Sunday it forced the Broncos to have to tweak things in their base defense, their nickel package (five defensive backs), their dime package (six defensive backs) and on almost every special teams unit as well.

So, they would likely try make a decision about Woodyard's status fairly quickly this week to get everybody that needs the work, ready to go in those packages, especially with just two days of practices.

The players whose playing time would increase the most if Woodyard did not play against the Raiders would be Keith Brooking and Williams. Brooking, who usually leaves the field when the Broncos go to their specialty looks on defense, stayed on in the nickel after Woodyard left the game.

The Broncos used Brooking and rookie Danny Trevathan much of the time at the two linebacker spots in the nickel after Woodyard was injured. Williams was moved into Woodyard's weakside linebacker spot in the base defense, played a smattering of snaps in the nickel and also played as the lone linebacker in the dime when Miller is moved into a pass-rushing slot.

When the Broncos faced the Raiders in Week 4, the Raiders chose to keep the Broncos in their base defense for the most part before the Raiders' last possession of the game. Before that game-ending possession the Broncos were in their base defense 27 times against the Raiders, including penalty snaps, and in the nickel 10 times, the dime once.

When the Raiders, down 37-6, opened things up for their final drive of the game, the Broncos played the nickel or a seven-defensive back look exclusively.

Add all of that with the juggling it takes when Woodyard is not on special teams, and it's all plenty for the Broncos to consider this week.

Broncos coach John Fox wants to see improvement in turnover ratio

Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
December 3, 2012

The final quarter of the Broncos' season begins Thursday night in Oakland, and Denver coach John Fox is pushing his team to hit its stride at the right time.

The Broncos' 31-23 victory over Tampa Bay clinched the AFC West Division title, but Fox has bigger goals in mind.

"You want to get better," he said. "And an area that we are not very good in right now is the turnover ratio."

The Broncos are minus-3 in turnovers this season. Compare that to the other AFC powerhouses, and it's not good. New England is plus-24. Houston is plus-14. Baltimore is plus-13. Fox pointed out that his 2003 Carolina Panthers Super Bowl team was minus-5 on turnovers during in the regular season, but was plus-9 in the playoffs.

"That's a big reason why we reached the Super Bowl," he said. "The important thing is getting in the tournament and then playing really well when you get in. ... We want to start building for that and we want to start this week against Oakland."

Because of the short work week, Fox said the Broncos will modify their practice schedule. The players are off on Monday, and then will practice on Tuesday and Wednesday before leaving for Oakland on Wednesday afternoon. The team won't practice in pads and will tone down its on-field work and concentrate more on meetings.

In injury news, linebacker Wesley Woodyard has a sprained ankle. The Broncos are waiting to see how he responds to treatment and if he practices on Tuesday before determining his availability for Thursday night's game.

Eye on: The Oakland Raiders

Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
December 4, 2012

Eye on ...The Raiders

Broncos at Raiders, 6:20 p.m., Thursday, KCNC-4 and NFL Network

For the record:The Raiders' free-fall continued with a 20-17 home loss Sunday to the Browns. The Raiders tumbled to 3-9 and have been eliminated from playoff contention for the 10th consecutive season.

Streaking:The Raiders have lost five straight for the first time since a six-game losing streak in Lane Kiffin's first year as coach in 2006. The fans have noticed. Attendance for the Browns game was 43,641, the lowest at Oakland since the Raiders drew 32,218 on Oct. 3, 2010.

Who's hot:Tight end Brandon Myers, who had 14 receptions (130 yards) vs. Cleveland, tying a team record set by Tim Brown against Jacksonville in 1997. Myers has 69 receptions this season and has become QB Carson Palmer's go-to receiver.

Who's not:Oakland's defense. After giving up 475 yards to the Browns, it ranks 29th in the NFL. The Raiders are giving up 31.3 points per game, worst in the league.

Key stat:58. That's how many plays of 20 yards or more the Raiders have allowed in their first 12 games. The Browns torched them for eight pass plays of 20 or more yards.

FYI:Coach Dennis Allen, the former Broncos defensive coordinator, left the team immediately after the Cleveland game to be with his father, Grady, who is seriously ill in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Injury report:The Raiders' battered secondary took more hits Sunday. Safeties Matt Giordano and Mike Mitchell and cornerback Phillip Adams all left the game with concussions and are questionable for Thursday night's game.

Playerspeak:"We can't stop the run, we can't stop the pass. Things just aren't going well on defense. Right now, I guess we're just a bad defense. We can't really hide it. We're just bad right now." — Raiders cornerback Michael Huff, to the Oakland Tribune after the loss to the Browns.

Denver Broncos nicknames: The fans weigh in

Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
December 3, 2012

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote a "Lunch Special" column suggesting that the Broncos — now the AFC West champion Broncos — needed a nickname.

There were a number of comments posted online, but I also received quite a few emails. I share a few of those with you now. Check them out, but please remember, I'm just the messenger.

- * "Wondering what you think of Demaryius "Deep Threat" Thomas, the team already calls him "DT." The way he's been playing lately it might as well stand for Deep Threat."
– Tyson, Kirk, CO.
- * "Mile High Monsters," for the defense. "The General," for Peyton Manning.
– Kevin, Watkinsville, Ga.
- * "The Wolfepack," for the D-line. "Von The Sack Machine Miller."
– Greg
- * "Orange Flash"
– Joseph, Colorado Springs
- * "Dummillerville," for Elvis Dumervil and Von Miller. When you get to the quarterback, you're there.
– Bob, Parker
- * "Von Doom," for our guys bringing the pressure from the edges. I also like "WMD," for Denver's weapons of mass destruction: Wolfe, Miller and Dumervil.
– John, Houston
- * "The Manning Express."
– Jack, Jacksonville, Fla.
- * "The Maestro," for Peyton Manning.
– Dick, Denver
- * "Mountain Magic."
– Bob
- * "The Pony Express."
– From multiple readers.

Another division win puts Fox in elite company

Eddie Pells
Associated Press
December 3, 2012

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — Instead of talking about the Super Bowl, Broncos coach John Fox focuses on the small goals his team has to meet to get there.

On an almost daily basis, he sets incremental, easy-to-digest benchmarks — cut down on turnovers, get a little better every game, play your best football come December — that rarely bring up the words "Super Bowl," but are certainly formulated with that in mind.

"As a coach, that's kind of your job, just looking for little carrots out there to maybe give guys a little extra juice," Fox said. "You look at different things and set those kinds of goals."

When the Broncos reached one of their goals by wrapping up the AFC West on Sunday, Fox joined a couple of coaching stalwarts from the 1970s, Chuck Knox and Ted Marchibroda, as only the third coach in NFL history to take over a team with a losing record and win back-to-back division titles in his first two years.

It was yet another in a long list of Denver's achievements to be met with almost no fanfare inside the locker room.

"You do this to win championships," Fox said.

He's talking about Super Bowls, not divisions, and his team, with a 9-3 record, a seven-game winning streak and Peyton Manning playing some of the best football of his career, is shaping up to be as legitimate a contender as anyone.

The Broncos play at Oakland on Thursday. Currently, they are the fourth seed in the AFC, with a game against Baltimore set for Dec. 16. Denver has a significantly easier schedule than two of the teams ahead of it, Baltimore and New England, so the No. 2 seed and the first-round bye that goes with it are both within reach.

Don't bother asking Fox or any of his players too much about that sort of big-picture stuff, however.

"The most important thing right now is to keep on stacking days, keep on stacking weeks, keep taking it one day at a time," linebacker Von Miller said. "I feel like we've scratched the surface of the team we know we can be. We've just got to keep on going to be that team that we all know we're capable of being."

Like almost every player in the Denver locker room, Miller stays on point, taking things one game at a time, refusing to create a distraction or give an upcoming opponent easy bulletin-board material. They live by one of Knox's many mantras: I don't hear what you say. I only hear what you do.

Setting that tone is Fox, the coach, who has the backing and guidance of quarterback-turned-executive John Elway, then had Manning fall into his lap. Some say that makes his job easier. Some say it makes it harder because of the pressure to win — and win now — that goes with being surrounded by those people, those names.

Fox's hiring was viewed skeptically in large portions of Denver. Yes, he was a veteran coach with a winning record (He's now 96-86) and one Super Bowl appearance, but he was coming off a 2-14 record in his final season at Carolina.

Hidden beneath that terrible record was the fact that his players played hard for him all year and that Fox, a lame duck coach with a depleted roster, kept smiling and stayed positive through the entire thing.

When Elway was looking for a coach in Denver, the Broncos were coming off a 4-12 season that included the midseason firing of Josh McDaniels and the awkward presence of McDaniels' first-round draft pick, Tim Tebow, who didn't get into the starting lineup until after the coach was gone.

"When I looked at this building when I first got here after the 2010 season, everyone was demoralized," Elway said in a recent interview. "The one thing that stuck with me with John was the positive attitude. Outgoing. Friendly. Positive. To me, that was the No. 1 characteristic. It was the simple fact of the way he was. I felt he could get this organization rehabilitated, get everyone excited about playing football again."

And, Elway said, there was Fox's "knack for football," honed over 34 years in the business, first as a graduate assistant in college, then through five stops in the NFL, starting as secondary coach in Pittsburgh in 1989, before he got the head job in Carolina in 2002.

Never did that knack work better than during the 2011 season, his first with the Broncos.

Unfazed by the prospect of building a system around a player, rather than making the player adjust to the system, Fox and offensive coordinator Mike McCoy set aside their egos and, many might say, set back offense by about 50 years by bringing the read option back to the NFL to give Tebow an offense he could function in.

Then, when Manning came to Denver, Fox and McCoy listened to their quarterback while reconfiguring the offense again.

The entire time, Fox's specialty, defense, has been rock solid. The Broncos are ranked third in yards allowed this season. Last year, defense helped the Broncos win five games in which they didn't crack 20 points.

Asked whether his coaching philosophy changed from one year to another, under such drastically different circumstances, Fox didn't divulge much.

"Not really. You're in this to win," he said. "It's only fun if you win. You try to bring that culture, that environment, to the team."

Notes: The Broncos put out an official injury report because they have a game in three days but they did not practice. Fox listed LB Wesley Woodyard (ankle) and WR Matthew Willis (knee) as "out." ... Fox said there was no reason to panic about K Matt Prater, who has missed three of his last five field goal attempts. "He's made a lot of big kicks for us. I've seen it happen to many kickers before. You just go back and work on it," Fox said. ... Due to the compact schedule, the Broncos had Monday off. They'll practice Tuesday and Wednesday and leave for Oakland on Wednesday night.

Super Bowl favorites? All guesses are under review

Barry Wilner
Associated Press
December 3, 2012

Unless you're part of the Manning family and hoping for a hometown reunion with Eli, Peyton and their teams in New Orleans, there's little reason now to make Super Bowl reservations.

With a quarter of the schedule remaining, there's no way to pick a favorite for the Lombardi Trophy. Not even the two teams with 11-1 records, the Falcons and Texans, or Eli Manning's Giants or Peyton's Broncos.

While there has been significant separation between the haves and the have-nots in the NFL - three division races are over and only the NFC North has no odds-on choice among the undecided sectors - none of the top teams presents overwhelming credentials for winning it all.

Several teams are trending upward, most notably the Broncos with a seven-game winning streak and the Patriots, who always begin peaking in November and December. Atlanta just about has home-field advantage in the NFC, and Houston would pretty much secure it in the AFC if it wins at New England next Monday night.

So that makes them the top contenders, right?

Not necessarily.

"Well, there's different championships," Broncos coach John Fox said. "Your division is obviously one, everybody aspires to be in the conference championship, but at the end of the day, everybody is looking for that world championship.

"It's a great accomplishment, a tribute to the staff and coaches in that locker room. They did a fantastic job. We still have a whole quarter of the season left. We'll see what happens."

What has been happening in Denver is encouraging because the Broncos (9-3) have been winning in a variety of ways. Yes, Manning remains the key to a first Super Bowl trip since his current boss, John Elway, retired after the 1998 title season. Throughout his remarkable comeback year after missing 2011 because of neck surgery, Manning has become more comfortable and familiar with his targets, his blockers and his running backs. That bodes well for the winter rush toward the Big Easy.

So does having a solid, physically imposing defense with a dynamic, big-play leader (linebacker Von Miller) and other playmakers.

Throw in strong special teams and it's a nice mixture.

But the Broncos also are a developing team, a much improved one since the beginning of the season, yet still a work in progress. Getting that work done in the next two months could be a rush job.

New England was 5-3 in 2011, then won eight in a row, two playoff games at home, and lost to the Giants for the championship. The Patriots (9-3) are on another roll and it would surprise nobody if they run the table, even though they have Houston and San Francisco coming up.

Tom Brady, the only quarterback with 10 division crowns, is in the MVP conversation again. He has a formidable running game for once, and even with standout tight end Rob Gronkowski injured, Brady doesn't lack for receivers.

Any Patriots issues center on a defense that has been exceedingly inconsistent and, at times, patchwork. New England survived it a year ago, but the other AFC contenders generally are better offensively now than last season.

"As a coach I think we're always going to sit here and tell you that we're trying to improve every week and that's our goal," defensive coordinator Matt Patricia said, noting his units have gotten stingier. "Certainly as the season goes on and people play together longer and are out there with each other longer then hopefully that's what's taking place."

Houston revived its dominant, ball-hawking defense Sunday at Tennessee and has more balance than any AFC team. It also has little postseason experience, some injury concerns that have tested its depth and very little behind Andre Johnson at wide receiver. Defenses often can shut down one brilliant receiver in the playoffs with double and even triple coverage.

Baltimore (9-3) probably will hold on in the AFC North, but its warts have shown for a while, especially the last two weeks in a tight escape over San Diego and a home loss to undermanned Pittsburgh.

Many pegged San Francisco (8-3-1) as most likely to emerge from the NFC after the Niners manhandled the Bears and outplayed New Orleans with second-year QB Colin Kaepernick emerging. Then they stumbled against the Rams, a team that also outplayed the 49ers in a tie last month.

That powerhouse defense is impressive, but might not be enough to carry San Francisco all the way. Coach Jim Harbaugh has placed his chips on Kaepernick over Alex Smith, hoping the addition of big-play potential and fast feet will complement a nasty D.

With the road to the Super Bowl almost certainly heading through Atlanta, which is 6-0 at home, the Falcons might look like a good bet. Remember, however, that they went 13-3 and were the conference's top seed two years ago, yet went out meekly against Green Bay in their first playoff game.

Until QB Matt Ryan, coach Mike Smith and a previously questionable defense come through in the postseason, there will be serious doubts about the Falcons.

The Packers and Bears need to get healthy to have any shot, but instead they keep seeing more players head to the infirmary. Green Bay has enough passing offense, Chicago has enough rugged defense. As for their other units, who knows? Particularly with so many injuries.

That leaves the juicy prospect that if Peyton Manning can get there, younger brother Eli and the Giants will be waiting. The Giants sprang to life even later in 2011 - in the final two weeks of the season - and have the key elements every contender desires: a winner at quarterback, strong pass rushers, a variety of playmakers and experience.

Then again, with no clear favorites in what has been an unusual NFL season, leave open the unprecedented possibility of two wild-card teams making their way to the Superdome in February.

Denver Broncos: Moving On

Bill Williamson
ESPN.com
December 3, 2012

Here are some areas the Denver Broncos need to focus on after a 31-23 home win over Tampa Bay on Sunday:

Recap: The Broncos clinched the AFC West with a win over the solid Buccaneers. It is the first time Denver has won back-to-back division titles since 1986-87. The Broncos have won seven straight games, which is the longest current win streak in the NFL. Denver is 9-3 and tied with Baltimore and New England for the second best record in the AFC.

Biggest area to fix: First-half performance. Denver trailed 10-7 at halftime. The Broncos took over the game in the third quarter. But they have to start faster. Denver had issues in the first halves of games early in the season. That won't fly in the playoffs.

Biggest area to build on: Run defense. The Broncos kept star Tampa Bay running back Doug Martin in check. He had 56 yards on 18 carries. According to ESPN Stats & Information, Martin did not have a single rush of at least 10 yards in a game. His 33 yards after contact were his lowest total since Week 6 against the Chiefs.

What to watch for: The Broncos go to Oakland on Thursday on a short week.

Power Rankings: Without an identity, Ravens could falter in homestretch

Pete Prisco
CBSSports.com
December 4, 2012

Look through the top 10 teams in the CBSSports.com Power Rankings and show me one that doesn't have major issues.

Also, show me one that hasn't had those issues show up in the past month.

That's the problem as we head to the final month of the season: They all have them, which is why it's hard to pick a dominant team.

Houston, the top team in our CBSSports.com Power Rankings, has lost once, but it also has had some major issues on defense. The Falcons, the second team, have won a lot of close games. New England? Defensive issues.

On and on it goes.

But the team in the top 10 that should have the biggest concern right now is the Baltimore Ravens.

Who are they? What is their identity?

We know they are no longer that ass-beating team that had you shaking in your boots as soon as you lined up to play them. But in that place, we expected another identity to emerge.

Was this Joe Flacco's time? Clearly it's not. Just look at his stat line from the Ravens' loss to the Steelers on Sunday. He passed for 188 yards, threw a pick and lost a critical fumble.

Is this Ray Rice's team? How can it be? He had 12 carries Sunday.

The Ravens are a fourth-and-29 conversion away from being on a two-game losing streak heading into a murderous four-game closing stretch. Is there a chance they miss the playoffs? Now comes news that Terrell Suggs, who missed the early part of the season coming back from a torn Achilles tendon, has a torn biceps tendon. That could shelve him for the season -- or not.

I don't think the Ravens miss the playoffs, but, in my mind, they are not as good as their 9-3 record.

Then again, who is as good as their record?

The Texans? The Falcons? The Patriots? The 49ers?

Can't say that about any of them, right? That's the greatness of December. The team that cleans up their issues the best just might be the team that wins it all.

RANK	TEAM	POWER RANKINGS	MOVE (LW)
1		They have clinched a playoff berth, but they want much more than that. At least the defense got back on track. Now they get the Pats.	— (1)
2		Give the defense some credit. In two games against Peyton Manning and Drew Brees, that unit has eight interceptions. That means something.	— (2)
3		They have a huge game Monday night to stake their claim as the AFC's best. I think they are the best team in the conference.	▲1(4)
4		With a soft schedule and the division title already theirs, they have to focus on a first-round bye.	▲2(6)
5		I worry about that offense. They just don't do enough and the defense isn't what it was in the past.	— (5)
6		The move to Colin Kaepernick was a risky one, and it didn't pay off in St. Louis. There is still a chance they might not win the division.	▼3(3)
7		They are back in first in the division, but they still seem to be off some. When do they turn it on? Do they? Can they?	▲2(9)
8		They have a ton of injuries, but that's no excuse for losing at home. The offense just didn't do enough.	▼1(7)

POWER RANKINGS

RANK	TEAM		MOVE (LW)
9		They have won four straight and control their own destiny to a playoff spot. They have really come alive.	▲1(10)
10		They just seem like the charmed team. It helps that they have a rookie passer who is playing like a veteran.	▲1(11)
11		They are suddenly in a fight for the division title. They have to get that passing game cranked up again.	▼3(8)
12		Russell Wilson showed a lot in what he did in Chicago. That could be a huge confidence booster for the rookie passer.	— (12)
13		That was a season-saving victory at Baltimore. Give props to Charlie Batch. Didn't think he had that in him.	— (13)
14		They are now a game back in the NFC East. Wow. But on a short week, they have to get ready for the Ravens.	▲1(15)
15		They are .500 and now must win out and get some help to have a playoff chance. But they are a much better team than expected.	▼1(14)
16		Their playoff hopes might be on the line this week in Cincinnati. That defense remains a major problem.	▲2(18)

POWER RANKINGS

RANK	TEAM		MOVE (LW)
17		They are alive in the playoff chase. Can you believe? Too bad they don't play the 49ers every week.	▲2(19)
18		How happy are the rest of the NFC teams that they are out of the playoff picture? Brees has been horrible the past two weeks.	▼2(16)
19		Christian Ponder just isn't getting it done. Is it time to make a change to Joe Webb?	▼2(17)
20		Is it Tim Tebow time? One thing is certain: It isn't Mark Sanchez time anymore.	▲1(21)
21		They still have some playoff hope. Not much, but some. Their defense is improving.	▲3(24)
22		I guess fired offensive coordinator Chris Palmer wasn't the problem after all. They're just not good.	▼2(20)
23		It's official: Another disappointing season for the Chargers. The house is about to be cleaned.	▼1(22)
24		Their disappointing season ended with a last-second touchdown by the Colts. They just aren't good enough on defense.	▼1(23)

POWER RANKINGS

RANK	TEAM		MOVE (LW)
25		It might be time to end that playoff talk. But just having some this season shows how they've exceeded many expectations.	— (25)
26		They are on a winning streak. And what's even more important: They are building something for next season.	▲3(29)
27		They can't score even when teams hand them the ball. This offense is a disaster.	▼1(26)
28		They just aren't good enough on defense. Teams gash them with the run. They need help on that side of the ball.	▼1(27)
29		Andy Reid has taken to firing coaches and releasing veterans. It's nice of him to get this team ready for next year -- for another coach.	▼1(28)
30		You have to be impressed with what they did against the Carolina Panthers after the tragedy of last Saturday.	▲2(32)
31		So much for anointing Chad Henne the man. He took a major step back against the Bills.	▼1(30)
32		So owner Mark Davis says coach Dennis Allen needs to show more emotion. Didn't you know his personality when you hired him?	▼1(31)

Some Broncos players feel sympathy for Tim Tebow

Mike Freeman
CBSSports.com
December 3, 2012

DENVER -- One Broncos player was asked about Tim Tebow, and his thoughts seem to be shared by others on the team I spoke to: Tim Tebow was always in over his head playing NFL quarterback, it's showing now, and he feels sorry for the former Bronco.

"When Tim was here we saw the issues up close," said the Broncos player who, along with other players, asked not to be identified. "The Jets didn't, and now they are seeing the problems, too."

He added: "I feel really, really bad for Tim. He's a good person, just not an NFL quarterback."

Several Broncos players told me it's almost impossible not to compare their situation now to last year when the team clinched the AFC West and made the playoffs late in the season. Tebow was portrayed as a hero for winning games at the last minute, but the truth is Denver was a better team than its close record showed. Tebow, in some ways, was holding the Broncos back. Harsh but true.

This season the Broncos won the division with a commanding win over a tough Tampa Bay team. Peyton Manning tossed three touchdown passes and with the exception of two or three throws played almost flawless football. The win was Denver's seventh consecutive victory, and in six of those wins Denver has scored 30 or more points. The Broncos are on track to win 11 or 12 games. Last year the team went 8-8 winning extremely close contests. With Manning, instead of Tebow, the Broncos look like a totally different franchise. Harsh but true.

Remember: There were some (including me) who wondered if Manning's body would hold up. It has.

"Of course we're comparing this year to last year," said another player. "This year we won the division with four games left. That's all Peyton Manning. If Tebow was here, we'd still be squeaking out wins, or losing games we shouldn't be losing. The division would be coming down to the last game.

"I've been following Tim in New York and I feel horrible for him. Everyone here, I think, wants the best for him. He's a good guy. But you can't turn Tim into something he's not, and he's not really an NFL quarterback. He's more of a gimmick player."

One huge takeaway I got from speaking to Broncos players about Tebow was their gratitude toward John Elway, the team's general manager, who pushed to sign Manning.

"By bringing in Peyton, we can compete with any team in football," one player explained, "Peyton is obviously that good."

He added: "I'm watching Tim and wishing him well but glad I'm here with Peyton."

NFL Playoff Picture Scenarios -- Week 14

Joe Ferreira

CBSSports.com

December 3, 2012

In Week 13, we had five teams that could clinch playoff spots and four teams came through with key wins. The lone outlier was Baltimore, who lost a nailbiter to Pittsburgh and now has to deal with a tough schedule and hungry division chasers in the weeks ahead.

A quick review of where we are in the AFC shows two division champions crowned (New England and Denver both at 9-3), one team that has the best record in the conference at 11-1 (Houston) and has secured a playoff berth and Baltimore with a two-game lead over Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. Indianapolis is in the Wild Card driver's seat at 8-4 while both Pittsburgh and Cincinnati have a two-game edge over the rest of the pack fighting for the sixth and final playoff seed.

Over in the NFC, 11-1 Atlanta has clinched the South division title and has a 2.5 game lead over its nearest competitor (8-3-1 San Francisco) for homefield advantage throughout the playoffs. Green Bay and Chicago are both 8-4 and headed for a Week 15 clash in Chicago, while the N.Y. Giants hold a one-game lead over both Washington and Dallas with their loss Monday night. The Wild Card race shows the Green Bay-Chicago non-division winner and 7-5 Seattle with the slots if the season ended today, but Minnesota, Tampa Bay and Dallas (and maybe Washington after tonight) are on their heels at 6-6.

Some notes:

- From tiebreaker record keeper Ivan (thenflrules): The four teams that clinched postseason berths on Week 13 (Atlanta, Denver, Houston, New England) are the most teams to secure a playoff spot with four weeks still remaining in a season. The previous record was three (1990: Chicago, N.Y. Giants and San Francisco; 1998: Atlanta, Denver and Minnesota).
- Also from the record books: The three division titles clinched this week by New England, Denver and Atlanta are the most division titles clinched with four weeks to play in modern NFL history. Previously, the most was two, with four weeks still remaining in a season (1973, 1990, 2009, 2011).
- If Indianapolis, Pittsburgh and Cincinnati win in Week 14, that will eliminate all teams with eight losses in the AFC (due to Pittsburgh and Cincinnati playing each other in Week 16).
- If Indianapolis wins against Tennessee and Houston loses at New England, Indianapolis will control its own destiny for the AFC South title since the Colts play the Texans twice on Weeks 15 and 17. Hmmmmm.
- If Houston clinches homefield advantage soon, that will render their game against Indianapolis on Week 17 likely meaningless for the Texans. Cincinnati and Pittsburgh fans should be rooting for New England over Houston next

Monday night to keep the Texans from clinching the No. 1 seed and potentially rolling over for the Colts.

- Baltimore has a tiebreaker advantage over Cincinnati on division record and Pittsburgh on conference record.
- Dallas has key losses to Seattle and Chicago and five conference losses, which will likely hurt the Cowboys in the wild card hunt. Their best bet is to win the division (they could have a division record advantage over New York).
- How many people are hoping for a wild card weekend game of No. 6 Seattle at No. 3 Green Bay? Anyone remember the ending to Green Bay at Seattle on Week 3? It could be billed the "Replacement Redemption Bowl."

Now let's jump into our Week 14 playoff clinching scenarios:

- *Houston can clinch the AFC South division title with **EITHER** a WIN + Indianapolis loss/tie **OR** a TIE + Indianapolis loss.* This is a simple case where Houston needs to have overall record supremacy over Indianapolis since they play head to head in Weeks 15 and 17 and the Colts can sweep and win that tiebreaker.
- *Houston can also clinch homefield advantage throughout the playoffs (No. 1 seed) with a WIN + Indianapolis loss/tie + Baltimore loss + Denver loss.* The Houston win would be over New England, giving the Texans head to head wins over Baltimore, Denver and New England, thus winning any tiebreakers among the only teams that could catch them at 12-4.
- *Houston can also clinch a first round playoff bye (Seeds No. 1 or No. 2) with a WIN + Indianapolis loss/tie + **EITHER** Baltimore loss **OR** Denver loss.* Simple math -- just get rid of one more team from the homefield clinching scenario. But they have to win the division first.
- *Baltimore can clinch the AFC North division title with a WIN + Pittsburgh loss + Cincinnati loss.* Baltimore would get to 10-6 at worst and has the tiebreaker advantage over both Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. With losses by both the Steelers and Bengals, only one of those two teams could get to 10-6 as they play each other in Week 16 and Baltimore's tiebreaker advantages would win out.
- *Baltimore can clinch a playoff berth with **EITHER** a WIN + either a Pittsburgh loss or Cincinnati loss **OR** a TIE + Pittsburgh loss + Cincinnati loss.* In this situation, Baltimore is getting to 10-6 with the win and guaranteed to beat either Pittsburgh or Cincinnati if they lose in any tiebreaker, thus gaining at least the No. 6 seed. In the case of the tie plus losses by both Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, the Ravens could still lose the division to either team, but that would give the loser of the Pittsburgh-Cincinnati game in Week 16 a 7th loss.

In the NFC, here's what we have:

- *Atlanta has won the AFC South and can clinch homefield advantage throughout the playoffs (No. 1 Seed) with a WIN + Green Bay loss/tie + Chicago loss/tie + San Francisco loss.* Atlanta win would get them to 12-4 and 8-4 in the conference at worst. Both Green Bay and Chicago would beat

Atlanta in a tiebreaker at 12-4 (only one of them can get there as they play each other) on conference record and San Francisco could beat Atlanta on overall record (12-3-1) or on conference record (8-3-1 to 8-4) in the case of a tie.

- *Atlanta can also clinch a first round playoff bye with a WIN + **EITHER** Green Bay loss/tie + Chicago loss/tie **OR** San Francisco loss (or with a TIE + GB and CHI losses).*
- *San Francisco can clinch a playoff berth with a WIN + Dallas loss + Minnesota loss + Tampa Bay loss + Washington loss + EITHER a Seattle loss/tie or St. Louis loss/tie. A win over Miami gets San Francisco to 9.5 wins but doesn't add to their conference win total where they can still end up 6-5-1. The losses needed by Dallas, Washington, Minnesota and Tampa Bay get the wild card slots down to one team from the NFC North (either Green Bay or Chicago) and San Francisco needs to eliminate one of Seattle or St. Louis so that no other team can gain a wild card berth. A St. Louis loss or tie gets rid of the Rams and a Seattle loss or tie gets rid of either Seattle if they have another loss or tie or St. Louis if Seattle wins out after this coming week. Loads of fun!*

PLAYOFF PICTURE SCENARIOS: WEEK 14

AFC

HOUSTON TEXANS

Houston can clinch the AFC South division with:

- 1) HOU win + IND loss or tie OR
- 2) HOU tie + IND loss

Houston can clinch a first-round bye with:

- 1) HOU win + IND loss or tie + BAL loss or tie OR
- 2) HOU win + IND loss or tie + DEN loss or tie

Houston can clinch homefield advantage with:

- 1) HOU win + IND loss or tie + BAL loss + DEN loss

BALTIMORE RAVENS

Baltimore can clinch the AFC North division with:

- 1) BAL win + PIT loss + CIN loss

Baltimore can clinch a playoff berth with:

- 1) BAL win + PIT loss or tie OR
- 2) BAL win + CIN loss or tie OR
- 3) BAL tie + PIT + CIN loss

NFC

ATLANTA FALCONS

Atlanta can clinch a first-round bye with:

- 1) ATL win + CHI loss or tie + GB loss or tie OR
- 2) ATL win + SF loss OR
- 3) ATL tie + CHI loss + GB loss

Atlanta can clinch homefield advantage with:

- 1) ATL win + CHI loss or tie + GB loss or tie + SF loss

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

San Francisco can clinch a playoff berth with:

- 1) SF win + DAL loss + MIN loss + TB loss + WAS loss + STL loss or tie OR
- 2) SF win + DAL loss + MIN loss + TB loss + WAS loss + SEA loss or tie

Here are my current predictions for NFL playoff seeds at the end of the 2012 season:

AFC: 1) Houston 2) New England 3) Denver 4) Baltimore 5) Indianapolis 6) Pittsburgh

NFC: 1) Atlanta 2) Green Bay 3) San Francisco 4) NY Giants 5) Chicago 6) Seattle

Enjoy the week!

Broncos Report Card: Third-quarter revival keys seventh straight win

Andrew Mason
CBSSports.com
December 3, 2012

There's no satisfying anyone -- even when you're en route to a seventh consecutive win that clinches your team's first winning season in six years.

In the second quarter of Sunday's game, with the Broncos offense struggling and facing third-and-16 at the Tampa Bay 46-yard-line, QB Peyton Manning audibled into a handoff to RB Lance Ball that went for no gain. A smattering of boos rattled through Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Yes, boos. For a future Hall of Fame quarterback that opted to take what was in front of him, it made no sense in the grand scheme of things, but at that point, a sense of frustration had set in; the offense was held to 17 points seven days earlier at Kansas City and had gasped and wheezed its way to a single touchdown by halftime Sunday.

The second half changed everything -- as it often has for the Broncos this year, particularly during the first two months of the season, and they built a lead that Tampa Bay (6-6) couldn't overturn, despite a fourth-quarter rally.

Offense: B

Give Manning a few possessions, and he'll figure out any defense. Sunday, he and the Broncos adjusted to Tampa Bay's zones, checking down and cobbling together drives strung together with short passes. Manning only completed two passes longer than 15 yards, but with an offensive line keeping him upright (he wasn't hit) and TE Jacob Tamme effectively filling in for injured WR Brandon Stokley in the slot, Denver found its stride in the third quarter with a pair of Manning-to-Demaryius Thomas touchdown passes and pulled away. RB Knowshon Moreno was serviceable against the league's best run defense, picking up 69 yards on 20 carries, but the ground game remains inconsistent, which was the case before Willis McGahee injured his knee. ***Previous game's grade: C***

Defense: B+

The key to attacking Bucs QB Josh Freeman is knowing that pressure, not sacks, stands as the reasonable goal. Freeman stood in the pocket, absorbed some hits and side-stepped others, so the usually prolific Denver pass rush finished with just one sack. But the pressure mounted by LB/DE Von Miller, DE Elvis Dumervil, DT Mitch Unrein, LBD.J. Williams and others in the front seven at one point forced Freeman into eight consecutive incompletions -- the last one of which was

intercepted and returned 26 yards by Miller for a touchdown. The Broncos also contained prolific RB Doug Martin by collapsing the Bucs' blocking at the vulnerable guard slots and forcing him to narrow lanes that he couldn't exploit. ***Previous game's grade: B***

Special teams: B

PR/KR Trindon Holliday hasn't scored since the Week 10 trip to Carolina, but he remains good for at least one explosive return a game; his 45-yard trek up the right sideline on a third-quarter punt return electrified the crowd and set the Broncos up at the Tampa Bay 40. But K Matt Prater's struggles continued; he missed a 47-yard attempt in the fourth quarter and has now misfired on five of his last 11 field-goal tries. ***Previous game's grade: C-***

Coaching: A-

John Fox and defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio put together one of their best game plans, managing to shut down Martin and Tampa Bay WR Vincent Jackson, a trick that most foes have failed to do this year. It helped that they had CB Champ Bailey to place in one-on-one coverage against Jackson; Bailey has won most of the duels and did so again Sunday, limiting Jackson to 55 yards on three receptions. The decision in the second quarter of Week 3 to return Bailey to his former role in man-to-man coverage on the opponent's top receiver has freed other defensive backs to be more aggressive, knowing that Bailey can still shut down the league's best wideouts. ***Previous game's grade: B***

Unnamed Broncos agree with Jets: Tim Tebow not an NFL quarterback

Nate Davis
USA Today
December 3, 2012

The New York Jets took Tim Tebow out of the Denver Broncos locker room, and now the freshly crowned AFC West champs are borrowing a page from the Jets' playbook for anonymously criticizing the quarterback who elicits such a wide array of opinions, most of them seemingly negative as it pertains to football these days.

CBSsports' Mike Freeman spoke with several Denver players, who declined to be named, but offered the following thoughts on their former teammate:

Bronco 1: "When Tim was here we saw the issues up close. The Jets didn't, and now they are seeing the problems, too.

"I feel really, really bad for Tim. He's a good person, just not an NFL quarterback."

Bronco 2: "This year we won the division with four games left. That's all Peyton Manning. If Tebow was here, we'd still be squeaking out wins, or losing games we shouldn't be losing. The division would be coming down to the last game.

"I've been following Tim in New York and I feel horrible for him. Everyone here, I think, wants the best for him. He's a good guy. But you can't turn Tim into something he's not, and he's not really an NFL quarterback. He's more of a gimmick player."

Another Bronco expressed relief that personnel boss John Elway acquired four-time MVP Manning to give the team a realistic chance to "compete with any team in football."

It was just last month that an unnamed Jets player declared Tebow was "terrible," echoing sentiments of several others in the organization who panned the backup's abilities but refused to attach their names to the comments.

Tebow's NFL future, particularly as a quarterback, seems more in doubt than ever.

Last year, he was garnering credit for reviving Denver's season and leading the Broncos to a division title. With revisionists from the team now suggesting that success came in spite of Tebow, it's worth wondering if he'll ever be liberated from the Jets' bench or get a shot under center elsewhere in the league.

Rex Ryan was never inclined to replace oft-struggling starter Mark Sanchez with Tebow before his ribs were injured, yet the coach is now mulling a switch to third-stringer Greg McElroy based on less than one half of work in yesterday's win over the Arizona Cardinals. And with colleges producing NFL-ready quarterbacks more

quickly than ever, it seems far-fetched that the Jacksonville Jaguars, Kansas City Chiefs or anyone else would cast their lot with a player saddled with so many drawbacks as a passer.

Tebow is renowned as a competitor, team-first player and gamer. Yet if he wants to maximize those traits, it sure seems the writing on the wall (and the internet) is telling him to make a go of it at a position other than quarterback.

Greg Schiano's Bucs blitzed in victory formation against Peyton Manning

Chris Chase
USA Today
December 3, 2012

Is it something the Manning brothers said?

For the second time this year, a Greg Schiano defense attacked a Manning in a victory formation. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers came at Peyton twice in the final moments of Sunday's 31-23 loss, leading to a brief scuffle after the final play and a close conversation between Schiano and the quarterback following the game.

Schiano's team famously went at Eli Manning in Week 2 of the NFL season and drew criticism for his aggressive approach in defeat. The team has come at other quarterbacks kneeling in the victory formation too, including Tony Romo and Robert Griffin III.

"I don't have any remorse or regret," he said after the Eli incident. "It's clean, hard football."

Manning had no complaints, at least to the press. Rather, he spoke of his surprise that Schiano gave him encouragement (a helmet slap) after he ran for a first down.

"That's the first time I've ever had an opposing coach tell me that was a good play in the middle of the game," Manning said after the game. "So I appreciated the compliment."

Peyton Manning asks Broncos fans to stop the wave

Marc Sessler
NFL.com
December 3, 2012

Peyton Manning is well known for the flood of pre-snap line adjustments and audibles he'll rattle off before picking apart a defense.

During Sunday's win over the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, the Denver Broncos starting quarterback also had a message for the home-team fans: Pipe down.

Manning asked the packed house of 76,432 to put the kibosh on the wave at Sports Authority Field. They complied, taking their seats to watch the All-Pro passer go to work.

"I'm all for excitement, but in a no-huddle offense, when you are calling something at the line, the quieter the crowd can be, it certainly is helpful," Manning told The Denver Post.

Not every quarterback could pull this off, but when Peyton Manning asks you to sit down and zip it -- before guiding your team on yet another scoring march -- you listen. We doubt the Broncos faithful are complaining.

KLEE: Manning, starters should take a seat late in year

Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
December 3, 2012

DENVER • Here is when you know the going is good for the Broncos. There are four games left on the schedule, and this question was posed to John Fox on Monday: What is your philosophy on resting the starters when the result doesn't matter?

Too soon? Yes, it's too soon. The Broncos must finish their veggies before they can have their dessert.

But it's a dilemma bound to surface. Denver doesn't need Peyton Manning exposed to a cheap shot any more often than is absolutely necessary. He is so clearly the league MVP — and coming off four neck surgeries, if his numbers make that not so clear.

Go ahead, admit it: the living room goes silent when Manning is sacked. One bad fall by No. 18, this run is over.

So it is a scenario worth considering. Pretend it is the season finale, and Denver (9-3) is locked into a seed.

It could be the No. 4 seed. If the season ended today, the No. 4 Broncos would host the No. 5 Colts in an AFC Wild Card matchup. Manning vs. Luck. TV ratings to make Nielsen dizzy.

It could be the No. 3 seed. Baltimore (9-3) is the No. 3. That will change. The Ravens are doomed for a slide against a schedule that could include four playoff teams (Redskins, Broncos, Giants, Bengals).

It could be the No. 2 seed. That would take some help from the currently No. 2-seeded Patriots (9-3), and Bill Belichick is Scrooge in December (12 straight wins in this month).

Houston (11-1) is the No. 1 seed and holds a tiebreaker against Denver. The Broncos aren't catching the Texans.

Right now Denver is assured of three things: The Raiders' best effort Thursday in Oakland, one game in the playoffs and an AFC West trophy that might as well be a lump of coal, if you ask the Broncos.

"It don't mean nothing," defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson said.

"There's a lot to play for," Fox said Monday. "We'll see where that leads us. I think everybody's going to be fighting for home-field advantage, for a first-round bye. All those things are things people are competing for at this point."

Predictably, Fox wasn't looking past the end of the hallway when I requested his philosophy on the resting-the-starters quandary.

But it pays to have a veteran coach in those situations, and Fox has a working knowledge of how teams have handled it.

The MVP quarterback does as well.

Manning's Colts sat their first-stringers for the final two games (loss, loss) of the 2009 season. Indianapolis advanced to the Super Bowl.

"As I've gone on in my career," Fox said, his M.O. is to sit the starters for the final game — of the preseason.

As it applies to the regular season, Fox said it depends on how the team is playing.

"The important thing is getting in that tournament and then be playing really well when you get in," Fox said.

Fox said he believes this playoff picture won't be set in stone until Week 17. If it comes down to the final Sunday, Denver has the latest kickoff (2:25 p.m.) of the teams that currently occupy the top four seeds.

Denver will know if it needs a win, or can rest.

This is Fox's belief, for future (Week 17) reference: He might rest the starters for a quarter, even for a half, but it is unlikely he would sit them for an entire game.

"We want to be playing our best football at the right time," he said.

The going is good, but the Broncos haven't played their best football.

It's a safe bet you will see the starters — and Manning — in the final four games.

Former Wyoming Cowboys, current Denver Broncos defensive tackle basks in touchdown glory

Ben Drederickson
Casper Star-Tribune
December 3, 2012

Mitch Unrein has been a popular man these past couple days. Everyone wants to hear about The Catch. And that's OK. Because Unrein is happy to talk about it.

In Sunday's NFL game between the Broncos and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Unrein became the first defensive tackle in Bronco's history to catch a touchdown pass. The 1-yard completion, lofted by future Hall of Fame quarterback Peyton Manning, surprised Unrein as much as those who saw the 6-foot-4, 291-pound defensive tackle running wide open through the end zone.

"At first I just figured we would do a running play," Unrein told the Star-Tribune Monday. "I didn't really have time to be nervous. I got to the huddle, and Peyton called the play."

See, Unrein wasn't new to offense altogether. This season he was added to the backfield in the Broncos' goal-line package, a formation the team calls "Cowboy" in honor of Unrein's Wyoming football career.

When Denver used the formation against the Saints earlier this season, it worked. Unrein blocked and running back Willis McGahee scored. McGahee handed the ball to Unrein, who spiked it into the ground. It was the highlight of the former Wyoming walkon's NFL career -- until Sunday.

Unrein said the team added a wrinkle to the "Cowboy" package a couple weeks ago. He started learning some pass routes.

"I caught everything in practice," he said.

When he got to the huddle Sunday, he heard Manning call one of the pass plays. Unrein would be the first option on the pass. Other receivers would be second and third options if he was covered.

He wasn't.

Unrein slipped into the flat. Manning threw the ball.

"The only time I was really nervous was when the ball was in the air," Unrein said. "It seemed like the ball kind of floated to me. I'm sure Peyton was trying to make it easy to catch."

Unrein grabbed it and chopped his feet to make sure he stayed in bounds. While most NFL receivers touch two feet down coolly, Unrein must have taken six steps.

"I had to double check to make sure I got two feet in," he said. "It's kind of one of those things. You don't really know what you're doing."

The crowd erupted. Unrein froze, taking in what had just happened. He spiked his own touchdown ball into the turf, then asked a trainer to make sure he have it back.

"Hopefully, I'll get something printed on there, which game and what it was for," Unrein said. "I'll hopefully have Peyton sign it for me as well."

Unrein's big day wasn't done. He later put a hit on Tampa Bay quarterback Josh Freeman that led to Von Miller's interception return for a touchdown. The Broncos (9-3) won the game 31-23 and clinched the AFC West.

"That was just one of our goals," Unrein said. "Our next goal is to be AFC Conference champs. And then, you know, go on to the Super Bowl and win the Super Bowl. We still have many goals to achieve."

They are big goals. But Unrein's career has shown hard work can make seemingly unthinkable things happen. The former Wyoming walk-on has the football to prove it.

"I never thought that in a million years," Unrein said. "I grew up watching Peyton Manning. To say I caught a touchdown pass from him, that's something that I will always remember. I'll tell my kids and my grandkids. Now that I kept the ball, I'll have proof that I actually caught it."

Bucs tried to blow up Peyton's victory formation

Mike Florio
ProFootballTalk.com
December 3, 2012

Forgotten in the Buccaneers' four-game winning streak followed by a one-point loss that happened with Tampa in possession of the ball is the fact that the Bucs have a habit under coach Greg Schiano of contesting victory formation late in one-score games.

They did it on Denver on Monday, trailing the Broncos by eight.

Yes, the Broncos. As in Peyton Manning's Broncos.

Mike Silver of Yahoo! Sports writes that it was "disconcerting" to watch Eli's less mobile brother move away from the scrum. Silver also decries the practice. "Quick, let's take a poll," Silver writes. "Voting yes, Greg Schiano and a few thousand blindly loyal Bucs fans. Voting no, everyone else on earth. The nays have it."

While the nays may have it, it's not unanimous. I'm not a Bucs fan, blindly loyal or otherwise. But I think that every game should be played until every game is over. In fact, it's far less problematic that the Bucs did it on Sunday because the fact that they did it back in Week Two against Eli's team made it obvious to any future opponents of the Buccaneers that they needed to be ready to — *God forbid* — play football for one more play.

Tim Tebow gets more anonymous criticism (and sympathy)

Michael David Smith
ProFootballTalk.com
December 3, 2012

A big kerfuffle arose in New York last month when Tim Tebow was described as "terrible" by an anonymous Jets teammate. Now Tebow has been described similarly by an anonymous ex-teammate with the Broncos.

But the Denver player who spoke anonymously to Mike Freeman of CBS wasn't describing Tebow as a lousy player because he dislikes Tebow. He was describing Tebow that way because he likes Tebow — and feels badly for him, that he's been thrust into a situation he can't handle.

"I feel really, really bad for Tim. He's a good person, just not an NFL quarterback," one Broncos player said.

Another Broncos player offered similar thoughts.

"I've been following Tim in New York and I feel horrible for him," the player said. "Everyone here, I think, wants the best for him. He's a good guy. But you can't turn Tim into something he's not, and he's not really an NFL quarterback. He's more of a gimmick player."

The Tebow gimmick hasn't worked with the Jets, but it's the Jets, not Tebow, who deserve the criticism for that. In Denver, Tebow engendered enough good will that there's genuine sympathy for what he's going through with the Jets. Even if no one in Denver would want him back.

Plenty More to Play For

Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
December 3, 2012

The Broncos want to be playing their best football when the postseason arrives.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- With a whole month of games left in the season, the Broncos have already set themselves up for the postseason.

Sunday's 31-23 win against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers assured the team of a second consecutive AFC West crown, a spot in the playoffs and at least one extra home game at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

But the club isn't ready to celebrate quite yet.

"It's one step," cornerback Champ Bailey said after the game. "It's not like we've done anything, really. We won our division. Next step is to just keep climbing in these playoffs. That's all we can concentrate on."

That mentality was echoed by Head Coach John Fox in his weekly press conference on Monday.

Just because the team is in the playoffs doesn't mean the next four games are irrelevant.

Quite the opposite.

"We always say people remember what you do in December," Fox said. "So that's what we have ahead of us. We've got a division game coming up. Hopefully Friday we get to 5-0 in the division so far. There's a lot to play for. We'll see where that leads us."

Fox indicated that going undefeated in the division is one of the "carrots" that the team has ahead of it to produce inspired football down the stretch.

Another is improving the club's turnover margin. Fox said that is an area the team is "not very good in right now," and harkened back to his 2003 Carolina Panthers squad, which lost the turnover battle in the regular season but turned it around in the playoffs, using a plus-9 ratio in the postseason to reach Super Bowl XXXVIII.

But there's more to it than just those goals.

Playoff seeding is important. The No. 1 seed, currently held by the Houston Texans, brings home-field advantage throughout the playoffs with it. The No. 2 seed --

currently a three-way tie between the Broncos, Baltimore Ravens and New England Patriots -- provides a first-round bye.

Denver is already assured one of the top four seeds as a division champ. Regardless of where they end up, Fox said the team needs to be playing its best football when the postseason tournament begins.

"If you look back, I don't know the exact history of it, but I don't know how many times the No. 1 seed has won in the last 10 years," Fox said.

To his point, a No. 1 seed has won the big game just three times in the past 10 years, the same number of times a wild-card team has taken the title during that span.

"People come from all over the map because they're playing their best ball during that time," he continued. "We want to start building for that and we want to start this week against Oakland."

Short Week Underway

Stuart Zaas
DenverBroncos.com
December 3, 2012

The Broncos' Thursday night game at Oakland kicks off just 97 hours and 12 minutes after Sunday's game ended.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- In the NFL, there is usually a 24-hour rule where teams can enjoy a win before moving on to the upcoming opponent.

This week for the Broncos, despite clinching the AFC West with a 31-23 win over Tampa Bay, that rule was out the window as the team immediately refocused on its Week 14 game that will kick off just 97 hours and 12 minutes after the final whistle sounded in Sunday's victory.

"With that Thursday night game it really is hard to think about anything else with this short week," quarterback Peyton Manning said following the game. "But it certainly feels good to get the win today and to guarantee a playoff spot."

With the condensed schedule, Monday was treated like a typical Tuesday with the players off except for those needing treatment.

"Heal up -- cold tub, ice pack, whatever you want to do," defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson said. "Get ready for Oakland week."

The team will return to Dove Valley on Tuesday to begin preparing for Thursday's game on an accelerated time frame designed to cram an entire week's worth of planning into one-and-a-half days before the team's flight leaves for Oakland Wednesday afternoon.

"(The schedule changes) quite a bit because to answer the bell of a physical game that quickly, you have to modify your schedule," Fox said on Monday. "Our quality control coaches jumped ahead last week to help in the game planning. Today's our Tuesday, so players have today off and then we'll practice Tuesday, Wednesday, get on the plane and head to Oakland."

Denver and Oakland have already squared off once this season, with the Broncos earning a 37-6 win at Sports Authority Field at Mile High in Week 4.

The fact that the Broncos coaching staff has already gameplanned for the Raiders once this season will help the short-week prep, as there is familiarity between the division rivals.

"Teams change a little bit, so you redo everything as far as your breakdown," Fox said. "There are minor roster changes or injuries, maybe a guy who was injured last

time is back in now. From that standpoint, there are minor changes, but it does help. It'll help both sides."

Fox said the team would "tone down" the on-field time, concentrating more on mental preparation for this week's game. The team will not practice in pads at all this week as players get their bodies ready for another physical game on Thursday night.

With the Broncos currently in a three-way tie for the AFC's No. 2 seed, cornerback Champ Bailey knows the team will be motivated to extend its seven-game win streak, despite the quick turnaround.

"It's a short week," Bailey said. "It is what it is. It's the nature of our job. We've just got to go out and play when we're called on. That's what we're going to have to do this Thursday. We'll be ready to go."

Next Day Notebook: Manning On Point

Sam Davis
DenverBroncos.com
December 3, 2012

Peyton Manning is on pace for one of his best seasons.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- In his 14th year in the league -- first with the Denver Broncos -- quarterback Peyton Manning's numbers are as good as they have ever been.

Manning is completing 68 percent of his passes, a mark he has reached just once in his NFL career. It is the most accurate completion percentage among starting quarterbacks in the NFL, and well above his career average of 65 percent.

His quarterback rating of 104.6 is better than any past year except for one.

Head Coach John Fox said what Manning is doing in the circumstances he is doing it in is "pretty historical."

"To come back after the injury he had, the residual of the injury he had, it takes a special guy," Fox said. "To come to a new team, new teammates, new city - everything about it is new other than the conference - it's pretty amazing, actually."

With 3,502 passing yards on the season, Manning has thrown for nearly 292 yards per game. That puts him on pace for 4,669 yards by season's end, which would be his second-highest single-season total.

His 29 touchdowns to nine interceptions makes him one of five quarterbacks in the league with a touchdown-to-interception ratio of better than 3-to-1. He has accomplished that feat in just two prior seasons.

Manning's performance so far in 2012 has been, as Fox said, amazing. But now is no time to think about the success he and the Broncos have enjoyed in the last two months.

The focus is on continuing to win football games and improve every week.

"Ultimately, it's about trying to get the win," Manning said. "You always want to play better each week. You want to be playing your best football, hopefully, here in the month of December."

TAMME TURNS IN STRONG PERFORMANCE

Time and time again on Sunday, Manning looked Jacob Tamme's way, and the tight end delivered on numerous occasions.

Tamme had his most productive game as a Bronco in Sunday's win against the Buccaneers, catching a game-high nine passes for 89 yards. Five of those catches moved the chains for the Denver offense.

"Obviously with (wide receiver) Brandon (Stokley) being out tonight, guys needed to step up and we did a pretty good job of that overall," Tamme said after the game.

The fifth-year tight end was targeted a game-high and personal season-high 13 times on the day. Because the Broncos use three different tight ends most games, it's never clear which one will get the most opportunities in the passing game. He just knows he has to be ready whenever Manning calls his number.

"The way that we play tight ends and the different personnel groupings that we have, it's going to vary game to game," Tamme said. "We really don't have much of an idea. Just kind of different games flow different ways. Sometimes Joel (Dreessen) will get a touchdown or two and sometimes I'll get chances."

COACH JOKES ABOUT UNREIN TD

Following Sunday's win, defensive tackle Mitch Unrein looked back on his first career touchdown reception with a sense of humor.

"It felt like a really long time when that ball was floating toward me," Unrein laughed. "I was like, 'Oh, just don't drop it, just don't drop it.' Luckily, it hit my hands and I caught it and wrapped it up with both hands. I kind of stood there for a second and I was like, 'Dang, I just scored a touchdown. That's pretty cool.' Then I had no dance afterward, no skills like Von Miller."

Asked how he earned the role of defensive tackle/tight end/blocking fullback, he joked, "Maybe because I have a hard head or something."

Fox was asked the same thing on Monday, and he, too, made a joke about the situation.

"We took a little poll, and he got the most votes," Fox smiled. "So he is the guy we've been working with."

To offer a more legitimate answer, he pointed to Unrein's versatility - still with a hint of humor.

"He has good hands, so that helps," Fox said. "He can be a dual-threat, a blocker and you never know -- he might be able to run it a little bit."

He did, however, eliminate the possibility of Unrein throwing a pass.

Inside the Numbers: Week 13

Stuart Zaas
DenverBroncos.com
December 3, 2012

1

Defensive Tackle Mitch Unrein's 1-yard touchdown reception in the first quarter against Tampa Bay was the first offensive touchdown by a defensive lineman in Broncos history. The play represented the first receiving score by an NFL defensive lineman since Ryan Denney (Buf.) on Sept. 27, 2009.

3

Head Coach John Fox became just the third coach to win division titles in each of his first two years with a club after inheriting a team with a losing record. He is just the second coach to take a last-place team and lead it to consecutive division championships in his first two years.

5

Linebacker Von Miller recorded his first career interception and returned it 26 yards for a score, to mark another career first. The play marked the fifth defensive touchdown of the season for the Broncos, and was the 11th non-offensive touchdown by the team under Fox.

7

The Broncos won their seventh straight game on Sunday against Tampa Bay to mark the franchise's fourth-longest win streak, and the longest since the 1998 season when the team won 13 in a row.

12

The Broncos clinched a record-tying 12th AFC West Division title with their 31-23 win against the Buccaneers on Sunday. Denver is tied with Oakland for the all-time lead in AFC West championships. The Broncos have won 10 AFC West titles during Owner and CEO Pat Bowlen's 29 seasons, which is the most by any team in that span. Sunday's win also marked his 17th winning season and guaranteed his 15th playoff appearance, which both mark the most among AFC West clubs during his ownership.

29

Quarterback Peyton Manning's three passing touchdowns against the Bucs gave him 29 on the season to represent a Broncos single-season record.

37.4

Wide receiver Trindon Holliday leads the NFL with a 37.4-yard kick return average and ranks second with a 13.0-yard punt return average since joining the Broncos in Week 6. He also remains the only player in the NFL this season to appear in 12 games and have an undefeated record through Week 13. Holliday spent the first

five games this year with the Texans, who were 5-0 to start the year. He then came to Denver just in time for the Broncos' first victory of their current seven-game win streak to make him 12-0 on the year.

4,986

Manning passed Dan Marino to climb into second place in NFL history for completions. He now has 4,986 in his career, trailing just Brett Favre (6,300) in that category.

Raiders Week: Monday Injury Report

Tyler Everett
DenverBroncos.com
December 3, 2012

On Monday, Head Coach John Fox updated the status of linebacker Wesley Woodyard, who left Sunday's 31-23 win over the Tampa Bay Buccaneers with an ankle injury.

Fox said he didn't expect Woodyard to need long to recover.

"He has played really good football for us," Fox said. "We'll just evaluate. It's an ankle sprain. It's not anything serious as far as if it will require a lot of time. We'll see how he feels tomorrow."

Though the players did not practice on Monday, the team had to fill out an injury report since the team plays on Thursday. The report is based on projections of how much players would have practiced if there had been one.

Below are the injury reports from the Broncos and Raiders.

DENVER BRONCOS

PLAYER	INJURY	MONDAY
DE Robert Ayers	Non-Injury Related	Full
TE Virgil Green	Hamstring	Full
G Chris Kuper	Ankle	Full
G Manny Ramirez	Back	Full
WR Brandon Stokley	Hip	Limited
WR Matthew Willis	Knee	DNP
LB Wesley Woodyard	Ankle	DNP

OAKLAND RAIDERS

PLAYER	INJURY	MONDAY
CB Phillip Adams	Concussion	DNP
S Tyvon Branch	Neck	Full
DE Jack Crawford	Toe	DNP
S Matt Giordano	Concussion	DNP
RB Mike Goodson	Ankle	Limited
RB Taiwan Jones	Ankle	Limited
RB Darren McFadden	Ankle	Limited
S Mike Mitchell	Concussion	DNP
QB Carson Palmer	Right Thumb	Limited
FB Marcel Reece	Hamstring/Quadriceps	Limited
DT Richard Seymour	Knee/Hamstring	DNP

Broncos vs. Buccaneers: Participation Breakdown

Sam Davis
 DenverBroncos.com
 December 3, 2012

Playtime Percentage

A breakdown of Broncos' players participation in Sunday's Week 13 win against Tampa Bay

PLAYER	OFFENSIVE PLAYS	DEFENSIVE PLAYS	SPECIAL TEAMS PLAYS
G C. Kuper	75 (100%)	-	6 (18%)
T R. Clady	75 (100%)	-	6 (18%)
G Z. Beadles	75 (100%)	-	6 (18%)
T O. Franklin	75 (100%)	-	6 (18%)
QB P. Manning	75 (100%)	-	6 (18%)
C D. Koppen	75 (100%)	-	-
WR D. Thomas	70 (93%)	-	-
TE J. Dreessen	68 (91%)	-	2 (6%)
WR E. Decker	67 (89%)	-	12 (36%)
RB K. Moreno	63 (84%)	-	2 (6%)
TE J. Tammie	56 (75%)	-	-
WR M. Willis	22 (29%)	-	11 (33%)
RB R. Hillman	9 (12%)	-	18 (55%)
TE V. Green	8 (11%)	-	-
T C. Clark	5 (7%)	-	17 (52%)
FB C. Gronkowski	3 (4%)	-	6 (18%)
RB L. Ball	3 (4%)	-	20 (61%)
DT M. Unrein	1 (1%)	25 (37%)	17 (52%)
S R. Moore	-	67 (100%)	7 (21%)
CB C. Harris	-	65 (97%)	1 (3%)
DE D. Wolfe	-	65 (97%)	5 (15%)
DE E. Dumervil	-	64 (96%)	5 (15%)
CB C. Bailey	-	59 (88%)	-
LB V. Miller	-	58 (87%)	-
S J. Leonhard	-	52 (78%)	-
CB T. Carter	-	45 (67%)	5 (15%)
LB K. Brooking	-	43 (64%)	16 (48%)
LB W. Woodyard	-	38 (57%)	5 (15%)
DT K. Vickerson	-	29 (43%)	2 (6%)
S M. Adams	-	26 (39%)	1 (3%)
DT J. Bannan	-	25 (37%)	7 (21%)
LB D. Trevathan	-	21 (31%)	5 (15%)
LB D. Williams	-	21 (31%)	19 (58%)
DL M. Jackson	-	20 (30%)	3 (9%)

CB O. Bolden	-	8 (12%)	6 (18%)
DT S. Siliga	-	4 (6%)	16 (48%)
S D. Bruton	-	1 (1%)	-
LB N. Irving	-	1 (1%)	27 (82%)
LB S. Johnson	-	-	26 (79%)
K M. Prater	-	-	20 (61%)
P B. Colquitt	-	-	12 (36%)
LS A. Brewer	-	-	11 (33%)
WR T. Holliday	-	-	11 (33%)
WR A. Caldwell	-	-	10 (30%)
G M. Ramirez	-	-	8 (24%)
			6 (18%)