

Denver Broncos targeting AFC's No. 2 seed

Mike Klis
The Denver Post
December 10, 2012

Was the rookie-replacing-rookie rally Sunday by Mike Shanahan's Washington Redskins against the Baltimore Ravens another sign that this is the Broncos' year?

Maybe, although little about the Redskins' 31-28 overtime win Sunday changed the Broncos' fortunes regarding the AFC's No. 2 playoff seed.

It doesn't hurt the 10-3 Broncos that the Ravens fell to 9-4 after Washington's rookie quarterback Kirk Cousins replaced injured rookie Robert Griffin III to finish off a final-minute, game-tying, eight-point drive in regulation.

But the Broncos have to beat the Ravens next week in Baltimore to gain seeding control. If the Broncos lose next week, they and the Ravens would both have 10-4 records, but Baltimore would have the tiebreaker. If the Broncos win, they would all but eliminate the Ravens from No. 2 seed contention.

The keys to the Broncos claiming the No. 2 playoff seed still figure to come down to winning in Baltimore next Sunday, and having the 9-3 New England Patriots lose one of their next two home games — against 11-1 Houston on Monday night, or against 9-3-1 San Francisco next Sunday.

Ravens in tough stretch going into game vs. Broncos

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
December 10, 2012

LANDOVER, md. — December has roared in on the Baltimore Ravens like some season-crushing lion, with very little holiday spirit in tow.

The Ravens lost on the last play of a game two Sundays ago when Pittsburgh Steelers backup Charlie Batch engineered a game-winning drive that ended with no time on the clock. Sunday, the Ravens lost to the Washington Redskins and two rookie quarterbacks — Robert Griffin III and backup Kirk Cousins, who constructed a stunning, 31-28 overtime victory in a game the Ravens led by eight points in the final minute.

And this Sunday they get perhaps the quarterback in the Broncos' Peyton Manning with Denver bringing an eight-game winning streak to Baltimore for a game that has significant bearing on the AFC's playoff bracket.

"Denver is a good team, and coming here after a few extra days off, it's going to be challenging," Ravens safety Ed Reed said. "But we're up for it. We'll get back to Baltimore and get this train rolling the right way. ... We know what Peyton Manning brings. Everybody knows what Peyton Manning brings."

After beating Oakland on Thursday night, the Broncos are 10-3 and squarely in the chase for a first-round playoff bye as one of the AFC's top two seeds. Sunday's loss dropped the Ravens to 9-4. The New England Patriots, who have a head-to-head win over the Broncos, are 9-3 heading into Monday night's game against the 11-1 Houston Texans.

Despite the recent bobbles, the Ravens still lead the AFC North and see the Broncos game as a chance to right themselves after a four-week stretch with two three-point wins and two last-play losses.

"We're not going to be disheartened; we understand what we're fighting for," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "We understand where we've got to go as a football team. ... We're fighting through all the things you're fighting through at this point in the season. That's why you don't overreact to things."

Asked the significance of the Broncos game, Harbaugh said: "It means about the same thing as going into the one last week. It's a big game. They're all big."

Added Ravens running back Ray Rice: "It's the shape we're in right now. And the shape we're in right now is we still have playoff hopes. We're still first place in the AFC North."

Looking forward to the Broncos, the Ravens have two growing concerns coming out of Sunday's loss. The first: The Redskins piled up 420 yards total offense, including 172 yards rushing — 122 coming from rookie Alfred Morris. Cousins came off the bench cold to relieve an injured Griffin — the Redskins said the initial exam showed a sprained knee, pending an MRI — and went 2-for-2 passing on the game-tying drive and ran in the two-point conversion.

The Broncos have the NFL's No. 3 offense, with Manning having piled up seven 300-yard games, including four in the team's eight-game winning streak.

"We've got a lot of little things we have to correct from this, that we will correct from this," Reed said. "It's a game of inches ... especially when you aren't where you're supposed to be."

The other major issue is the increasing pressure defenses have put on Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco, who has been sacked 12 times in the last four games. Flacco was sacked twice by the Redskins on Sunday and hit repeatedly, especially from his blind side on the offensive left. And he fumbled twice.

Ravens starting right guard Marshal Yanda suffered what could be a season-ending ankle injury late in Sunday's loss. The Broncos are tied for second in the NFL in sacks with 39, and linebacker Von Miller has 16.

"(The Broncos) have got a great defense. A lot of guys I know over there, I respect those guys," Reed said. "And I have a lot of respect for Peyton, and I'm sure he'll have a lot of wrinkles with a couple days of extra work looking at us."

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Hard times for Baltimore

The Redskins piled up 420 yards on the Ravens' defense Sunday, another week of struggle for a unit that has consistently been one of the NFL's best since the franchise won its only Super Bowl to close out the 2000 season. Here's a look at the 2012 totals by opposing offenses:

30-point games: Three

400-yard games: Five

170-yard rushing games: Four

300-yard passers: Four

Ravens hope to have Ray Lewis back in lineup against Broncos

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
December 10, 2012

LANDOVER, md. — In need of a little pick-me-up, the Baltimore Ravens hope to have one of the league's all-time greats back in the lineup Sunday against the Broncos.

Ravens middle linebacker Ray Lewis, who returned to practice from injured reserve last week, is eligible to return to play against the Broncos.

That return is still in question and would almost be unprecedented as Lewis tore his right triceps in a Week 6 game against the Dallas Cowboys. Lewis had surgery shortly after the injury and the Ravens used the "designated to return" tag on him when they placed the perennial Pro Bowl selection on injured reserve.

"He's always meant a lot," said Ravens defensive lineman Arthur Jones. "He's amazing."

Lewis returned to practice last week and was seen throwing a football at times, using his right arm, between drills and was working on a blocking sled using both arms as well.

Lewis released a statement last week that said: "I'm making progress. ... But, the story shouldn't be about me right now. ... When I know I will play in a game, or when I play in a game, I will say more then."

The Ravens are 4-3 without Lewis in the lineup, including Sunday's overtime loss to the Washington Redskins.

The Ravens could be thin at linebacker given two linebackers — Jameel McClain and Josh Byner — left Sunday's game. Byner later returned in the second half, but McClain was evaluated for a neck injury and did not return to the game.

McClain had been playing in Lewis' middle linebacker spot.

"We hope we have everybody we can have (for the Broncos)," said Ravens tackle Kelechi Osemele. "We'll just get back to chopping wood, get back to work, and hopefully everybody who can play for us will be in the lineup."

Redskins rally to beat Ravens 31-28 in overtime after RGIII is hurt

Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
December 10, 2012

LANDOVER, md. — In the end, after his backup quarterback and his backup punt returner had lifted his team to its fourth consecutive victory, Washington Redskins coach Mike Shanahan was all smiles as he fixed his tie in the wake of a 31-28 overtime victory over the Baltimore Ravens at FedEx Field.

"They just kept fighting. Our guys just kept fighting," Shanahan said. "You always want to see that, get through those ups and downs and keep going."

The win was the Redskins' fourth in a row, moving them to 7-6 in the NFC East race and handing the Ravens (9-4) their second consecutive loss, the first time Baltimore has lost back-to-back games since the 2009 season.

The only downside to the dramatic day for the Redskins was quarterback Robert Griffin III's right knee. Griffin was injured on a scramble in the fourth quarter, when he appeared to hyperextend the knee when he was tackled by Ravens defensive tackle Haloti Ngata.

Griffin left the game, limping badly, for one play on the Redskins' last possession of regulation, but returned for four plays before leaving the game for good.

The Redskins took Griffin for an MRI exam after the game and said "everything is clear" as far as serious ligament damage and that RGIII has a knee sprain.

That left fellow rookie Kirk Cousins, behind center with the Redskins trailing 28-20, facing second-and-20 from the Ravens' 26-yard line.

Cousins hit Leonard Hankerson for a 15-yard gain and followed with an 11-yard touchdown pass to Pierre Garcon with 29 seconds remaining in regulation. Cousins then ran in the two-point conversion to tie the game 28-28.

"The touchdown was an off-schedule play," Cousins said. "I tried to start my read and did not feel comfortable in the pocket and waiting on it. ... So, I thought, 'I'm going to do my best RGIII,' if you will."

Ravens safety Ed Reed said the Baltimore defense knew Cousins would try to run on the two-point play.

"Yeah, we were calling it," Reed said. "But schematically, and as players, we have to execute. We didn't execute."

Another Redskins backup, cornerback Richard Crawford, helped decide the issue in overtime. When Washington's defense forced a three-and-out by the Ravens offense, Crawford tore through the heart of the Ravens' coverage unit as he brought the ensuing punt back 64 yards to put Washington in position for the victory at the Ravens' 24-yard line.

The Redskins ran two plays before Kai Forbath booted 34-yard field goal for the win.

Baltimore loss doesn't change much for Broncos but it doesn't hurt

Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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Really, little about the Washington Redskins final-second rally to defeat the Baltimore Ravens on Sunday changed the Broncos' fortunes in claiming the AFC's No. 2 playoff seed.

It doesn't hurt the 10-3 Broncos that the Ravens fell to 9-4. Still, the Broncos have to beat the Ravens next week in Baltimore to gain seeding control with two weeks left in the regular season. If the Broncos lose next week, they and the Ravens would have both have 10-4 records but Baltimore would have the tiebreaker. If the Broncos win, they would all but eliminate the Ravens from No. 2 seed contention.

The keys to the Broncos claiming the No. 2 playoff seed still figures to come down to winning in Baltimore next Sunday, and having the 9-3 New England Patriots lose one of their next two home games — against 11-1 Houston on Monday night, or against 8-3-1 San Francisco next Sunday.

This assumes the Broncos win their final two home games against the 5-8 Cleveland Browns (who have won three in a row) and 2-11 Kansas City Chiefs, and the Pats win their final two games — at 2-11 Jacksonville and home against 5-7 Miami.

Baltimore, by the way, may have to play well to finish with 10 wins after starting 9-2. Not only have they lost their last two games, to Pittsburgh and Washington, they have arguably the league's toughest remaining schedule with games against the Broncos and New York Giants at home, and Cincinnati Bengals on the road.

With three weeks left, awards races still very much up in the air

Peter King
Sports Illustrated
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Adrian Peterson is not chasing 2,000 yards. He is chasing 2,105. The record.

Kirk Cousins is going to write for *The New Yorker* someday, and maybe not about football. In a few paragraphs, you'll read his take not only on getting the save over the Ravens, but also on the art of quarterbacking (his words, not mine).

And like Romeo Crennel a week ago, Dallas coach Jason Garrett had to tell his team unspeakable news Saturday, then think of a way to make football meaningful. And then, when the Cowboys' game in Cincinnati was over, he kept his team waiting. He had to make a phone call.

All of the stories of the day in due time, but this point first: Three weeks from today, the 50 voters for the annual Associated Press NFL awards have to file their ballots. Three weeks out every year, most of the races are either clear or have two or three men in the running. This year, as I see it, there's not a single easy race.

For MVP, I could make a solid case for any of the three quarterbacks with at least 20 more touchdowns than interceptions -- Tom Brady, Aaron Rodgers, **Peyton Manning** -- or the aforementioned runner chasing 2,000 yards coming off knee reconstruction (Peterson), or one of the three transcendent 23-year-old defenders: Houston's J.J. Watt, **Denver's Von Miller** or San Francisco's Aldon Smith. And what about the rookie quarterbacks, with their insane frosh seasons; Robert Griffin III leads the league in passer rating. There's not a bad choice.

I'll take the quarterback with the longest winning streak (eight games) and who's had the biggest adjustment to make of all the very good ones this year, schematically and physically, on a new team in a new city. For now, give me **Peyton Manning**.

For Offensive Player of the Year, it'd be easy to vote for a quarterback with gaudy numbers, and justifiable. But this is one, if Peterson continues on his current pace (last seven games: 1,101 yards, 7.2 yards per rush) and hits 2,000 yards, that could be easy. For now, give me Peterson, with an asterisk, because he has to keep up his breakneck pace when the three remaining defenses he'll face all know he'll be getting the ball early and often.

For Defensive Player of the Year, it's likely to be a race between Watt, **Miller** and Smith, with Seattle cornerback Richard Sherman an outside threat. To me, it's a choice between one of the best pass rushers to come into the league in years,

Smith, versus two men who are more all-around run-pass defenders, Watt and Miller. A factor that must be considered, obviously, is Smith threatening the NFL sack record. He has 19.5 after getting two Sunday against Miami. The record is 22.5 by Michael Strahan. With three games left -- at New England and Seattle, then home against the leaky Arizona line -- Smith needs 3.5 sacks. Today I'll take Watt, with his 16.5 sacks and league-record 15 passes batted down, four of which resulted in Houston interceptions. Three weeks from today, who knows?

The rookie awards are more congested than the others.

For Offensive Rookie, three quarterbacks of teams that didn't make the playoffs last year are in playoff contention this season. That would be amazing if any rookie quarter were doing it. But three? Andrew Luck of the 9-4 Colts is almost assured of a rookie playoff game; Russell Wilson of the 8-5 Seahawks (do you get extra credit for being a third-rounder and playing at a Pro Bowl level?) and Griffin of the 7-6 Redskins are deserving. And what of the league's third- and fourth-leading rushers, Tampa's Doug Martin and Washington's Alfred Morris? You can't go wrong with any of the five. Today I'd take Griffin, with his rookie-QB record 748 rushing yards and league-leading 104.2 rating. But if he misses time with his knee injury, Wilson or Luck could sneak in.

For Defensive Rookie, three linebackers stepped in from day one and became tackling machines -- Carolina's Luke Kuechly, Seattle's Bobby Wagner and Tampa Bay's Lavonte David. Cornerback Casey Hayward of the Packers has been a star from about Week 4. Linemen Chandler Jones of New England (outside) and **Derek Wolfe of Denver** (inside) have provided consistent pressure since Week 1. Safety Harrison Smith of Minnesota is already one of the most instinctive safeties in the league. For now, for the wins and the leadership and filling a gaping hole, I'll take Wagner of the Seahawks.

For Coach of the Year, line 'em up. Gary Kubiak has gone from firing line to best record in the league in 22 months. Mike Smith had the guts to change both coordinators on a playoff team, and the Falcons are 11-2. Greg Schiano jumped from Rutgers to playoff contender with Tampa; Jeff Fisher has taken the Rams (10-38 the last three years) and gotten them to .500. Pete Carroll and Bill Belichick and Jim Harbaugh and **John Fox** ... vote for any and you'll get no argument from me. My choice, today? I'll split my vote between the two men coaching the Indianapolis Colts: leukemia-stricken Chuck Pagano (by text and telephone) and interim Bruce Arians (by daily hard coaching).

For Comeback Player, we could argue all day about Peterson coming back to a very high level after surgery and **Peyton Manning**, for returning to Peyton Manning form after something no quarterback's ever done -- playing the position coming off four neck procedures in two years. And don't forget the stirring comeback of Carolina linebacker Thomas Davis, who'd win it in a walk in almost any other year. He's playing at a high level after tearing the same knee up in 2009, 2010 and 2011. For now ... I'd probably take Manning because of the unprecedented nature of his

situation, and because he's played at such a high level and has the Broncos flying so high.

I asked Peterson Sunday who he'd pick for Comeback Player, and I liked his answer. "If I had a vote, who'd I take?" he asked before pausing. "We got three weeks left. Let's let it play out."

Smart man.

Headlines of the weekend:

Another weekend, another tragedy. Dallas nose tackle Josh Brent apparently drove drunk and, in an ensuing accident, killed his best friend and practice-squad teammate Jerry Brown. Somehow, the players union and teams have to get players who have been drinking to call for the free ride. It's the only solution; players are going to drink on Friday nights, in every NFL city. They need to get to the point where the car services are common and acceptable. "We are going to keep pushing the education about drinking and driving, and pushing, and pushing," NFL director of player programs Troy Vincent said Sunday. "We're not going to stop, and we're getting to everyone in their circle of influence."

A two-game suspension on the first DUI would be another positive step.

RGIII must be Elastic Man. Robert Griffin III's right knee whipped after being hit by a Ravens' defender in the fourth quarter at FedEx Field, and it hyperextended grotesquely. Remarkably, his MRI showed a knee sprain, which is a partial ligament tear, but not major damage. The Redskins know he can't expose himself to as many hits as he does at 218 pounds, but now's not the time for a lecture. If Washington's lucky, Griffin will miss Sunday's game in Cleveland and be back to face the Eagles and Cowboys to end the regular season.

The Colts take command of the AFC Wild-Card race. Pittsburgh lost, embarrassingly, to San Diego. Cincinnati got out-emotioned by the Cowboys. Indianapolis snuck by Tennessee. The upshot: The 9-4 Colts have a two-game wild-card lead for the AFC's fifth seed with three games to play; 1-2 will get them in the playoffs for sure, and 0-3 might. Another day, another bunch of odd heroes, like Cassius Vaughn and Vick Ballard, from among the 70 percent roster changeover from last year to this one.

The Bears are in big trouble. A month ago, Chicago was 7-1 and vying for NFC home-field through the playoffs. Now the Bears are hanging onto the sixth playoff spot by their fingernails, quarterback Jay Cutler's hurt again and they're 1-4 in their last five games. Worse, Green Bay's coming to town Sunday trying to win the NFC North and, at the same time, send the Bears careening out of the playoffs for the second year in a row. Futures are on the line. Brian Urlacher's. Maybe Lovie Smith's.

And starting at quarterback for the Cardinals, from Utah State University, No. 00, Kent Somers! Week after week, just when you think it can't get worse, Arizona's quarterbacking does. For two weeks it was Ryan Lindley playing the fool; Sunday in a 58-0 loss at Seattle, it was John Skelton. Next week, Detroit comes to the desert with Arizona, on a nine-game losing streak and imploding like no other team in football. Kent Somers may suit up. Somers, the *Arizona Republic* beat man covering the team, asked Ken Whisenhunt who would play quarterback next week against the Lions. "Can you play?" Whisenhunt said. He wasn't smiling. The Cards long for the days of Max Hall.

For the 47th straight year, there won't be a home team in the Super Bowl. This is not exactly true; when San Francisco made the Super Bowl in January 1985, the game was played in Palo Alto on the Stanford campus. Close enough to be a home game, just not in the home stadium. Ditto the Rams in Pasadena in 1980. But the Saints losing for the eighth time this year means New Orleans will host the game this year and have a chip on its shoulder with the homeboys not playing.

As Mike Florio of ProFootballTalk.com said Sunday night, "The commissioner better have his Popemobile when he goes to the Super Bowl this year." He's right: New Orleans will be an unfriendly place, and that's putting it mildly, for commissioner Roger Goodell, with Saints fans certain he went too far in the punishment over the bounty scandal.

(In the next few days, we'll see if the supposed neutral appeals officer hearing the player appeals, ex-commissioner Paul Tagliabue, cuts the four players some slack.)

Anyway, I thought interim coach Joe Vitt said something prescient after the 52-27 mauling at the hands of the Giants Sunday: "When you're losing the way that were losing, you're a fragile football team. We've got a lot of guys who are used to winning and doing things the right way around here. But unfortunately, we don't have enough of them. All of a sudden something goes bad and its, *oh, here we go again*, instead of just setting your jaw and drawing a line in the sand and having some mental toughness to get it done."

The Saints have a lot of work to do, particularly on defense, to make sure they don't waste year 14 of the career of Drew Brees next season ... and to make sure they get Sean Payton back as coach.

Eliminate the kickoff? Riiiiiiiiight. David Wilson of the Giants ran back kicks for a total of 227 yards Sunday, including an electric 97-yard touchdown return, the longest since the LBJ Administration. Tampa coach Greg Schiano's idea -- proposed to Roger Goodell when Schiano was still the Rutgers coach -- to eliminate the kickoff in favor of allowing a team to opt to go for it on 4th-and-15 from its 30-yard line ("So arbitrary it sounds like it was pulled out of a hat," one coach said Friday) seemed like a longshot before Sunday. But after the return electricity in the Meadowlands it seems ever more unlikely.

In fact, former officiating czar Mike Pereira, writing at FOXSports.com, said it's the type of proposal that will cause the Competition Committee to roll their eyes and quickly go to the next proposal. We'll see. I think Goodell's point was, excitement or not, if there's evidence that concussion and other neck and knee injuries can be reduced significantly by the elimination of the kickoff, it's only a matter of time before something takes its place -- for the long-term health of the game and its players.

The Adrian Peterson story.

Fifty weeks after surgery to reconstruct a battered knee, Minnesota's Peterson's has amazing round numbers, the best in his career after 13 games: 1,600 yards, 6.0 yards per carry, 10 rushing touchdowns.

"You need 400 yards to get to 2,000," I said to Peterson an hour after his seventh straight 100-yard game, a 21-14 win over the Bears. "Think you can do it?"

"Oh yeah," he said. "Without a doubt. It'll happen. Two thousand, that's easy. I'm eying Eric."

Dickerson? Eric Dickerson's NFL record, the 2,105-yard mark set in 1984? That's the one. Peterson needs 506 yards to break the record. That's 169 yards a game. Minnesota has lost Percy Harvin for the year; Harvin would have deflected some of the defensive pressure from Peterson. And Christian Ponder is slumping badly. So it's going to be tough, particularly against three of the top 15 rush defenses in the league: at St. Louis, at Houston, Green Bay at home.

That Peterson can even talk about this is amazing, given the fact that it wasn't a lock he'd be able to start the season after his knee reconstruction late last December. In four of the first six games, coach Leslie Frazier opted for a light (17 carries or less) load for Peterson; he was still breaking up scar tissue in the knee as he ran. But in the last two weeks, he's been a workhorse: 21 carries for 210 yards last week, 31 for 154 against the Bears.

"I feel like I'm there, but there's more to come," Peterson said. "I'm not surprised at all. In fact, this is what I envisioned. When I was running hills in the offseason, running the gassers, I planned to come back stronger than ever, and I was convinced I could."

"Today was a huge day for us as a team. You felt the energy in the locker room before the game. We lost last week in Green Bay, and we really needed this game, and everyone just knew we'd respond to the adversity well."

The Vikings are in a clump of teams at 7-6, and they may have to win out to make the playoffs. That's fine with Peterson, because winning means playing well, and

playing well means he won't have to do it all himself. But to have a chance at Dickerson's record, he'll need 80 carries, minimum. And he could use a more productive quarterback than the one who's thrown for just 369 yards in the last three games.

The forgotten rookie quarterback.

On draft weekend, Michigan State's Kirk Cousins thought there were a lot of teams that might pick him. Washington wasn't one of them, not after taking Robert Griffin III in the first round. But the Redskins took him at pick 102. "I was scratching my head too," Cousins said Sunday evening, "I think like a lot of people were."

But Cousins settled into a support role for Griffin, and they became good friends. Cousins, a team source told me, has been an excellent guy for Griffin to bounce ideas and frustrations off of. "A football career is a marathon, not a sprint," said Cousins. "And I realize how good it is for my career that I'm in a place where the game is taught so well. If I ever want to coach someday, now I know all about the zone-read scheme, and that's something that may grow in the game as the years go on."

So Cousins was on the sideline -- "with my overcoat on for about three hours" -- when Griffin hurt his knee against the Ravens. Washington trailed 28-20, and Cousins got to three five or six passes in haste on the sideline, trying to get the blood flowing a little on a raw day at FedEx Field. He hustled onto the field on 3rd-and-6 from the Washington 40 with 1:42 to go; his crossing-pattern pass to Pierre Garcon was on target, but Garcon got mugged by backup cornerback Chris Johnson, and interference was called. Now Griffin came back for four snaps before the knee was just too painful to move, and back came Cousins. Second-and-20, Baltimore 26. Cousins found Leonard Hankerson open for 15. Now 36 seconds left. Timeout. Third-and-5. Offensive coordinator Kyle Shanahan called a play with Cousins, in the pocket, instructed to take his time, survey his options, and pick the most open one.

"I didn't like the look I got right away," Cousins said. "Something inside me said to take off and try to make a play. That's what you do sometimes as a quarterback. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

But how many sometimes come when you're cold off the bench, with your team's playoff life at stake?

Not many sometimes.

"It happened so fast," Cousins said. "I definitely didn't want to take a sack. We weren't playing The Little Sisters of the Poor out there. I was out of the pocket, and I just channeled my inner RGIII, and Pierre got open in the corner of the end zone."

Cousins threw a perfect ball, over one corner and just before the safety came in to hit Garcon. Touchdown.

Now it was 28-26. Two-point conversion. The call was quarterback draw all the way. Cousins saw a hole and made it past the goal line before Ed Reed could blast him. Tie game. Washington got a long punt return and won on Kai Forbath's field goal in overtime.

"One of the things I've learned about being a quarterback," said Cousins, and for a minute, he sounded like a Penn professor of Football 101 with a tweed coat on, "is that it's a balance between being a robot and being an artist. On the touchdown to Garcon, that's being an artist; you don't really know how it's going to look, but you've just got to get out of the pocket and create something. On the two-point conversion, you're a robot. You take the play and do what's called, because you know if it's blocked the right way and set up the right way, it'll work -- the quarterback just executes it."

Cousins did his first NFL spike in the end zone after the robot play. When he got to the sideline, Griffin hugged him and said, "Thank you." A region of fans said the same thing.

The Deep End

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

Before the weekend, Adrian Peterson needed 139 yards a game for the next four games to break 2,000 yards for the first time in his illustrious career. His best to date was in 2008, when he gained 1,760 (110.0 yards per game). What makes this task all the more difficult is that with Percy Harvin not playing since Week 9 and Christian Ponder averaging 131 yards passing for the last six games, Peterson's been the only offensive threat the Vikings have. So after watching the game this week, will he crack 2,000 or won't he?

The Pros: "The Bears have an excellent defense and, though they paid scant regard to Ponder, regularly playing with nine men up to stop the run, Peterson still gained 154 yards; 125 of his yards came after contact because he consistently managed to squeeze additional yardage out. This is something he's done throughout the year. His line will get him 2.3 yards per run and he'll average 3.9 after contact. The average number of yards after contact throughout the league is 2.5, so essentially his ability in this area has netted him just shy of an additional 400 yards. In short, the Bears tackled well and he still got the required figure without a huge amount of help from his normally good run-blocking line."

The Cons: "After gaining 104 yards in the first quarter on 11 carries Sunday, Peterson's next 20 runs only produced 50 yards. He became the Bears' sole focus as Ponder was trusted less and less to throw the ball. The quarterback passed for

only 91 yards, and unless he can improve dramatically, Peterson will be the only target of every defense he faces over the next three weeks. No matter how good he is personally, that may not be enough. For him to rush for 2,106 yards and break Eric Dickerson's all-time record, the way he said after the game he hopes to? Very, very difficult."

In Summary: "To hit 2,000, Peterson would need 133 yards per game against the No. 12 (Rams), No. 2 (Texans) and No. 14 (Packers) defenses against the run by yardage. With Ponder looking less and less like a viable NFL quarterback every week, it seems unlikely that Peterson will get the support he needs to succeed. To put it another way, even if he picks up 200 yards against one of those teams, he still needs 100 against both the others. This looks like a bridge too far even for the best running back of his generation."

Fine Fifteen

1. New England (9-3). Patriots' scoring output in their last six games: 242 points. Seahawks' scoring output in first 12 games of season: 242 points.

2. Houston (11-1). A win tonight in Foxboro -- in Matt Schaub's first game ever at New England -- would all but clinch AFC home-field through the playoffs for Houston. A win would make them two games clear of second-seed Denver with three to play, meaning Houston would have to go 0-3 and Denver 3-0 for anyone else to win home-field, seeing that Houston has the tiebreaker in head-to-head with Denver.

3. Denver (10-3). As the indefatigable Mike Reiss points out, Manning-Brady XIV is assured for 2013 now that Denver and New England have both clinched their divisions. The 2013 schedule metric, planned long before Peyton Manning signed with Denver last March, has the AFC West winner playing at the AFC East winner (as in 2012, for some bizarre reason), and sets up the XVth time Manning's team will play Brady's team since Brady took the starting job for New England in 2001. Two of the 16 matchups were negated by injury, Manning's in 2011, Brady's in 2008.

For those keeping score at home: Next season will be the third straight Brady-Manning Bowl in Foxboro. The previous three were in Indianapolis. The previous five were in Foxboro. All-time series score when Manning and Brady have started against each other: Brady 9, Manning 4, including 2-1 Brady in playoff games. CBS got Denver-New England this season. Look for it in primetime next year.

4. San Francisco (9-3-1). Remember when it was panicsville about Colin Kaepernick? You know, like, five days ago? The option run around left end cured that, at least for the time being.

5. Atlanta (11-2). Almost every good team in history has had a nightmare day, and this was Atlanta's. The key for Mike Smith now is to make sure it doesn't mushroom. You know how to do that? Run it better. With Jacquizz Rodgers.

6. New York Giants (8-5). I love the matchup in the Wild Card round if the playoffs were based on the standings today: No. 5 seed Seattle at No. 4 New York. Russell Wilson trying to slip-slide through and around that great defensive front. Fun times.

7. Seattle (8-5). Average score in the last five games (Seattle 4-1): Seattle 32, Foes 14.

8. Green Bay (9-4). I love it when a quarterback takes the bull by the horns. That's what Aaron Rodgers did on his third-quarter touchdown run. Amazing with the problems the Packers have had this year, but a week from today, with a win at Chicago and a Niners loss at New England, Green Bay would have a half-game lead for the NFC's second seed with two games to play.

9. Washington (7-6). Any team that sweeps the Giants and Ravens in seven days with playoff life on the line has to be in the top 10, even though neither win came with an exclamation point. After watching the last few minutes of the win over Baltimore, I no longer think it's hopeless if Kirk Cousins has to play Sunday in suddenly hot Cleveland.

10. Baltimore (9-4). I doubt even the return of Ray Lewis for the final three games (Peyton at home, Eli at home, then at Cincinnati) will revive the Ravens D. And that D needs a revival.

11. Indianapolis (9-4). I keep watching the Colts and saying Andrew Luck makes too many mistakes and there are holes in the secondary and they have a flawed offensive line and whatever else. But then Cassius Vaughn and Jerrell Freeman and Vick Ballard make plays, and it forces me to just say, "Shut up, logic."

12. Cincinnati (7-6). It's beginning to look very much like the Cincinnati-Pittsburgh game in 13 days will be for the sixth seed in the AFC playoffs. It's at Heinz Field.

13. Pittsburgh (7-6). Conference record: 4-6. Four and six. Cleveland has a better conference record. Strange days at the confluence, and it sure looked like Ben Roethlisberger came back a week too early.

14. Chicago (8-5). The record sounds much better than the Bears are playing.

15. Dallas (7-6). Steelers and Saints at home, before Dallas closes with Washington on the road. Cowboys could go 3-0. Cowboys could go 0-3. That you know.

The Award Section

Offensive Player of the Week

Cam Newton, QB, Carolina. The 30-20 win over NFC South first-place Atlanta showcased the 2011 Cam: 23 of 35 for 287 yards and two touchdowns, plus nine carries for 116 yards, including a 72-yard touchdown run. "I think this game allows me to have a little chip on my shoulder," said Newton. That's what he had most of last year.

Defensive Players of the Week

Bobby Wagner, LB, Seattle. The Seahawks' second-round rookie is trying to wedge his way into the Defensive Rookie competition the way Russell Wilson is doing on the offensive side. His 12 tackles and two interceptions were big keys to the 58-0 whitewash of the woebegone Cardinals.

Thomas Davis, LB, Carolina. As my compatriot Dennis Dillon reports (see the end of this column), Davis has had a remarkable recovery from his third ACL tear in as many years. Think of that -- three major knee injuries to the same right knee and he's back playing at a high level. Against Atlanta he had seven tackles and, in the middle of the fourth quarter, with the Falcons driving to cut the Panthers' lead to three, stepped in front of a Matt Ryan pass for an interception. That led to an insurance touchdown, and to the upset of the day.

Special Teams Player of the Week

Travis Benjamin, WR/KR, Cleveland. The rookie fourth-round pick from Miami (Fla.) made the longest punt return for touchdown in the storied history of the Browns (93 yards), giving Cleveland a 10-7 second-quarter lead over Kansas City. The twisting, leaping, cutting return was one of the best in the NFL this season, but add to the skill of the return the prelude to it. Benjamin began the play at the line of scrimmage, blocking the Chiefs' gunner, split wide right. About seven seconds before the snap, returner Josh Cribbs sprinted into a middle linebacker position, and Benjamin was left to sprint back into return position. Two seconds after he got there, the punt was floating down to him, and the rest is Browns history.

David Wilson, RB/KR, New York Giants. For going 97 yards untouched on a kickoff return (longest GMen TD return on a kickoff since 1964) to forge a 7-7 tie in the first quarter of a game the Giants had to have. Wilson, the first-round pick from Virginia, had fumble problems early this season for the Giants, but he's become a real threat in a part of special teams that had been a bit of a dry gulch for the team in recent years. His first three kick returns Sunday against the Saints: 58, 97 and 52 yards. For good measure, he added 13 carries for 100 yards and two rushing touchdowns. Combined yardage for the day: 327 yards. Yowza.

Dr. Z Unsung Man in the Trenches of the Week

The award for the offensive lineman who was the biggest factor for his team in the weekend's games, named for my friend Paul Zimmerman, the longtime SI football writer struggling in New Jersey to recover from three strokes suffered in November

2008. Zim, a former collegiate offensive lineman himself, loved watching offensive line play.

Andre Smith, RT, Cincinnati. The former overweight, underperforming first-rounder (remember how embarrassing his *Hard Knocks* performance was as a rookie?) has rebounded with a big year, and played well in the 20-19 loss to Dallas. Smith allowed but one pressure and no sacks (the rest of the line surrendered five), and he was a powerful part of a 146-yard afternoon on the ground. Credit offensive line coach Paul Alexander for plugging in so many new pieces to the line and keeping it humming over the years -- and for helping rebuild Smith's confidence after it flagged his first two seasons in the league.

Coach of the Week

Jason Garrett, head coach, Dallas. Talk about a difficult weekend. For the second straight week, a head coach of a team in crisis. Like Romeo Crennel in Kansas City last week, Garrett had to stand up in front of his team Saturday and tell them of a death in the family. Garrett did it just before the Dallas charter left for Cincinnati, telling his players that practice-squad linebacker Jerry Brown had been killed in a drunk-driving crash, and starting nose tackle Josh Brent was the driver of the car that killed him. "Everybody in our organization who knew Jerry is completely numb, and has been numb the last couple of days," Garrett said Sunday. "And football is a game of emotion."

Down 19-10 in the fourth quarter, Garrett's prep work paid off late, and the Cowboys rallied to a 20-19 win.

Goat of the Week

Jake Locker, QB, Tennessee. Standing in his end zone, under pressure, with a 20-14 lead late in the third quarter, Locker threw a mind-bendingly bad interception to Indianapolis cornerback Cassius Vaughn, who waltzed in with a three-yard interception that a third-grader would have caught and turned into a touchdown. Terrible decision, terrible execution, and without it, there's a good chance the Titans would have shocked the Colts in Indy. But the Colts went on to win, 27-23.

Quote of the Week I

"Vote Ray Guy."

-- A hand-written plea, black-marked on white athletic tape and covering the 50th anniversary Pro Football Hall of Fame patch, on the front of Minnesota punter Chris Kluwe's uniform Sunday. Kluwe has been outspoken (to put it mildly) in pushing the Hall of Fame case for the former Oakland punter.

He tossed it away after the game. That would have been a tremendous charity auction item.

Quote of the Week II

"Maybe his wife can teach him how to throw."

-- FOX NFL analyst Jimmy Johnson, on Minnesota quarterback Christian Ponder, who was recently engaged to ESPN college sideline reporter Samantha Steele. Johnson also said Ponder is the worst quarterback in the NFL.

Quote of the Week III

"How can he see what he just saw?! ... I'm not sure exactly what Pete Morelli's thinking on that. That's a sack ... If Luck saw that replay, I'm sure he's seething."

-- CBS analyst Dan Fouts, after referee Morelli did not overrule a Tennessee touchdown on a Will Witherspoon interception, when it appeared Andrew Luck's left knee was on the ground just before he released the ball.

Quote of the Week IV

"It's been a complete culture shock for everybody. I remember when we first put it in ... It was kind of like learning to walk again. I guess I'm speaking for myself. You play football for a very long time—through high school, through college, and never been exposed to anything like this, and I think that's a majority of the people in our offense. And then all of a sudden, we're doing all this zone-read stuff and we're letting guys go and pushing the whole offensive line to different guys than we normally do. It was just completely new, like a completely new learning experience. The receivers, they have vastly different responsibilities now. I think this whole process has just been kind of a gigantic learning experience, and something that I'm glad, personally, that I've been exposed to."

-- Washington tight end Logan Paulsen, to me, on this week's "Sports Illustrated NFL Podcast With Peter King," discussing the team's new option offense, run by quarterback Robert Griffin III.

You can find the podcast (with Steelers QB Charlie Batch as well) on iTunes or on SI.com. If you'd like to be educated on the new Washington offense, which, in my opinion, will be the one trend every smart assistant will be studying come the offseason, it's worth your time. Paulsen's a bright guy who has become a disciple of the option scheme.

Stat of the Week

The New York Jets have a two-game winning streak, and there's a chance it's the ugliest two-game winning streak in their history. Mark Sanchez's last 40 possessions (over the last three games, dating to Thanksgiving night against the Patriots) have produced, among other results: One touchdown pass. Three touchdown runs. Ten turnovers. Fifteen punts.

Factoid of the Week That May Interest Only Me I

Forty years ago today, the Miami Dolphins traveled to Yankee Stadium on a raw 44-degree Sunday, got 197 rushing yards from Mercury Morris, Larry Csonka and Jim Kiick, forced six Giant turnovers and beat New York 23-13. There was some fourth-quarter drama as the Giants were driving with a chance to tie in the fourth when they turned it over again, but Miami survived the last speed bump on the way to a perfect regular season. The win made Miami 13-0. The Dolphins shut out the lowly Colts the next week to finish the season 14-0, then beat Cleveland, Pittsburgh (a week after The Immaculate Reception game) and Washington to finish the only perfect season in modern NFL history.

A few interesting notes on the game, thanks to Mike Freeman's impressive and engrossing living-history book about the perfect season, *Undefeated: Inside the 1972 Miami Dolphins' Perfect Season* (itbooks):

- The game was a significant marker in the streak because it was the first time the media made a big deal of it, and it was the first (and only) time the franchise ever played in Yankee Stadium. And that week, *Time* magazine had a Peter Max-like illustration of Don Shula on the cover with the subtitle: "Building For The Super Bowl." The Giants' coach, Alex Webster, took the cover as a slap in the team's face and put it on a bulletin board in the Giants' locker room as motivation, Freeman wrote.
- Shula, according to Freeman, always thought this was one of the more significant wins of his career, because it was against a good 7-5 Giants' team, because the eyes of the world were sharpening focus on the unbeaten team, and because of the venue. (For emphasis, a couple of notes not in the Freeman book. "Our players were awed by Yankee Stadium," Shula told friends years later. The Miami locker room was crammed with press after the game, but players told Paul Zimmerman two decades after the game that Shula's words as the season wound down were all about the postseason. As in: Nobody's going to remember this as a perfect season unless you win 'em all in the playoffs.)
- After the game, Freeman reported that a writer asked Shula if, to take off the pressure of being perfect with the division already clinched, the Dolphins should have played to lose one of the final games of the season. Steam came out of Shula's ears at that one. "I just can't buy into that attitude," Shula said that day. "I don't think there's anything you ever gain by losing. I go along with Jack Nicklaus. He once said, 'You know what breeds winning? Winning breeds winning.' "

I make note of it today for a couple of reasons: The Dolphins are celebrating the 40th anniversary of their perfection Friday with a dinner in Fort Lauderdale. And because that season doesn't get celebrated enough in the realm of great NFL accomplishments.

Factoid of the Week That May Interest Only Me II

The last time Detroit won at Lambeau Field was this week 21 years ago, □ Dec. 15, 1991.

That day, Brett Favre was a 248-pound third-string rookie quarterback in Atlanta, behind Chris Miller and Billy Joe Tolliver. While Favre sat the bench, as he always did that season, Deion Sanders had two interceptions and Mike Rozier was the leading rusher for Atlanta.

Mr. Starwood Preferred Member Travel Note of the Week

I was the Passenger You Don't Want to Be Near in the Quiet Car, on an Amtrak regional train, Providence to New York, Saturday afternoon. The idiot passenger. I put my phone on vibrate, and 10 minutes into the trip, it vibrated, and I answered it, bent over and whispering, not sure who it'd be. Of course the conductor came by. "Library-type atmosphere, sir," he said. "Off the phone." I got off. Twenty minutes later, there was another call. Not urgent, but I picked it up anyway. Same deal. Conductor walked over. "Last time I'll tell you this," he said. "Off the phone or move."

He was right. I was wrong. The car was half-empty, but that doesn't matter. I was what I shake my head at on the Quiet Car often -- the idiot who whispers on the phone when you're not supposed to be on the phone. Felt like a bum. The rules of the train are not complex. If you can't follow 'em, walk.

Tweet of the Week I

"That just happened. Your 2012 season in a nutshell."

-- @cmccosky, Chris McCosky of the Detroit News, seconds after the Lions, up 14-0 at one point, fumbled to hand Green Bay defensive tackle Mike Daniels an early-Christmas gift touchdown at snowy Lambeau.

Tweet of the Week II

"Definition of team quitting? 9 losses n a row. 9th loss 58-0! Injuries handling of offense worst n NFL. Adrian Wilson&Darnell Dockett situations!"

@FitzBeatSr, Larry Fitzgerald Sr., father of the Arizona wide receiver, after the ridiculous loss by the Cardinals in Seattle. The son has been quite quiet through it all, but knowing the Cards receiver as I do, this is killing him □ and he's not going to sit idly by without trying to get out if he doesn't think the team can solve the endless quarterback problem.

(Double) Tweet of the Week III

"We all know about the tailgating at Arrowhead but #Browns fans won some respect today. Went running downtown this a.m. and . . . lots of fans already tailgating before 7 o'clock. Music playing, grills going and it was still dark. Cold out, too"

-- *@adamteicher of the Kansas City Star, on Sunday morning, in Cleveland to cover Chiefs-Browns.*

Tweet of the Week IV

"There are medieval kings who had less job security than Mark Sanchez."

-- *@StevePoliti, the columnist of the Newark Star-Ledger, who deserves royalties because of how often he is in this column.*

Ten Things I Think I Think

1. I think this is what I liked about Week 14:

- a. Well, Greg Hardy, I guess you were right.
- b. Nick Foles, who looked like a starting NFL quarterback at Tampa.
- c. The tackling machine known as Luke Kuechly, Sixteen more for the Carolina rookie linebacker against the Falcons.
- d. Cleveland's ability to smother an offense. Three wins in a row. Didn't think we'd see that out of the 2012 Browns.
- e. Victor Cruz's ability to stretch a defense.
- f. Nice touch by Dean Spanos, giving Norv Turner the game ball after a too-little, to-late win in Pittsburgh.
- g. Colts, 7-1 in their last eight.
- h. Marshawn Lynch, with his 128 yards and three rushing touchdowns, even against the white-flag Cards.
- i. Colin Kaepernick, 3-1 as a starter, with that gorgeous option run.
- j. The Rodney Harrison quote Sunday night: "No one's afraid to play Atlanta."
- k. Holy Jason Avant! What a catch in the corner of the end zone by the pride of Verona, N.J., Anthony Fasano

l. The Rams, who are relevant again, much sooner than we thought they'd be.

m. Nick Fairley, with the mauling sack of Aaron Rodgers pushing the Packers out of realistic field-goal range in a tie game.

n. Seattle's sked. 'Hawks won't face a hostile crowd until the first playoff game, if they make it. They're at Buffalo (actually, at Toronto to play Buffalo), then have the 49ers and Rams at home to close.

o. Good sliding catch for the win in Tampa by Jeremy Maclin.

2. I think this is what I didn't like about Week 14:

a. Christian Ponder's ball security. So, so lucky he got away with that incomplete pass while being thrown to the ground. Could well have been a fumble.

b. Horrendous coverage by DeAngelo Hall on the second touchdown reception by Anquan Boldin. Pausing with the ball in the air?

c. Tennessee cornerback Alterraun Verner, not corralling a fumble that could have ended the day for Indy in the second quarter.

d. Way to cost your team 15 yards for taunting Andre Smith, Rob Ryan. (In an otherwise good day for Ryan and the Dallas defense.)

e. Donnie Avery, who will be sick over the perfect Andrew Luck pass that floated through his hands and off his facemask, costing Indy a fourth-quarter touchdown.

f. The.

g. Arizona.

h. Cardinals.

i. I like Mike Irvin. I don't like his cackling when I am watching the highlights.

j. The way Robert Griffin III's right leg flailed. I am surprised the thing didn't break in half. And he might play Sunday? That can't be real.

3. I think I have to throw a bouquet out to Army quarterback Trent Steelman. If you watched the Army-Navy game Saturday, your heart had to break for Steelman, a four-year starter who'd never beaten Navy and had Army in position to win the game at the Navy 13 with 64 seconds left, trailing 17-13. Steelman muffed a handoff to Larry Dixon, and Navy recovered to win the game. Steelman wept so uncontrollably that, watching his devastation, you had to almost weep with him. But the Navy coach, Ken Niumatalolo, put it perfectly after the game when he said:

We should all be proud as Americans that this guy is going to be defending our country. They don't get any tougher than Trent Steelman."

4. I think Texas A&M quarterback Johnny Manziel, at 6-1, will be an intriguing pro whenever he chooses to enter the NFL draft. What's good for him, obviously, is the success of Drew Brees and Russell Wilson, which will diminish the perceived importance of height in a scouting report for quarterbacks.

For those who have asked: College players are not eligible for the draft until after their third season of eligibility is completed, which means Manziel theoretically could enter the draft in 2014 after his third college year and sophomore football season, or in 2015 or in 2016. Andrew Luck had the same option. He redshirted his freshman year at Stanford, 2008, and played in 2009 and 2010, then passed up entering the 2011 draft to play his redshirt junior season in 2011. Then, of course, Luck declared for the 2012 draft□ but he could have stayed in to play this season.

5. I think, with all the talk about Jon Gruden's coaching candidacies, remember these things:

a. ESPN would feel betrayed after clearing Ron Jaworski out of the three-man Monday night booth this season if Gruden left. Not that this would prevent Gruden from taking a great job in the NFL, but simply a point to keep in mind□. He wouldn't go with ESPN's blessings, regardless what the PR spin is when he leaves.

b. Gruden's going to have to have a veteran quarterback who's smart enough to process and execute the whims of his offense, and to be flexible. A Tony Romo, for instance, or Philip Rivers.

c. I would not be at all surprised if the Cowboys have a bad final three weeks if Jerry Jones goes after Gruden hard.

6. I think Brandon Jacobs cannot hide his disgust any longer at being nothing but an insurance policy for the Niners. Via ProFootballTalk.com, Jacobs wrote on Instagram this week, asked by a fan to put up a photo of him wearing some 49ers gear: "I am on this team rotting away so why would I wanna put any pics up of anything that say niners this is by far the worst year I ever had, I'll tell you like I told plenty others."

I always knew Jacobs wouldn't take the bench well. He never did in New Jersey either.

7. I think the kickoff debate, spurred by comments Roger Goodell made to *Time* this week, won't be the only rules change the Competition Committee is going to study,□ and I hope it's 2013 and not later. Interesting history lesson here: The abolition of the extra point was first discussed 60-plus years ago by then-commissioner Bert Bell. His son, Upton, told me about it over the weekend.

"My father, being a coach and player, really thought about how important the rules would be to a new and more wide open game," said Upton Bell in an email to me. "He was constantly talking about getting rid of the extra point and making the field goal the focal point, second only to a touchdown. He thought the extra point was unnecessary and that he could improve the quality of the game by having the touchdown count for six or seven without kicking the extra point. In the year he became commissioner (1946), he tried to sell the idea that by eliminating the extra point, it would take away another option of the gamblers and how they set the point spread.

"By the fifties, he had Paul Brown sold on it. So again, he tried in 1951 to get the owners to agree with it, along with bringing in one of his favorite projects, sudden death. He was particularly interested in the effect of the extra point on television. He thought it slowed the game down. Both times, he got close but didn't have enough votes. He finally got sudden death through but I can remember him, almost until the day he died, talking about how he wanted to get rid of the extra point.

"Ironically, when I owned a team in the World Football League in Charlotte, one of the few things that the League did well was abolish the extra point and you went for two points, which was called 'the action point.' Believe it or not, for the two years we survived, it was one of the most exciting plays in the game and forced coaches to really think and plan. That's what I think would happen if the NFL got rid of the extra point and forced the coaches to make a decision."

Just for your information, in the last 45 NFL regular-season weeks, kickers have missed 23 extra points. That's 23 misses in 705 games (not including Sunday). I've been harping on this and probably won't stop: Why waste 45 seconds on a play that's 99.3-percent certain (which it's been since the start of the 2010 season)?

8. I think the NFL must look at the picture-perfect hit by Reggie Nelson to the sternum of Dez Bryant to jar a reception loose from Bryant. Must. And if the officiating staff of Carl Johnson can look at this hit and justify the personal-foul on Nelson, then I have to think about covering another sport. A stunning and stupid penalty. Defenders have to be allowed to defend, for crying out loud.

9. I think -- and I don't care how much of an Eagles homer this makes me sound like -- I was happy to see the delight on the Philadelphia sideline as the seconds ticked off on the win in Tampa. That's not an eight-game-losing-streak team, and it doesn't mean Andy Reid is suddenly a lousy coach. It's football. And it's good to see the seeds planted with a young quarterback like Nick Foles bear fruit -- he improvised on the winning drive, inventing a fourth-down-conversion pass in the huddle.

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

a. Johnny Football is a good Heisman choice, but for many reasons, I thought Manti Te'o was a better one.

b. Nothing against Manziel (how many first-year starting quarterbacks walk into Tuscaloosa and beat Nick Saban and the unbeaten Tide?), and I don't watch a lot of college football, so I shouldn't have a vote. But think of this: Where was Notre Dame before this season in the eyes of America? Not ranked in the AP writers' poll, ranked 24th in the USA Today coaches' poll.

With an inconsistent offense all season, Te'o was huge in so many big wins -- two picks of Denard Robinson in beating Michigan, a late pick of Landry Jones to seal the win over Oklahoma, leading goal-line stands against Stanford and USC, and, arguably, the best leader on any team in college football. They stand number one now, the only unbeaten team in the land, and I agree with Brian Kelly: If Te'o doesn't win the Heisman this year, no defensive player will ever win it.

c. David Stern on my old state (N.J.) supporting the addition of sports gambling to the landscape: "New Jersey has no idea what it's doing." Hey! Them's fightin' words!

d. My thanks to coach Andrew MacKay and the Ashland (Mass.) Clockers football team for hosting me at the team awards breakfast Saturday. I miss high school sports, and Saturday was a great example of what I'm missing -- good kids, good coaches, great life lessons.

e. Coffeenerdness: Nothing like the 1:16 a.m. pot of Starbucks Italian Roast to jolt you awake and make 4,000 more words seem not such a hopeless task. I'd mainline it if I could.

f. Beernerdness: Can't beat getting off a train in Providence Friday night and finding the Luxe Burger Bar a few steps away with the last few minutes of Celtics-Sixers, and Harpoon IPA on tap. Now that's a quality 90 minutes before bed right there.

g. So I made my semi-annual pilgrimage to my favorite restaurant in New Jersey, Osteria Giotto in Montclair, the other night. And I thought about lots of different things to order, but I did what I do nine out of 10 times there: "Lasagna." And our server, Marisa, told me every time I go in there and have the lasagna and then mention it in the column, they have a run on lasagna and can't keep it in the place. Well, tell the boss to make extra this week, Marisa.

It's never been better than I had the other night. So good, in fact, that I got two pieces to go and froze one. I took Brandon Jacobs there before the NFC title game almost five years ago, and he was so smitten with the lasagna that he got four pieces to go.

h. I like that Royals-Rays trade for Kansas City, because I'm very partial to James Shields and like Wade Davis too. I guess the outfielder Tampa Bay got, Will Myers, might be the best player in minor-league baseball, and obviously the Rays know what they're doing. But this is the first time in forever Kansas City looks to have a major-league rotation (Shields, Davis, the enigmatic Ervin Santana, Jeremy Guthrie and someone). The Royals might be OK.

i. It's entirely possible the Red Sox are the fifth-best team in the East. Just because you spend \$13 million a year on Shane Victorino doesn't make him a \$13-million-a-year player.

j. Chris Christie on *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* was kid-like talking about hugging his new best friend, Bruce Springsteen. Cute.

Who I Like Tonight, and I Mean Dennis Dillon

Dillon, an SI.com columnist, wrote a terrific story last week about the forgotten man in the Comeback Player of the Year derby, Carolina linebacker Thomas Davis. Davis, who clearly has to be in the discussion for Comeback Player, has had his right knee reconstructed three times in three years -- in November 2009, March 2010 and September 2011, and had sincere doubts about going through a third rehab after the last one. But he did. And as Davis told Dillon: "I feel like I'm doing this for guys who are to come. I'm doing it for the guys who are going to go through injuries and the teams that are going to have to make decisions on guys that have been injured. Don't give up on the player. And if you're a player, don't give up on your dreams."

Re my pick for tonight -- New England 27, Houston 23 -- I think the Patriots will struggle protecting Tom Brady if Sebastian Vollmer misses with his stiff back. It's got to be all relatively healthy hands on deck if New England's going to be able to block left end J.J. Watt and keep him from wrecking the Patriots game plan.

The skill players for New England, and missing Rob Gronkowski (broken forearm) for at least another week and Julian Edelman (foot) for the season? I don't worry much about that for them. As Houston safety Danieal Manning told me, "Tom throws to anybody -- he just doesn't care. Even with Gronkowski down, they're not in trouble. I faced [backup tight end] Visanthe Shiancoe when I played for the Bears and he was in Minnesota, and he's a stud. There's no way they'll be worried about the guys they don't have. Their depth is so good."

This game has the feel of one of the great Monday night games, with the two teams a combined 20-4 and the Patriots on fire. Neither team has lost since Oct. 14. It's reminiscent in some ways to the Giants-49ers game on Dec. 3, 1990, when New York and San Francisco entered with twin 10-1 records. The Niners won 7-3, stopping the Giants on four shots inside the 10-yard line midway through the fourth quarter.

But the biggest takeaway from that game was the near-fight between Ronnie Lott and Phil Simms after the game, when Lott went crazy because of something he thought Simms had said about him before the game. Crazy story: Jim Burt went to San Francisco in the twilight of his career, and he played for the Niners in this game against the team that made him famous. A few hours before the game, Burt told Lott a phony story to get him fired up. He said Simms thought Lott was overrated, washed up and went out of his way to avoid big hits. Lott was a crazyman all game,

and sought out Simms afterward, and they went facemask-to-facemask before being pulled apart.

Not enough bad blood between New England and Houston; they've met only three times, and never with much on the line.

"I'll be telling my grandchildren someday I played against Tom Brady," Danieal Manning said. "These are the kinds of games you love playing in."

Can't imagine Danieal Manning and Brady going face-to-face after this one, unless it's to say, "Nice game."

The Adieu Haiku

Yo! Adrian! And
I don't mean Talia Shire.
You smell a record.

Baltimore loss is Broncos gain

Andy Koen
KOOA.com
December 9, 2012

The Denver Broncos could thank their former coach for strengthening their position playoffs. Mike Shanahan's Washington Redskins beat the Baltimore Ravens Sunday in overtime. The loss gave the Broncos a one game lead over the Ravens in the overall AFC standings.

Denver had already moved into second place on Thursday night after picking up their tenth win of the season in Oakland.

They could still be bumped down a spot if New England beats Houston on Monday Night Football. While both teams would have 10-3 records, the Patriots still hold the tie breaker because of their win over Denver back on October 7 in Foxborough.

Should the Broncos run the table and keep second place through the end of the season, they would pick up a first round bye in the playoffs and have the homefield advantage during the Divisional Round January 12-13.

With Denver Broncos off Sunday, Fans Should Pull for Houston Texans, Washington Redskins

Rich Kurtzman
CBS Denver
December 9, 2012

Denver locked up their division three weeks ago with their victory over the Chargers in San Diego, winning the AFC West for the second straight year for the first time since 1986-87. Of course, that hasn't stopped them from running off three more wins—an NFL-high eight straight in all—and continuing to fight for playoff improved playoff positioning along the way.

The Broncos, at 10-3 before kickoff of the games Sunday, technically sit in second place in the AFC standings, but they've also played one more game than everyone else. Because the Houston Texans sit at 11-1, and they hold the head-to-head tiebreaker over Denver, the Broncos have little hope of catching them and gaining the No. 1 seed overall. But for the men in orange and blue, the No. 2 seed in the AFC, with a coveted by and the home field advantage for their first playoff game that comes with it, is still in reach. Like Houston, though, the New England Patriots own the head-to-head tiebreaker over the Broncos as well, making Monday's game between the two powerhouses all-important for Denver.

Yes, it would benefit the Broncos for Houston to knock off the Patriots in New England, though it will be no easy task. The Patriots, led by veteran quarterback Tom Brady, possess the No. 1 offense in the entire NFL. Their 35.8 points per game are a full touchdown better than Denver's 28.8, while they lead with a total of 426 yards per game as well. Brady is beastly behind center, running offense more efficiently and more quickly than anyone else today. The Patriots leave opponents gasping for air as they hurry to the line to call another play, only to have Brady hit one of his many deadly pass-catching threats.

Houston will put up a fight, allowing a fourth-best 18.4 points per game, and if they can force turnovers, it will only help the cause. More likely though, the Texans' high-powered offense will have to try to keep up with the Pats, Monday. And if anyone can do it, Houston can. Matt Schaub is a special quarterback, with star wideout Andre Johnson to go to, they can score in one play. Not only through the air, as Arian Foster is arguably the best running back around today. He's quick and strong, while also being incredibly speedy and able to break off long touchdowns on a whim.

There's another game, one on TV today, that affects the Broncos as well—Baltimore at Washington. The Ravens are 9-3, and would improve to 10-3 to tie Denver, but due to their better conference record, would still hold a better playoff seeding if the

two teams tie. That means Broncos fans are hoping the 6-6 Redskins, with their blossoming star Robert Griffin III, can beat Baltimore. RGIII is magical, rejuvenating the Redskins' fanbase and becoming a rock star in less than an entire season in the league. Mike Shanahan not only knows how to use RGIII by rolling him out and letting him run the rock, he also still believes in a balanced offense, giving big boy Alfred Morris the ball on the ground a great deal, too.

But Baltimore is a tough team, led by a gritty, albeit injured, defense. Ray Lewis is injured, and so is Terrell Suggs, but there's still playmakers and hard-hitters. And the Ravens' offense shouldn't be slept on. Joe Flacco doesn't get nearly enough respect for his great play as of late, and Torrey Smith is an athletic freak of a receiver. Their offense is fueled by running back Ray Rice though, the dynamic runner that loves to break long runs inside and out. He also gives their offense a chance to control the clock, making it even more difficult for Washington Sunday.

By the numbers: Broncos sputtering offense

Zach Fogg
Mile High Sports
December 9, 2012

Last year, everyone praised a Denver Broncos offense that played it safe and almost always settled for field goals. This season, everyone is up in arms over the team's offense settling for field goals.

That seems to be the refrain I constantly hear from Broncos fans when discussing the problems surrounding Peyton Manning's side of the ball for your 2012 Denver Broncos.

I understand where you're coming from, I really do. I mean, the Broncos have won eight games in a row, scored 30-plus points in 10 of 13 contests this season and are exactly one New England Patriots loss to Houston or San Francisco away from controlling their own destiny on the quest for a two seed in the AFC and a first round bye in the playoffs. It's certainly not as if they've been struggling.

It's just that the team has been, well, underwhelming over the past six weeks dating back to a week nine contest against Cincinnati. Sure, putting any kind of points on the board was nice when Tim Tebow was under center, but do you really want to hold Peyton Manning to the same standard?

It's a matter of expectations really. Last season most of us were tickled that the Broncos even made the playoffs, much less won a game. Everyone who watched the team, from myself to John Elway, to John Fox, to Rex Ryan in Week 11 as Tebow ran for a game-winning touchdown against his vaunted Jets defense, seemed to have a perpetual half smile on their face that told you everything you needed to know: The Broncos just got away with something completely ridiculous that had no business working in the NFL.

Is that the same standard you want to hold Peyton Manning to? I certainly don't think so. In fact, I tend to believe that it would be insulting to Manning if he heard you say that. Don't be that guy. That's like being the guy who starts the wave when the Broncos are on offense. Nobody likes that guy.

The problem is that it's hard to point to a single statistic that explains the sputtering we see on the field. By most statistical measurements, the Broncos have a top-five offense across the board. They are top five in points, yards, total first downs and even third down conversions. They don't have an overwhelming number of penalties, they don't put themselves in too many third and long situations and they don't seem to struggle converting in any down whether they attempt to run or pass the football.

Still, they just seem off. No one would claim they are a woeful offensive team, but for whatever reason, they continue to frustrate fans with their hit-or-miss nature and the inability (or unwillingness) to blow out inferior competition. A 26-13 snoozer at Oakland Thursday night in which the Broncos offense put together only one drive of longer than one yard that resulted in a touchdown (their opening drive no less) did little to alleviate that perception. With that in mind, let's dig a little deeper and explore why this team is sputtering offensively.

56 percent- It starts right here, where the Broncos only score touchdowns on 56% of trips into the red zone. While that number is still good for a 10th-13th tie in the NFL, it is a far cry from the top-3 offense that the Broncos boast in terms of yards and points. It's also important to consider that this is a statistic where the difference between the top and bottom team in the league is over 35%, so in this case 14% separates the Broncos from the elite teams of the league. So if the Broncos' struggles start here, now it's time to determine why their red zone offense has struggled.

30- Well for starters, the Broncos are third in the NFL in dropped passes with 30. Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker lead the way with eight and seven a piece, respectively. The six teams with the most drops in the NFL are, in order, Detroit, Jacksonville, Denver, Oakland, Green Bay, and Tennessee. Four out of six of those teams are awful, so Denver and Green Bay being mixed in may explain why both teams have struggled at times with stalled offensive drives this season.

3.8- Denver has an average yards per rushing attempt of 3.8, good for only a 29th place tie in the entire league. With Peyton Manning under center this statistic is somewhat less important, but it still hurts on third and short/goal situations. This problem has been exacerbated by the loss of Willis McGahee. The Broncos will have to get some carries to Chris Gronkowski or Jacob Hester down the stretch if they want that to improve.

170- The Broncos may have the 4th highest third down conversion percentage in the NFL, but they also have attempted the 7th most third downs in the league. In short, completing 44% of 3rd down conversions still means you failed to convert 95 of 170. Since John Fox's conservative coaching style has dictated that the Broncos only attempt five 4th downs all season (tied for 2nd least in the league), the team's overall conversion rate is somewhat less than stellar.

11.6- The Broncos have an average yards per catch of 11.6, only 16th in the league. However, Denver's average yards per attempt is 7.9, 4th in the NFL. This tells us that while the Broncos are very efficient passing the ball; most of their passes are for relatively short yardage. Peyton Manning or not, it's tough to sustain drives that way.

The operative word here (somewhat obviously) is execution. The combination of dink and dunk pass plays, the number of dropped passes and the inability to convert short yardage situations on the ground have led to an increased number of third downs and subsequently stalled offensive drives.

Missing from the Denver offense are the quick strike long passes that were a staple of Manning's offense for years in Indianapolis. If the Broncos hope to become more efficient scoring with the football, they need to take more shots down the field.

It's not too much to ask. Heck, even Tebow could throw the deep ball, so I expect Manning to do it as well... Except better. Much, much better. There's nothing wrong with holding the Broncos to a higher standard and expecting excellence out of what is unquestionably a more talented roster than last season, with perhaps the greatest field general the game has ever seen.

The Broncos' only three losses this season have come at the hands of the best three teams in the league. If that is to change come playoff time, it's time to expect more from Peyton Manning and the Broncos offense.

What to Watch This Week

Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
December 9, 2012

The Broncos have already played their Week 14 game, defeating the Oakland Raiders 31-23 on Thursday Night Football.

So with the orange and blue off on Sunday, what should Broncos fans watch instead?

There are six games that could provide varying levels of interest to Broncos fans, involving either playoff seeding or scouting future opponents.

Here's a map of which games will be broadcast where, so you can see which contest will be on your local CBS and FOX affiliates.

BALTIMORE RAVENS AT WASHINGTON REDSKINS **11 a.m. MST, CBS**

The Ravens are the Broncos' next opponent, so it's a chance to see what Baltimore is all about in advance of the Week 15 matchup at M&T Bank Stadium. Also, entering Week 14, Baltimore was ahead of Denver in playoff seeding, so a Ravens loss would move Denver up in the ranks.

COWBOYS AT BENGALS **11 a.m. MST, FOX**

CHARGERS AT STEELERS **11 a.m. MST, CBS**

These games are worth watching from a playoff seeding standpoint. Entering Week 14, Pittsburgh had the No. 6 and final playoff spot as the second wild-card team. However, the Bengals are 7-5 as well, and both teams are just two games behind the Ravens in the AFC North. There's still plenty up in the air in that division, and if the Broncos don't earn a first-round bye, Denver could face either one of those AFC North rivals in the Wild Card round.

TITANS AT COLTS **11 a.m. MST, CBS**

Speaking of Wild Card round opponents, entering Week 14, the Broncos were slated to take on the Colts in the first round of the playoffs. This game provides a look at what Denver could face in the opening round of the postseason.

READ: IF THE PLAYOFFS STARTED THIS WEEK: WEEK 14

CHIEFS AT BROWNS
11 a.m. MST, CBS

In the final Sunday game worth keeping an eye on, the Broncos' final two opponents of the regular season square off. In Week 16, the Cleveland Browns head to Sports Authority Field at Mile High, then the Chiefs close out the slate in Week 17, also a home game for the Broncos. This game provides a little advance scouting for Broncos fans.

TEXANS AT PATRIOTS
6:30 p.m. MST, Monday, ESPN

The Monday Night Football matchup this week carries plenty of interest for Broncos fans. If the Houston Texans lose, the Broncos would be just a game behind the No. 1 team in the AFC — though Houston did defeat Denver head-to-head. If the New England Patriots lose, the Broncos would essentially control their own destiny for a first-round bye. In that case, Denver at 10-3 would be ahead of the 9-4 Patriots, and potentially tied with Baltimore, depending on how the Ravens fare on Sunday. But the Broncos face the Ravens in Week 15. So if the Patriots lose and the Broncos win out, Denver would hold one of the top two seeds in this year's postseason tournament.

Inside the Numbers: Week 14

Stuart Zaas
DenverBroncos.com
December 9, 2012

1,000

The Broncos are 6-0 on the road against the AFC West over the past two years.

4

Kicker Matt Prater converted all four of his field goal attempts against the Raiders to tie a career high. Thursday marked the fifth game in which Prater has converted four field goals.

5

Linebacker Von Miller has forced five fumbles in the past five games and is tied with defensive end Elvis Dumervil (2012) and S Dennis Smith (1989) for the most in team history for a single season. Miller and Dumervil are tied for second in the NFL this season in that category.

6

Miller recorded a sack in his sixth consecutive game to set a new career long streak.

16

Miller notched his 16th sack of the season on Sunday against the Raiders, which ranks second on the Broncos single-season record list.

34

Broncos CB Champ Bailey picked off a pass from Carson Palmer in the first quarter on Thursday at Oakland to tie DB Tyrone Braxton for the fourth most interceptions (34) in team history. The interception was the 52nd of Bailey's career, which represents the most by a cornerback since his rookie season in 1999.

70

Quarterback Peyton Manning topped the 300-yard mark for the 70th time in his career to extend his own NFL record in that category.

100

Running back Knowshon Moreno finished Thursday's win at Oakland with a career-high 32 carries for 119 yards with one touchdown to mark his third career 100-yard game.

5,000

Manning became just the second player in NFL history to complete 5,000 passes and did so in the fewest games (221).