

# Denver Broncos' Eric Decker shows he's a touchdown maker

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
December 18, 2012

Some receivers, such as New England's Wes Welker and Dallas' Jason Witten, are catch guys. Lots and lots of catches.

Other receivers are yardage guys. Randy Moss was a yards guy in his prime. Detroit's Calvin Johnson and Tampa Bay's Vincent Jackson have been high-yardage guys.

Then there are receivers who catch a relatively high percentage of touchdowns. The Broncos' Eric Decker is a touchdown guy.

"I'm a touchdown guy?" Decker said, modestly.

No Broncos receiver ever had more touchdown receptions through his first three NFL seasons than Decker's 18.

The great Lionel Taylor played his rookie season as a linebacker for the Chicago Bears in 1959, then had 16 touchdown catches with the Broncos in 1960 and 1961.

Still, Decker doesn't have to apologize, because he essentially got to play in only three games as a receiver his rookie year of 2010. He didn't catch his first TD pass until his final game that season, from Tim Tebow.

Decker then had eight touchdowns last year — four on passes from Kyle Orton, four from Tebow — before catching nine more from Peyton Manning this season with two games left to play.

Decker's 18th touchdown catch was a beauty — a 51-yard score off a double move Sunday against the Baltimore Ravens that gave Decker a step on his defender and enabled him to receive Manning's perfectly thrown ball in stride.

Decker is tied for 15th in the NFL with 72 catches, tied for 17th with 923 receiving yards — and tied for sixth with nine TD catches.

Of the three categories, touchdowns is not a bad place to stamp one's identity.

"That's the hardest to get," Decker said. "When you get to the red area, defenses get a lot tougher. The numbers (of TD catches vs. number of catches and yards) are smaller, so it's always fun to find yourself in the end zone."

**Pro Bowl votes now up to coaches, players.** Fan voting for the 2013 Pro Bowl teams closed Monday. Broncos coaches and players will cast their ballots Thursday, with the results announced Dec. 26. Fan voting represents one-third of the balloting, coaches have one-third of the vote, and players constitute the other one-third.

The most recent voting results had three Broncos leading at their respective positions: Manning, cornerback Champ Bailey and outside linebacker Von Miller. Ranked second (and therefore in position to start) were defensive end Elvis Dumervil, guard Zane Beadles, tackle Ryan Clady and outside linebacker Wesley Woodyard.

Ranked third were special-teamer David Bruton, return man Trindon Holliday and center Dan Koppen.

**Porter nearing return.** It's easy to keep track of how long cornerback Tracy Porter has been sidelined. He has been down since falling ill the day before the Broncos were to play their Monday night game, Oct. 15 at San Diego.

In that game, Porter's replacements, Chris Harris and Tony Carter, both had defensive touchdown returns to ignite what has now grown into a nine-game winning streak.

Porter, though, started practicing three weeks ago and there's a decent chance he will play, if in a limited role, this week against the Cleveland Browns.

"As far as Tracy goes, they're all competitors," Broncos coach John Fox said. "They want to play. He got injured or had an illness; some guys stepped in and did well. He just needs to focus on getting better every day. I saw good improvement last week. He went a month without playing. So he's working his way back."

# Denver Broncos' defense wants to slam the door on opposing offenses

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
December 18, 2012

Editor's note: NFL reporter Jeff Legwold analyzes the Broncos' 34-17 victory over the Baltimore Ravens on Sunday and looks ahead:

Of the 62 plays the Baltimore Ravens sent toward the Broncos' defense Sunday, one in particular was a topic of conversation in the wake of Denver's 34-17 victory.

At least among the Broncos' been-there, done-that set.

Oh, yes, they were ecstatic about Chris Harris' game-changing, 98-yard interception return for a touchdown. And there were smiles over the run defense that held the Ravens to 56 yards.

The Broncos enjoyed the three sacks and the fact Anquan Boldin didn't have a catch in a game for the first time since 2005.

"But a play like that, it spoils it a little bit," Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey said of the Ravens' last touchdown. "It was kind of how the fourth quarter went for us. It's one of those things that kind of stays with you. Because for all the good you do, you can't let it happen. That can wreck your whole day in another kind of game.

"That's not us, and it can't be us."

The issue: the Ravens' one-play drive — a 61-yard catch-and-run from quarterback Joe Flacco to tight end Dennis Pitta that followed a sustained Denver drive (15 plays that burned 9 minutes, 59 seconds). And while the Broncos had the game in hand, timing is still everything.

"And the timing was terrible," Bailey said. "You can't have our offense hold the ball like 10 minutes, like we always say we want it as a defense, and then go out there and give that up. Not on one play, not late in games."

So while the Broncos have crossed off plenty of things from their to-do list in the nine-game winning streak, they have allowed what coach John Fox calls "explosive" plays on defense in the fourth quarter of several recent games.

In fact, with Pitta's play, Denver now has allowed eight pass plays of 20 yards or longer in the fourth quarter of the past five games. The Chargers had three, the

Buccaneers two and the Raiders had a 56-yard Carson Palmer to Darrius Heyward-Bey completion.

Pitta also had a 31-yard touchdown catch early in the fourth quarter Sunday. He had 125 yards receiving in the game, but 92 came in the last quarter. Flacco had 106 of his 254 total passing yards in the fourth quarter.

"We can't do that," Broncos defensive end Elvis Dumervil said. "If we want to get where we want to go, we have to finish it off. We've had too many plays get away from us late in games. We can't relax. We'll get it straightened out."

### **Key matchup**

Broncos special-teams coordinator Jeff Rodgers may be glad it happened, because the plays often prevent touchdowns, but in the end they are still the stats no special-teams coach really wants to see.

Broncos kicker Matt Prater and punter Britton Colquitt combined for three tackles Sunday. Prater, with two, tied linebacker Steven Johnson for the team lead on special-teams tackles for the day.

But when the kicker and punter have tackles, it's because everybody else didn't.

That's a loose end the Broncos will have to tie up this week given they face Joshua Cribbs of the Cleveland Browns. Cribbs had 191 yards on seven kickoff returns (27.3-yard average) Sunday in the Browns' loss to the Washington Redskins.

He is tied for sixth in the NFL in kickoff-return average (27.6 yards) and has a 74-yarder this season. He's also sixth in punt-return average (12.5) and has had just six fair catches and 35 returns.

Prater routinely piles up the touchbacks at home, but the Broncos have to keep Cribbs from giving the Browns quality field position.

### **Comparison shopping**

With Pitta's 125 yards on seven receptions to go with two touchdowns, he became the third tight end to post a 100-yard receiving game against the Broncos this season. The Cincinnati Bengals' Jermaine Gresham had 108 yards receiving, and the Carolina Panthers' Greg Olsen had 102 yards.

Opposing tight ends have caught 74 passes for 879 yards and 11 touchdowns this season.

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## **Fourth-and-too long**

*The Broncos have surrendered 36 pass plays of at least 20 yards this season, but over the course of the last five games, opposing quarterbacks have found a little more room to work in the fourth quarter. They have given up eight fourth-quarter pass plays of at least 20 yards in their last five outings.*

Opponent	Fourth-quarter pass plays	Yardage
San Diego	Philip Rivers to Malcolm Floyd	38
San Diego	Rivers to Ryan Mathews	24
San Diego	Rivers to Danario Alexander	21, TD
Tampa Bay	Josh Freeman to Vincent Jackson	24
Tampa Bay	Freeman to Mike Williams	28
Oakland	Carson Palmer to Darrius Heyward-Bey	56
Baltimore	Joe Flacco to Dennis Pitta	31
Baltimore	Flacco to Pitta	61, TD

# Broncos offense performing better with a little more bulk in formation

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
December 18, 2012

Ferrari or pickup. Pickup or Ferrari.

One looks great; it's sleek and fast. And one does the job. And despite the lure of high performance, the Broncos may need simply to take the work truck out for a spin from time to time as they roll toward the postseason.

Sunday, the Broncos were in their three-wide receiver set plenty. It's often been the favored option on offense this season, and often the results have been spectacular.

But of late, it has been a struggle at times, particularly Sunday in Baltimore.

Against the Ravens, the Broncos ran 27 plays out of a three-wide set and averaged 3.4 yards per play. But more troubling, perhaps, was the amount of pressure the Ravens created in coming after Manning and the amount of punishment Manning took when the Broncos had three wide receivers in the formation.

The Broncos had four three-and-out drives in the first half, and they were in a three-wide look for every snap of three of those drives.

But when they went to a two-tight end look against the Ravens, their output improved greatly. They averaged 6.27 yards per play out of their two-tight end look against a physical Ravens front.

They gained 282 of their 350 yards on offense with at least two tight ends in the formation, including 144 of their 163 rushing yards as well as 138 of Manning's 204 passing yards.

Most importantly, however, they were able to keep Manning out of harm's way better in the bulkier look.

Manning also found the home-run ball as well with his 51-yard touchdown pass to Eric Decker coming out of the two-tight end look. Manning completed two passes longer than 10 yards out of the three-wide package — 14- and 13-yarders — but had completions of 14, 14, 15 and 28 yards to go with the touchdown toss with two tight ends in the game.

And when all was said and done, all three of the Broncos' touchdown drives on offense came on possessions when the team predominantly used the two-tight end set.

So, at least in the short term, perhaps it might be the best option for a team that has struggled at times to protect Manning when Chris Kuper is not in the lineup. Kuper missed his second consecutive game Sunday in Baltimore, his eighth overall this year.

The Broncos have allowed 21 sacks this season, 19 of those, including the Ravens' two, have come in the eight games Kuper has not played.

The Broncos have shown they can hit the big play out of the look as well, including Decker's touchdown catch Sunday. And with Jacob Tamme, Joel Dreessen and Virgil Green rotating in, they can diversify things as well with Tamme essentially playing as a bigger slot receiver.

Some matchups in the coming weeks may simply beg for the three-wide look. And the Broncos have shown how much they like it, by how often they have run it over the last two months. And Manning in a wide-open, fast-paced attack is usually a good bet on the scoreboard.

But at some point Manning has to take fewer hits. He's always going to be judicious with the ball and throw it away when that is the play to make.

Opposing defensive coordinators, however, appear to be bolder than they than have ever been in blitzing Manning, especially in the middle of the field. A two-tight end set widens out the defensive front a bit, pushes the edges of the formation out and adds a potential body or two in pass protection.

And at least for one game, it was clearly the team's best option.

# **Broncos' Chris Harris shows his value both inside, outside vs. Ravens**

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
December 18, 2012

The shopping list for any NFL personnel executive with designs on some trophies for the team's mantle will always include the basic got-to-have items. Items like franchise quarterback, left tackle and edge rusher.

But in an increasingly pass-happy league, with records seemingly being toppled each and every week, the cornerback who can play in the slot, on the inside, is becoming a highly-sought-after, hard-to-find player. Most offenses believe it is a matchup they can repeatedly win out of a three-wide receiver set, especially if they move one of their most productive receivers into the slot and let him work the middle of the field against what is usually a team's No. 3 cornerback.

This is why Chris Harris, who the Broncos signed as an undrafted rookie following the 2011 draft, has become such a valuable player in their defense.

Harris can play on the outside, as he has done at right cornerback having started the last 10 games there. And then when the Bronco go to their looks with five or six defensive backs, Harris often moves down inside to play in the slot.

And Sunday he was a key part of the effort to hold the Ravens' Anquan Boldin without a catch. He had Boldin on the outside for much of the day. And when the 220-pound Boldin moved down inside where he is at his play-rough best, Harris followed him.

It was the first time Boldin did not have a catch in a game he played in since the 2005 season. At one point, Boldin was so frustrated he was flagged for an unnecessary roughness penalty for some post-play action early in the fourth quarter.

"Chris is a physical corner. Anquan likes to play that physical game and Chris loves that," said Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey. "The numbers speak for themselves. Chris is a good corner, he knows how to play in the slot, he likes going in there with those guys, why not let him?"

Harris' ability to play with both power and speed allowed the Broncos to put Bailey on Torrey Smith, the Ravens' chief downfield threat. And without the two players he had targeted the most coming into the game available to him much of the time, Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco was often in a position to do little more than simply throw the ball away.

And Harris' 98-yard interception return for a touchdown came on a play when Flacco was trying to force one into Boldin.

"I'll play wherever they want me to," Harris said. "I always want to show them I can play inside, outside, wherever. I just want to play, keep working and keep the ball from the guy I'm on."

# Broncos' defensive showing will put Jack Del Rio on head-coaching radar

Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
December 18, 2012

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

**Q:** With all the head-coaching jobs projected to be open after the season, what are chances that defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio might be one-and-done in Denver? And if Del Rio goes, do the Broncos have anyone in-house that is being groomed to take over as coordinator and keep the existing defensive schemes? Or will it be a case of another new defensive coordinator from the outside with another new defense that players will have to adjust to? The Broncos defense needs some stability after all these years.

**A:** Jerry, the Broncos finished out Sunday's game as the No. 4 defense in the league in yards allowed per game (307.1) and they are No. 5 in scoring defense (19.6 per game).

There are only four defenses in the league that are top 10 in both rushing defense and pass defense: the Broncos (No. 2 against the run, No. 8 against the pass), the Steelers (No. 4 and No. 1), the 49ers (No. 3 and No. 5) and the Seahawks (No. 10 and No. 5). The Broncos are tied for second in the league with the Texans in sacks, and linebacker Von Miller is in the discussion for the league's Defensive Player of the Year.

That's a lot to add to a resume. And I have known a long-time coordinator in the NFL who has often been asked by younger assistants about the best way to get jobs. His response is routinely, "Go to the Super Bowl."

Franchise owners can sell Super Bowl assistants as their new head coaches. They bring excitement and optimism, which when paired together usually prompts people to open their wallets and buy plenty of tickets and merchandise.

Many people in the league already believe the Broncos will have to replace offensive coordinator Mike McCoy this coming offseason. McCoy, and the Broncos offensive staff as a whole, are highly regarded for the ability and flexibility to have constructed offenses specifically for Tim Tebow and Peyton Manning in consecutive seasons and implement them both on short notice.

McCoy will certainly get a look from several teams with openings. But the Broncos' offensive staff has had far more continuity in recent years than the defensive staff.

By contrast, Del Rio is indeed the seventh defensive coordinator in the last seven years. That kind of turnover will always affect performance, especially if the personnel side of the organization is unsettled as well, because then each coordinator is often bringing in different kinds of players.

So, the depth chart is routinely shallow and the numbers showed that in recent seasons. The Broncos surrendered at least 400 points in 2007, 2008 and 2010.

Defensively, Broncos coach John Fox has said he would provide the continuity if there were changes on the defensive staff, including at coordinator. The Broncos were 20th in total defense in 2011 with Dennis Allen at coordinator, a vast improvement over their 2010 finish — 32nd, last in the league.

Allen left to be the Raiders head coach. And Fox hired Del Rio, who now has the team in the league's top five. Players have complimented Del Rio for his confidence, experience, as a player, NFL assistant and former head coach, and no-nonsense nature.

As Broncos Ring of Famer Karl Mecklenburg, who worked with some of the Broncos pass rushers in training camp, put it:

"I like Jack, Jack's kind of an old-school, hard-nosed, tough guy who's not going to put up with guys that are more concerned about their stats than playing the kind of defense that wins. What you need is a bunch of grinders, guys who aren't looking for themselves on ESPN or whatever and some humble, star-level players. Jack has that."

As far as Del Rio being a head coach again — he was the Jaguars coach for nine seasons — he will likely have something to choose from if the Broncos get themselves to the AFC championship game and especially if they advance to the Super Bowl. Some people expect as many as six, seven or eight openings around the league at season's end, but former head coaches like Del Rio are often a little more choosy as well.

They're not as fond of simply jumping at the first offer, especially if there isn't an opportunity at a potential franchise quarterback that comes with the new job. The only reason Del Rio wouldn't get a look is if there are several team owners looking for the "next big thing" instead of a former head coach.

But by the same token, Del Rio has no reason to simply jump at any chance to be a head coach again. His value isn't going down on a team with Miller and Peyton Manning on it.

# Denver Broncos eyeing ... the Cleveland Browns

Tom Kensler  
The Denver Post  
December 18, 2012

**For the record:** With a 38-21 home loss Sunday to Washington, Cleveland dropped to 5-9, fourth place (last) in the AFC North.

**Streaking:** One of the legendary team names in pro football, the Browns have clinched their fifth consecutive losing season. They have only two winning seasons during the past 14 years and last won a playoff game in 1994.

**Who's hot:** Veteran returner Joshua Cribbs took back seven kickoffs Sunday for 191 yards — the most in the NFL during the weekend. His effectiveness could be limited against the Broncos, however, because Denver kicker Matt Prater often booms the ball out of the end zone, especially in the rarefied air of home games.

**What's not:** Cleveland pass defense. The Browns rank 24th among NFL teams in passing yards allowed. Sunday, the Browns allowed Redskins rookie QB Kirk Cousins to throw for 329 yards and two TDs in his first NFL start.

**Key stat:** 11 carries for 28 yards. That's all Browns rookie running back Trent Richardson could do Sunday against the Redskins. The former Alabama All-American had a 14-yard run, meaning he netted just 14 total yards for his other 10 carries.

**FYI:** If, as expected, Browns left tackle Joe Thomas earns another trip to the Pro Bowl, that would be six Pro Bowls in six years for the former Wisconsin standout who was selected No. 3 overall in the 2007 draft.

**Injury report:** S T.J. Ward (knee), DE Frostee Rucker (groin). Both were injured against the Redskins. Neither injury is thought to be serious.

**Coachspeak:** "Yeah, I'm looking forward to him having a much better game in Denver." — Browns coach Pat Shurmur, when telling reporters Monday that he is sticking with struggling rookie quarterback Brandon Weeden

# Denver Broncos veterans keeping watchful eye over threat of complacency

Tom Kensler  
The Denver Post  
December 18, 2012

If any Broncos player shows the least bit of overconfidence or complacency this week, team leaders will be ready to step up and, um, voice their concerns, Broncos veteran cornerback Champ Bailey said Monday at Dove Valley.

"If I see that, words will be said," Bailey said. "You can't let that happen."

Friends and family no doubt will be constantly telling the Broncos (11-3) that they have the AFC's No. 2 seed all but locked up — needing only to finish the regular season by holding serve at home against two inferior opponents: Cleveland (5-9) on Sunday and Dec. 30 against Kansas City (2-12).

The top two seeds in each conference (Houston is presently the top seed in the AFC) receive first-round byes in the playoffs.

That's a huge deal to players who would relish having extra time to heal a season's worth of wounds.

But until seeds are clinched, teams can't afford to get ahead of themselves, Bailey said.

"It's almost natural to get settled to where you are," Bailey said, referring to the Broncos being the No. 2 seed if the season ended today.

But the season does not end today.

"Everybody understands the situation we're in; we haven't accomplished anything yet," wide receiver Brandon Stokley said Monday. "It's all about playing your best football in January. You want to feel good about what you do at the end of the regular season."

The team's charter returned to Denver after the Broncos' blasting of Baltimore in time Sunday night for players to watch some of San Francisco's win at New England. The loss by the Patriots moved the Broncos into the No. 2 playoff position as it stands, but there is no reason to celebrate, Broncos players said Monday.

"The focus is on Cleveland," wide receiver Eric Decker said. "Obviously, there's a lot of ball left to be played. Cleveland is a very good team. They beat Pittsburgh and they beat Cincinnati, two teams contending for the playoffs."

"Our focus isn't on whether we get a bye or not. It's on beating (Cleveland) and taking care of this week."

Stokley said veteran Broncos players will make sure of that.

"Young guys look at the older guys and see how they go about their business," Stokley said. "It's our job to be very professional and go about our job like we have done the past 15 or so weeks and prepare the same way. That's what we're going to do, no matter what's happening with everybody else."

"But if we see something going on that we don't like, we'll speak up and let them know."

The best way to maintain focus in this situation, Broncos coach John Fox said Monday, is to remind the team it still has much room to improve and to point out the shortcomings.

"Right now, I know we can control our own destiny (for a No. 2 seed)," Fox said. "But if we don't play our best game against Cleveland this week, that will be all for naught."

Bailey said he has played on teams that needed to be reminded of the task at hand. But he senses that this squad won't have to be monitored.

"We've got a real good group," Bailey said. "And I think everybody understands what's at stake and what everybody has to do to get to where we want to go."

"So I'm not really concerned about (complacency) right now," he added. "But if I see it, of course, I'll deal with it. This is not the time to coast. You don't want to coast. You have to keep pressing."

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### **Broncos' playoff seeding, 1990 season to present**

Season	Seed	Result
2012	-	TBD
2011	4	Lost in divisional playoffs
2005	2	Lost in AFC championship game
2004	6	Lost in wild-card playoffs
2003	6	Lost in wild-card playoffs
2000	5	Lost in wild-card playoffs
1998	1	Super Bowl champion
1997	4	Super Bowl champion
1996	1	Lost in divisional playoffs
1993	5	Lost in wild-card playoffs
1991	2	Lost in AFC championship game

*Source: NFL record book*

# NFL MVP debate: Does Adrian Peterson trump Peyton Manning, Tom Brady?

Patrick Saunders  
The Denver Post  
December 17, 2012

*"The MVP, man, that's something that I've always wanted to grab. I work hard. I want to be the best player to play this game, so with that, MVP awards come. But I know this league and how it is, man. They're kind of biased to the quarterback, which is unfortunate. They make it hard for other players to win it, but I will."*

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Those are the words of Minnesota Vikings wonderback Adrian Peterson. He uttered them to The Associated Press last week, *before* he rushed for 212 yards Sunday against the St. Louis Rams.

Peterson's story is remarkable, almost unbelievable. Just a year ago, on Christmas Eve, he tore the anterior cruciate and medial collateral ligaments in his left knee. Now he's threatening to break Eric Dickerson's single-season rushing mark, a record that's stood for nearly 30 years.

Dickerson ran for 2,105 yards for the Los Angeles Rams in 1984. Peterson has a career-high 1,812 yards though 14 games. To set the all-time record, Peterson must average 147 yards in his final two games.

If he pulls it off — if he even comes close — does he deserve to be the NFL MVP?

Denver Post readers, of course, have already wrapped the MVP award in a big Christmas bow and handed it to Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning. In a weekend poll, 87 percent said Manning should win MVP. Peterson got a mere 7 percent of the vote. Patriots quarterback Tom Brady got 6 percent.

Manning already has won an unprecedented four MVPs and appears to be the favorite to win a fifth. Manning has more than hometown sentiment going for him. He's led the Broncos to an 11-3 record that includes nine straight victories. Twelve times in his career, Manning has led his team to a 10-win season as a starter. No quarterback can match that statistic.

For a recent story about where Manning ranks among the all-time greats, I asked some people I respect to define what the MVP award means.

"I've always thought the award should really be 'MVTP,' with the T standing for team player," legendary broadcaster Dick Enberg told me.

Fox Sports analyst John Lynch, the former Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Broncos Pro Bowl safety, told me that Manning epitomizes the term MVP.

"I've seen what he's done with this Broncos team this year, and it's simply amazing," Lynch said. "Great players, most-valuable players, make everyone around them better. Peyton does that for everybody. I'm talking players, coaches and staff. He's raised the standard throughout that building. I mean, it's just like Magic Johnson, he makes everyone better."

Peterson's Vikings are 8-6 and remain on the fringe of the playoff picture. Manning's Broncos and Brady's Patriots are already in and are legitimate Super Bowl contenders.

Peterson said that the NFL "is kind of biased to the quarterback." He's right about that. Of the six previous 2,000-yard rushers, just three of them either won or shared MVP honors that season: Buffalo's O.J. Simpson in 1973, Detroit's Barry Sanders in 1997 (he shared it with Green Bay's Brett Favre) and the Broncos' Terrell Davis in 1998.

Two 2,000-yard backs — Baltimore's Jamal Lewis in 2003 and Tennessee's Chris Johnson in 2009 — lost the MVP race to Manning (Manning shared the 2003 MVP with Tennessee QB Steve McNair).

Dickerson, the single-season rushing king? He didn't win the MVP in 1984. Miami quarterback Dan Marino did.

Still, the question lingers. If Peterson passes Dickerson and re-writes one of the greatest records in NFL history, does he deserve the MVP? It's a great debate.

My vote? It goes to Manning.

Why? Because I agree with Enberg. The MVP, especially in the NFL, goes to the most valuable *team* player. No player — and especially no player on a championship caliber team — means more to his team than Manning does to the Broncos.

# Final hours for fans to vote for Pro Bowl

Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
December 17, 2012

Fan voting for the 2013 Pro Bowl teams closes tonight.

Broncos coaches and players will cast their ballots on Thursday with the results announced Dec. 26 on the NFL Network.

The most recent voting results had three Broncos leading at their respective positions: Manning; cornerback Champ Bailey and outside linebacker Von Miller.

Ranked second (and therefore starting) were defensive end Elvis Dumervil, guard Zane Beadles, tackle Ryan Clady and outside linebacker Wesley Woodyard.

Ranked third were special teamer David Bruton, returner Trindon Holliday and center Dan Koppen.

Vote here: <http://www.nfl.com/probowl/ballot>

# Big win sets Broncos up for week off in playoffs

Eddie Pells  
Associated Press  
December 17, 2012

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — When things weren't clicking at the beginning of the season, Peyton Manning and the Denver Broncos spent most of their time looking at the film and working out the kinks on the practice field — and very little time focusing on the standings.

The work is paying off, and if they bothered to look at those standings Monday, they would've liked what they saw.

After their runaway win over Baltimore and New England's loss to San Francisco, the Broncos are the No. 2 seed in the AFC and only need victories at home over Cleveland and Kansas City, combined record 7-21, to wrap up a first-round bye in the playoffs.

Eight of the 10 AFC teams to make the Super Bowl under the current playoff format have had a first-round bye.

"I always thought if we kept getting better, there was no way we couldn't be one of the top teams," Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey said. "It was just a matter of keeping your nose down, not worrying about your record, keep working and everything will take care of itself."

During their nine-game winning streak — longest since they won the first 13 games of the 1998 Super Bowl season — the Broncos (11-3) have steadily gotten better.

One of the issues was how they would fare against a winning team, the likes of which they faced only twice over the first eight wins of the streak. The trip to Baltimore, against a struggling Ravens team, but still a team that has qualified for the playoffs with a 9-5 record, was considered their biggest litmus test before the playoffs begin.

They passed it and didn't even need Manning at his very best to do so.

The Broncos quarterback threw for 204 yards, his lowest output of the season.

But the Broncos were so good everywhere else — rushing for 163 yards, creating two turnovers and returning one for a touchdown, milking the clock in the fourth quarter with a 9:59 drive — they didn't need Manning to do much more than hand off.

In fact, Manning handed the ball off 45 times Sunday, the most in his career.

"Our goal is to try to get better every week," he said. "I feel like we probably have in some areas. You're still looking to play that perfect 60-minute game, and that's your goal every week."

After Week 5, a 31-21 loss at New England that dropped Denver to 2-3, nobody was mistaking Manning or the Broncos for perfect.

Still getting used to his new offense and his new teammates, Manning was struggling. He threw a career-high 26 incompletions in a loss to Houston and had the three first-quarter interceptions in a loss to Atlanta.

There were still questions about his arm strength, and others about whether he would get used to playing at full speed again.

Manning brushed off most of the criticism, bristled at some of it and, mostly, kept believing that more time with his teammates would solve many of the problems.

Since Week 6, when the winning streak began, the Broncos have averaged 386 yards a game (sixth in the NFL) and scored 30.4 points (second), while allowing 291 yards (second) and 17.8 points (third).

"I knew we had a really good team," receiver Brandon Stokley said. "A lot of people on the outside wanted to push the panic button. But for us, it was just about improving every week. We were a relatively young team with the system we put in, and just getting better, knowing that good things could happen if we kept working hard, that's what we've done."

Even with the victory over the Ravens, the question remains: How will the Broncos fare against the league's elite? Their only three losses came to Atlanta (12-2), Houston (12-2) and New England (10-4) and Denver hasn't faced a team of that caliber since.

The fact that the Broncos would face a possible rematch with the Patriots at home could give the Broncos a supposed advantage in a series in which they've lost their three meetings in the John Fox era by a combined score of 117-54.

Two of those games, including last year's 45-10 playoff loss (with Tim Tebow at quarterback), were in New England.

But ask any of the Broncos about the path to the Super Bowl that is clearer than it was two days, to say nothing of nine games, ago and, well, you mainly get the trademark blank stare and the pat answer.

"Right now, I know we can control our own destiny, but if we don't play our best game against Cleveland this week, that will be all for naught," coach John Fox said.

Notes: Fox did not list RB Knowshon Moreno on the injury report, though Moreno could be seen on the sideline during the fourth quarter with trainers looking at his back. ... Fox downplayed a tweet from CB Tracy Porter, who has expressed his dissatisfaction about the lack of playing time after losing his job to Chris Harris. "He just needs to focus on getting better every day," Fox said. "I saw good improvement last week." Porter, who has been cleared to play after dealing with health issues, hasn't played since Oct. 7. ... Fox said KR/PR Trindon Holliday would still be the returner even though he has fumbled four times since signing with the Broncos in October. He has also scored two touchdowns.

# Broncos won't relax now

Bill Williamson  
ESPN.com  
December 17, 2012

The Denver Broncos are in control of the No. 2 seed and a first-round bye in the AFC playoffs.

Yet Denver coach John Fox is not celebrating, nor he is going to allow his team to relax after the Broncos won their ninth consecutive game Sunday, a 34-17 thumping at Baltimore, to improve to 11-3. Later Sunday night, New England lost at home to San Francisco and fell to 10-4. If the Broncos win their two final games, at home against Cleveland and Kansas City, or if they win once and New England loses once, the Broncos will get the No. 2 seed.

Still, Fox knows the Broncos' goals have not been met.

"Right now, I know we can control our own destiny, but if we don't play our best game against Cleveland this week, that will be all for naught," Fox said. "So all our focus will be on the Cleveland Browns, a team that's won three out of four games, plus-7 in the turnover margin, beat two teams that are in the hunt on the AFC side for the playoffs -- so all our focus will be on this week against the Cleveland Browns."

In other words, don't expect a letdown by the Broncos in the final two weeks.

In other AFC West news:

Fox said return man Trindon Holliday will remain in his role, but there's no doubt Holliday needs to improve. He nearly lost two punts Sunday. Holliday is a high reward-high risk player who could really help -- or really hurt -- Denver in the postseason. He has returned a kick and a punt for scores since the Broncos claimed him in October.

After Week 15, the Chiefs remain on pace for the No. 1 pick in the 2013 draft, Oakland remains on pace for the No. 3 despite winning its fourth game and San Diego moved up to the No. 7 slot from being on pace for the No. 9 pick.

# Denver Broncos: Moving On

Bill Williamson  
ESPN.com  
December 17, 2012

Here are some areas the Denver Broncos need to focus on after a 34-17 road win at Baltimore on Sunday:

**Recap:** This was the best game of the season by the Broncos. They proved they can beat good teams on the road when it counts. Denver simply dominated the Ravens. It led 31-3 early in the fourth quarter. Denver has won nine straight games and is 11-3.

**Biggest area to fix:** It's difficult to complain too much about this game, but Broncos can work on sustaining drives. They punted eight times Sunday. The offense isn't totally clicking.

**Biggest area to build on:** Pass-rush. The Broncos had just three sacks, with two coming on the final two plays of the game. But Denver pressured Baltimore quarterback Joe Flacco all game. Flacco had cuts on his face after the game. He was hit nine times.

**What to watch for:** The Broncos finish the regular season with home games against Cleveland in Week 16 and Kansas City in Week 17. The Broncos have been a focused team all season and I don't expect that to change with two lower-echelon teams coming in.

# Power Rankings: Seahawks make their case with blowout wins

Pete Prisco  
CBSSports.com  
December 18, 2012

If you told me before the season that a team would have back-to-back games scoring 50 or more points, and it would be quarterbacked by a rookie, never would I have picked the Seattle Seahawks.

That's why we play the games.

The Seahawks have rocked the Cardinals and the Bills the past two weeks, scoring 50 or more in each game, serving notice that they are not to be overlooked come playoff time.

The Seahawks have the second-ranked scoring defense in the league, and we expected that unit to be solid. But it's the offense that has opened eyes as they've surged to the playoffs. Seattle is now 11th in points per game and that makes them fourth in point differential.

The three teams ahead of them on offense are New England, San Francisco and Denver, arguably the league's three best teams.

The Seahawks have a chance to really prove how good they are this week when they play the 49ers in Seattle. Their run to 9-5, coupled with the high-scoring games, has Seattle up to seventh in the CBSSports.com Power Rankings.

It also has Russell Wilson as a candidate to be the league's Offensive Rookie of the Year. He is eighth in the NFL in passer rating at 95.5 with 21 touchdown passes and nine interceptions. He ran for three and threw one in Seattle's 50-17 blowout of the Bills on Sunday. The Seahawks scored on their first five possessions of the game.

Seattle coach Pete Carroll has this young, talented team playing at a high level. Are they ready to compete for a Super Bowl? We'll see by late Sunday night. A victory there will tell us a lot.

The Seahawks are hot, but can they stay that way?

# POWER RANKINGS

RANK	TEAM		MOVE (LW)
1		They have won nine consecutive games and have played better than anybody else in that span. They've earned this spot. Take a bow, Peyton Manning.	▲2(3)
2		The most overlooked part of any team in the league is how well this defense has played against good quarterbacks at home.	▲2(4)
3		That was an impressive first half at New England. The second? Not so much.	▲2(5)
4		Lesson learned: They can't turn it over against good teams and expect to win. The 49ers game showed them that.	▼3(1)
5		They bounced back nicely after the beating in New England. Now it's about locking up the top seed.	▼3(2)
6		They seem to be the team gaining steam at the right time. Surprised? I am not.	—(6)
7		They are surging at the right time. Russell Wilson is growing each week.	▲3(10)
8		If they can win the next two, there is a chance they win the division. But they have to beat their rivals -- something Andy Dalton has not done.	▲5(13)
9		Kirk Cousins looked good and now the Redskins have control of their own destiny to win the division. Wow.	▲6(15)
10		They can win the next two and still get into the playoffs. But that game at Atlanta sure was eye opening.	▼3(7)
11		Three consecutive losses and they still clinch a playoff berth. Wow. Who doesn't want to play them in the playoffs?	▼3(8)

# POWER RANKINGS

RANK	TEAM		MOVE (LW)
12		They competed at Houston, but now they have to work to clinch a playoff spot. One victory does it.	▼3(9)
13		What has happened to this team? They are in big trouble. Could Lovie Smith be as well?	▼2(11)
14		That was an impressive victory over the Steelers, a have-to in fact. Now they have to keep it rolling in the Sean Payton Bowl to have a chance to be a playoff team.	▼2(12)
15		Two consecutive losses have their playoff hopes in jeopardy. Can they rebound against the Bengals?	▼1(14)
16		Adrian Peterson is putting this team on his back and just might carry it to the playoffs. That would be impressive.	▲1(17)
17		They packed it in against the Saints. Or are they spent from being beat down by their coach?	▼1(16)
18		So much for their playoff hopes. They were ended with a horrible showing at home to the Vikings. On to 2013.	—(18)
19		Cam Newton is on fire. I think Ron Rivera will keep his job -- and he should.	▲8(27)
20		If they could play prime-time games all the time, they'd be fine. They were 2-0 in those this season.	▲4(24)
21		Heads have to roll. It's time they went to Greg McElroy.	▼2(19)
22		Norv Turner should keep the tape from the Carolina game to remind him of why he is getting fired.	▼2(20)

# POWER RANKINGS

RANK TEAM

MOVE  
(LW)

- |    |   |  |            |
|----|---|--|------------|
| 23 |    | The final two weeks should be used to make sure Sean Payton is coming back. This year has been a big disaster.                                     | ▼<br>1(22) |
| 24 |    | Just when you think Brandon Weeden is taking steps, he has a bad game like he did against the Redskins. Do they need to draft another quarterback? | ▼<br>3(21) |
| 25 |    | Beating up on Jacksonville at home is nothing to brag about, but it's a victory. They've overachieved this season.                                 | ▲<br>1(26) |
| 26 |    | Can they really keep Chan Gailey around the way this thing is going? That was a horror show against the Seahawks.                                  | ▼<br>3(23) |
| 27 |    | At least they showed some fight against the Lions. That's a good thing for Ken Whisenhunt's future.  | ▲<br>2(29) |
| 28 |  | Did they quit last week at Arizona? Sure looked like it. Not a good showing.   | ▼<br>3(25) |
| 29 |  | The excitement of a week ago was gone with that bad night against the Bengals. Now they can play spoiler against their division rivals.            | ▼<br>1(28) |
| 30 |  | Too bad they can't play the Chiefs every week. At least they showed up this week.  | ▲<br>2(32) |
| 31 |  | The Raiders are terrible on defense. The Chiefs didn't score. What's that say about that offense?  | ▼<br>1(30) |
| 32 |  | It's the worst season in franchise history. When it's worse than an expansion year, you know it's bad.   | ▼<br>1(31) |

# Monday Musings: Did some teams pack it in Sunday?

Pete Prisco  
CBSSports.com  
December 17, 2012

- Week 15 was not good for the reputations of some coaches. Some teams, in my mind, looked like they packed it in. They were the Bills, the Bucs, the Chargers, the Jaguars, the Chiefs and the Lions. All six looked horrible in losing. They were all blown out. Bucs coach Greg Schiano is a first-year coach, so he's safe. The others? Not so much, even though Jacksonville's Mike Mularkey is also in his first year. The players there have complained about his physical practices, which is not a good sign. There will be change in the front office, which also won't help his cause. Lions coach Jim Schwartz made the playoffs last year, so he gets a one-year reprieve. If he doesn't win next year, he's out. The Bills have to make a change with Chan Gailey. This season has been a major flop. And we know Norv Turner is gone. Games like we saw from their teams are a reflection of the coaches. Kansas City's Romeo Crennel is gone, too. His team didn't even get a first down in the first half against the Raiders. Don't tell me players don't know when their coaches are lame ducks. One more note: Has Schiano worked his team so hard that they have nothing left? That was the theory of some in the league on Sunday.
- Kirk Cousins looked good for the Redskins against the Browns. But let's slow down on the franchise-quarterback talk for now. He has a chance to be that, but it takes more than one start. The Redskins did a smart thing drafting him in the fourth round. Robert Griffin III is a mobile quarterback who takes shots. He is going to get hurt. Having a capable backup is smart. Cousins has the look of a future starter. But let's slow down on the franchise-quarterback talk.
- Colin Kaepernick had four touchdown passes to lead the 49ers past the Patriots. That has the world saying Jim Harbaugh was right to pick him over Alex Smith. Maybe so, but it won't be the right move if the 49ers don't at least make it to the title game of the NFC. That's where Smith went last year. If we're being fair, that's where Kaepernick has to go this season -- at least.
- **It's time to give Broncos corner Chris Harris some Pro Bowl consideration. He has been playing at that level all season. His big pick-six against the Ravens at the end of the half was huge as Denver beat Baltimore. When Tracy Porter had his illness issues, Harris went from nickel corner to starter. And he has continued to play at a high level. Champ Bailey is the best corner on the team, but Harris has played at a level that isn't far behind. Not bad for a guy who wasn't drafted.**

- Is it time to get off Tony Romo's back? He has 13 touchdown passes and three interceptions in his last seven games. He threw for 341 yards and two scores in the Cowboys' victory over the Steelers on Sunday. Romo is quietly having a heck of a season. Maybe that's why we don't hear much about him.
- Is there anything better than a coach saying a fake punt or field goal late is because of a look that his team was given? Seattle faked a punt up 47-17 against the Bills. Really? And then Pete Carroll said it was an automatic call. Come on, Pete. You know better.
- Detroit's Matt Stafford was horrible against the Cardinals. Three picks and two returned for touchdowns is not the way you win games. What a lost season for the Lions.
- Shocking to see Bryan Cox in a coach-player confrontation. He would be a candidate for that in any pool, right? Cox got into it with Bucs linebacker Adam Hayward during the Tampa Bay-New Orleans game. Cox is a coach on the Bucs' staff, which makes that so disturbing. But it was probably Hayward who was at fault.
- Bad day for Josh Freeman against the Saints with four picks and no scores. Has Tampa Bay hit the wall? Sure looks like it.
- If I am the Packers and 49ers, I sure wouldn't be feeling good about my kickers heading into the playoffs. Mason Crosby has been so bad that the Packers passed on a field goal leading by seven to go for it on fourth down. And David Akers has been shaky at best for the 49ers. I would be shocked if one of those teams doesn't take a look at kickers this week. Let me throw in Giants kicker Lawrence Tynes, too. He has missed three field goals in the past three weeks.
- Boy, that money spent on Mario Williams really paid off for the Bills. Wow. How bad can a defense be?
- That move to fire Cam Cameron really paid off for the Ravens. What changed? Nothing. Joe Flacco still can't show he's an elite passer, no matter the coordinator.
- It could be Russell Wilson vs. Robert Griffin III in the first round of the playoffs. Some will say that's a dream matchup. Here's what I say to that: The teams waiting in the next week would rather play either one of those teams than, say, the Packers or the 49ers in the third spot. Or even the Giants in the sixth spot. There, I said it.
- **Adrian Peterson: Amazing. He has 212 yards against the Rams and is closing in on the single-season rushing record. Even so, no MVP talk. That has to be Peyton Manning or Tom Brady or Aaron Rodgers. It has to be.**

- The 49ers were not the same defense when Justin Smith went down with an injury in the second half against the Patriots. Aldon Smith truly missed his defensive holds that help free Aldon Smith for sacks on stunts. They are illegal, but Justin Smith is the best at it.

- **Why do I think the AFC will come down to Peyton Manning vs. Tom Brady? I just do.**

# Race for the MVP

Adena Andrews  
CBSSports.com  
December 17, 2012

With the season winding down you can almost smell the gumbo down in New Orleans, home of Super Bowl XLVII. However, before we get to the Big Easy and even before the postseason begins we must determine who is this season's MVP. The *NFL Monday QB* crew had a few names to choose from but narrowed it down to these three guys.

**Peyton Manning** – Just when you count Peyton Manning out with a little bit of nerve damage in his neck, he comes back to kick butt after a season off. He's like a football version of the Terminator. Change his jersey, change his city, change his teammates and he just keeps on kicking. Manning has 31 TD's against 10 interceptions and has led the Denver Broncos to nine-straight wins to become AFC West division champs and grab a solid second seed in the AFC playoff picture.

With nine wins in a row Manning is out there making John Elway look like the executive of the year and the entire team believes they can make it to the Super Bowl, according to Phil Simms.

**Adrian Peterson** – "MVP Awards are biased to the quarterback, which is unfortunate. They make it hard for other players to win it, but I will," Adrian Peterson told the Associated Press. In pure prophecy form, Peterson said this before he rushed for 212 yards in a 36-22 win over the St. Louis Rams. He is now on pace to break Erick Dickerson's 30 year-old single-season rushing record of 2,105 yards. Did I mention Peterson is doing this nearly a year after he tore the ACL and MCL in his left knee? A.D. is 188 yards from becoming the seventh 2,000-yard rusher in history and is competing for the Comeback Player of the Year award with Peyton Manning.

Adam and Rich Gannon actually have MVP votes, unlike the rest of our esteemed panel, and they are going with Adrian "All Day" Peterson.

**Tom Brady**- It wouldn't be MVP voting if Brady's name wasn't in the conversation. Even in a Week 15 loss to the 49ers, he led all QB's with 443 yards while the New England Patriots sit atop of the AFC.

# Most talked about quarterbacks

Adena Andrews  
CBSSports.com  
December 17, 2012

Based on Facebook's super-duper high-tech scientific analytics the five most talked about quarterbacks on Facebook are:

1. Tom Brady
2. Tony Romo
3. Robert Griffin III
4. Jay Cutler
5. Peyton Manning

With the exception of Brady and Cutler, each quarterback in the top five grabbed a win this Sunday, even if they didn't play (ex. like Robert Griffin III). Cutler probably made the list due to him and Brandon Marshall calling for heads to roll after losing for the fifth time in the last six Sundays. Also, although Brady lost he most likely tops the list because he is Brady and his awesomeness along with great looks transcends wins.

However, what about the other half of the top 10? Or what I like to call the "Quarterback Quint." Here are the five other quarterbacks that sparked the most chatter on Facebook.

6. Russell Wilson
7. Joe Flacco
8. Aaron Rodgers
9. Eli Manning
10. Cam Newton

Rodgers could have been higher up on this list according to the *NFL Monday QB* crew, especially because he's playing without all his best weapons due to injury, but the Facebook peanut gallery spoke louder.

Seeing Wilson, Rodgers and Newton on this list is understandable because they all had wins and impressive performances but Flacco and Manning probably ended up in Facebook chatter due to their dismal losses. On Sunday, you couldn't help but run to your Facebook wall to cry about the shutout of Eli Manning and the defending Super Bowl champs or scream about Joe Flacco and the flailing Baltimore Ravens notching their third consecutive loss. The playoff picture looks good for the Ravens, who have already clinched, but that doesn't change the fact they're falling like prices at Wal-Mart.

# Broncos Report Card: Convincing win, but room for improvement

Andrew Mason  
CBSSports.com  
December 17, 2012

The Broncos' 34-17 demolition of the Baltimore Ravens (9-5) pushed them to 11-3, and thanks to help from the 49ers, moved them closer to a first-round bye. However, it wasn't quite the litmus test that many expected.

As the Broncos piled up wins following a 2-3 start, skeptics pointed to the Ravens game as the one that would demonstrate their worthiness as a title contender. But by the time Denver arrived in Baltimore, the Ravens were beaten up, with injuries crippling their offensive line and linebacking corps. The Broncos attacked both Sunday and never trailed, winning their first game in Baltimore since 1983.

In retrospect, the Week 9 win at Cincinnati might have revealed more about the Broncos' readiness for January than their effort Sunday. The Bengals have only lost once since then, and are the only team to hold a fourth-quarter lead over the Broncos in two months. Cincinnati looks ascendant and has the potential to be a tougher playoff out than the Ravens, who quickly capitulated in the third quarter Sunday.

Nevertheless, their Week 15 win on Sunday was over a division leader, something the Broncos didn't have until now, having lost to Atlanta, Houston and New England in the season's first five weeks. The Broncos' early season woes seem far behind them, and there's ample reason to believe that if they play any of those three teams in January, the results will be different.

## **Offense: A-**

The Broncos ran 45 times -- a tally they hadn't racked up since Tim Tebow was keeping it and taking off with the zone-read option last year -- and RB Knowshon Moreno averaged 5.4 yards per carry on his 22 runs, finishing with 118 yards and a touchdown. That set everything in motion for the Broncos; QB Peyton Manning was able to exploit the Ravens' increasing commitment to run defense with play-action passes, none more devastating than a 51-yard strike to WR Eric Decker. With each week that they commit to the ground game, the Broncos become more capable of winning a grinding slugfest in January -- and setting up Manning for play-fakes, at which he remains one of the league's best. **Previous game's grade: B-**

## **Defense: B**

If grades were given for three quarters only, the Broncos would have aced the test; after 45 minutes of game play Sunday, the Denver defense had outscored Baltimore's offense 7-3, thanks to CB Chris Harris' 98-yard interception return in the final seconds of the first half. Alas, the fourth quarter was a letdown; although the Broncos got three sacks of QB Joe Flacco in the final 15 minutes after pressuring him consistently throughout the game, they surrendered two

touchdowns on just eight plays in the fourth quarter. After the game, CBChamp Bailey could barely contain his frustration with the closing act, which continued a recent trend, as Denver has given up 33 points in its last three fourth quarters. "Great defenses don't do that," he said. "The first three (quarters) were pretty good. The fourth quarter -- it's not who we are. We can't keep putting that on film." **Previous game's grade: B-**

#### **Special teams: D+**

It was sub-par all around for the Broncos' special-teams units. P Britton Colquitt's net punting average of 36.5 yards was his second-lowest of the year, largely because of Tandon Doss' 40-yard return. KR/PR Trindon Holliday's feast-or-famine tendency continued; he had a 27-yard punt return up the left sideline but gained just 6 yards on his other five returns and fumbled for a second consecutive game. Holliday has fumbled four of his 40 total returns with the Broncos, but coach John Fox said he would not lose his job. K Matt Prater sounded alarms again by hooking a last-minute 45-yard field-goal attempt wide left after drilling his previous six attempts; he's just 3 of 7 this season from 40-49 yards. **Previous game's grade: B**

#### **Coaching: A-**

Fox and offensive coordinator Mike McCoy's insistence on establishing the run game and emphasizing it in practice has reaped dividends the last two weeks, and now Moreno is running with more patience and decisive burst than he ever has as a pro. The Broncos also did a good job keeping Moreno engaged and involved during his eight weeks on the inactive list. That's paying off now, too. **Previous game's grade: B**

# Some statement Week 15 wins, but playoff chase still a tangled mess

Peter King  
Sports Illustrated  
December 17, 2012

In my job, athletes are not very good interviews after 34-0 losses. They don't want to talk after 34-0 losses. They will find every excuse not to pick up the phone after 34-0 losses. But Sunday was different. Victor Cruz is different. This weekend was different, around the country and certainly within a short drive from Newtown, Conn., where 20 elementary school children and six women charged with teaching and protecting them were murdered.

"When I heard about the shootings," Cruz said from Atlanta, "I was just fighting back tears. I couldn't stop, all [Friday] night. I took my [11-month-old] daughter, grabbed her, and held her, and she slept with me Friday night. I didn't want to let her go. I don't know ... You drop your child off at school. A routine dropoff, parents do it every day. And this happens, and what can you do."

The Giants and their ace wide receiver, Cruz, went to Atlanta to play a football game. In the hotel Saturday night, Cruz kept noticing messages on his Twitter feed. All were about someone named Jack Pinto. "Fifty, 100 tweets, right in a row, people wanting me to get in touch with the Pinto family," Cruz said. He found out young Jack Pinto, 6, was one of those murdered in Newtown, and Jack was a huge Victor Cruz fan, and so he asked his girlfriend and publicist, Elaina Watley, to try to find the Pintos' phone number in Newtown, and she did. At 10 p.m. Saturday, here he was, on the phone with the father, Dean Pinto, and then Jack's brother Benjamin, and then Dean again.

The conversations weren't long, because no one could talk very well.

"The father was taken aback that the message got to me," Cruz said. "I told him I was going to do whatever I could to honor Jack. And Jack's brother, he was very emotional, fighting back tears. He barely got any words out."

On Sunday morning, Cruz wrote on Twitter: "Today's game is for you Jack."

On one shoe, Cruz wrote in black Sharpie: "Jack Pinto My Hero." On the other, "RIP Jack Pinto."

Falcons 34, Giants 0. Cruz wishes he, and the team, could have played better. But when the family says a murdered boy may be buried in his jersey, and all Cruz wants to do is anything to make them feel better, the game is a game. Now Cruz will do something, privately, he hopes, this week for the family.

"I just want to go down there and help any way I can, if I can," Cruz said quietly. "It's hard to know what to do. You just have to put your faith in God and pray."

There is no way to segue to football without seeming totally crass, so forgive me. Before I do, praise to the Giants, in Atlanta, and the Jets tonight, in Nashville, for remembering Sandy Hook Elementary School on their helmets. And to the Patriots, New England's team, for the Newtown helmet decals (right), and for sending up 26 flares honoring the school victims during a prolonged moment of silence before their game with the 49ers.

It's hard to know what to do.

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### **Before muddling the playoff picture, here's the game of the day. No, the year.**

You may have been asleep for the end of the game of the season; it ended after midnight on the East Coast, a good half hour after most Sunday-nighters are put to bed. In a game with eight fumbles, three interceptions, 51 first downs, 75 points and a blown 28-point lead, the 49ers and Colin Kaepernick beat New England 41-34. It's the first Patriots' home loss in December in 10 years, and that is not a misprint.

"You just beat Tom Brady!" a smiling, wide-eyed Jim Harbaugh told Kaepernick when he found him on the field after the game.

"It feels amazing," Kaepernick said from Foxboro, an hour after the game. "Watching Tom, when I grew up, play the position so well, he was someone I always really admired."

I could pick out lots to write about in this game. The Patriots scored four touchdowns in 14 and a half minutes against the best defense in football; there's one thing. I mean, the 49ers allowed 317 yards and 28 points to the Patriots, in freezing rain, in 19 minutes ... and won. "Tom Brady-ish," Harbaugh said afterward, describing the offensive display that nearly cost San Francisco the game.

But a 62-yard kickoff return by LaMichael James -- apparently the only Niner who doesn't promote agita in the return game -- and Kaepernick's biggest throw of the night saved the day for San Francisco midway through the fourth quarter. The Patriots had just tied it at 31, and in the huddle, before first down at the Patriots 38, Kaepernick said: "We have to score. We gotta put up seven right here."

As in, right now. This play.

"I expected Cover Zero," Kaepernick told me. "And it's what we got."

In Cover Zero, safety help vanishes, and defensive backs are in man coverage. They're the last line of defense. And or the quarterback, he just has to find a receiver fast, and make a decision fast.

New England clogged the line with six rushers: Rob Ninkovich, Vince Wilfork, Jerod Mayo, Brandon Deaderick, Dont'a Hightower and Justin Francis. Before the snap, all quick-twitched like they were coming, and behind Deaderick lurked Brandon Spikes. Kaepernick was in his preferred Pistol distance from center, about 4.5 yards, and at the snap, all seven rushed. To Kaepernick's left was physical wideout Michael Crabtree, with cornerback Kyle Arrington poised to cover him. With the ball in his hands, Kaepernick had just one thought: "Find a quick answer and get it out of my hands." He whipped it to Crabtree five or six yards downfield, and Crabtree broke free from Arrington's grasp. And that was it. No safety between Arrington and the goal line. Devin McCourty sprinted from midfield to help, but he was too late. Touchdown.

"The biggest thing we learned today is it's never over 'til it's over," Kaepernick said. "They're down 28, and in a flash, they score 28. We've just got to put the pedal to the metal for 60 minutes every game."

Kaepernick is growing into the job well. He's 4-1 as a starter now, and anyone (me included) who thought it was a mistake to bench Alex Smith has to look at Kaepernick's fastball and his 202 rushing yards in five starts and his surprising early accuracy (65.6 percent) and know Harbaugh knew what he was doing. Harbaugh had to figure: We're a very good team, maybe even a Super Bowl team, with Smith; but we could be a great team with Kaepernick. Making the move when he made it gave Harbaugh time to grow with Kaepernick, gave him the security to know if the kid couldn't handle it he could go back to Smith, and also gave Kaepernick the chance to be able to handle the kind of pressure he's going to have to endure and thrive in during the playoffs.

You don't get full explanations from Harbaugh about much. You get clues. And this, from his postgame presser early this morning, is about as far as he'll go to explain why Sunday's game was important for his team -- and Kaepernick. "I used to live next to a train station in Chicago," said the former Bears first-round pick. "It's like, the more you hear the train, the less you hear it. I feel that way with our team in terms of pressure in big games. The more you hear it, the less you hear. The more you feel it, the less you feel it. So, I feel good about that. I feel good about our team in those big game situations."

He shouldn't feel good after winning in Foxboro. He should feel great.

### **T-minus 13 days and counting ...**

Who's In: Giants vs. Vikings

With 33 games left in the regular season, let's go over what we know of the playoff races, and the most compelling teams:

**NFC:** Three-way tie in the East between Washington, Dallas and New York, all 8-6. Washington wins the division by winning out (at Philadelphia, Dallas at home). The Cowboys, oddly and potentially painfully, could face the exact same scenario as in 2011: Be tied for the division lead entering Week 17, get flexed into the Sunday night game on NBC, play on the road for the division title, and be out of the playoffs with a loss. The Giants win the division only by winning out (at Baltimore, Philly at home) while Washington and Dallas lose at least one game each. The Giants win at least a wild card by going 2-0 ... Green Bay clinched the North by winning in Chicago Sunday. The Bears, losers of five of six, and Vikings are in play at 8-6. But the Bears have the advantageous schedule (at Arizona, at Detroit), while the Vikes play at Houston and home to Green Bay ... Atlanta has a five-game lead in the South, where the Bucs were eliminated Sunday ... San Francisco would have to be swept by Seattle and Arizona to lose the West. Seattle (9-5) looks solid as the fifth or sixth seed.

**AFC:** New England has clinched the East, Houston won the South by beating Indy Sunday, and Denver has officially lapped the West ... In the North, the Ravens (9-5) clinched a playoff spot thanks to the Steelers' loss, but are in free-fall, on a three-game losing streak with a moribund offense and generous defense, with the similarly desperate Giants coming to Baltimore Sunday. Baltimore clinches the division with one win in its last two games. The Bengals win the division only by going 2-0 against Pittsburgh and Baltimore while Baltimore goes 0-2. The Steelers, 7-7, can get the sixth seed by winning their last two. The Colts are a wild card with one win in their last two games (at Kansas City, Houston at home).

**Playoff matchups to behold:** If Washington wins the East, it likely would be the fourth seed. If Seattle wins one more game, it's likely the fifth seed. That would set up Russell Wilson at Robert Griffin, rookie quarterbacks facing off in Washington in what would be the game of wild-card weekend ... Imagine Chicago or Minnesota as six seeds -- with a wild-card game at likely third seed Green Bay ... Or, if the Giants can't once again pull a Houdini, opening the playoffs at Green Bay. I can hear Packers fans shrieking at the thought ... The attractions aren't as marquee in the AFC, though wherever Andrew Luck goes attention will follow. It'd be Indy at Baltimore if the playoffs were today, and Luck could certainly win that game.

**Think of this:** Three rookie quarterbacks starting playoff games.

**Seattle's a sight to behold.** Last nine quarters: Seattle 114, Foes 17. The Seahawks have won five of six, and in five of the last six, Wilson has a passer rating over 100. He's running the offense the way he ran the Wisconsin offense -- with freedom and instinctiveness, running to make plays and not just to get out of trouble -- as his three rushing touchdowns against Buffalo suggested. The Seahawks are a legitimate Super Bowl contender, and Wilson is afraid of nothing. But it's hard to imagine a playoff-green team with a rookie quarterback winning three straight on the road in January, which is what they'll almost certainly have to do to make it to New Orleans.

**Atlanta, and Atlantans, feel better about themselves this morning.** Sunday showcased the Indian Summer Matt Ryan, who was dominant against the Giants with a 23-of-28, three-touchdown day. Much needed, after five mediocre weeks for the Falcons. With the 34-0 win over the Giants, Atlanta showed the kind of explosiveness and defensive pressure the Falcons will have to have to beat explosive teams like Green Bay and San Francisco (and maybe Seattle) in the playoffs. Ryan said afterward the atmosphere around practice was "tense -- well, not tense, but intense, and that was good. We needed that. There was an edge to practice, like, 'This isn't good enough.' " Ryan now has four weapons he relies on in the passing game, with slot receiver Harry Douglas (27 targets in the last six games) earning more of the offense's trust, and Tony Gonzalez continuing to be Mr. Reliable. In the last four games, he's caught 23 of the 26 balls Ryan's thrown his way. "Tony's willingness to work on his game in his 16th year in an inspiration to me," said Ryan, "and I see him do it every day."

**Not much of a hangover for Houston.** Embarrassing night in Foxboro Monday, with New England's 42-28 win. I asked J.J. Watt how long it took him to get over it. "The public perception would be that game was really damaging, but we never let it be," he said from Houston after the 29-17 win over Indianapolis. "Our bandwagon got a little lighter, and rightfully so. Playing like we did, I can't blame people for doubting us. But we didn't doubt ourselves." Watt was dominant against the patchwork Indy line in the 29-17 AFC South-clinching win Sunday, with three sacks and three more tackles for loss. He's putting together one of the best seasons ever by a 3-4 end ... in fact, name one who's had 19.5 sacks and 16 passes deflected in one year. You can't. There isn't one. "You know me," he said. "I don't care who's in there to block."

**James Jones is this year's breakout star.** Aaron Rodgers is as good as ever, and as long as he's in Green Bay, he'll be Chicago's kryptonite. He just doesn't make the mistakes most quarterbacks make, and he knows he can get out of trouble with his feet when he has to. And it helps for him to have the most underrated (but not for long) wide receiver in football, James Jones. The hands and speed and route-running of Jones make it possible for Rodgers to feel confident about throwing a pass to a spot, knowing if it's supposed to be a 13-yard curl, Jones isn't going to cut it off at 11 or lengthen it to 15. When I watch Jones, I think of a guy who shuts out all the outside distractions and focuses on one thing -- catching the ball. You saw it on one of his three touchdown catches from Rodgers at Soldier Field, in the far left of the end zone, being screened by a Chicago corner ... and not looking at the hands or arms in front of him. Only the ball. Touchdown. Here's a stat of the day: Jones has a league-leading 12 touchdown receptions. Twelve -- that's the number of touchdowns Calvin Johnson, Wes Welker and Steve Smith have combined to catch.

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### **The Tagliabue aftermath.**

The takeaways from Tagliabue's 22-page ruling in the Saints bounty case:

- I never knew Gregg Williams offered \$5,000 to knock Brett Favre out of the NFC title game. But Tagliabue's brief says he did.
- The former commissioner's strategy was clear: Get this thing over with so the league can get on with the overwhelming issue of player health and safety. Tagliabue threw roundhouses at the Saints ("This sad chapter in the otherwise praiseworthy history of the New Orleans Saints casts no executive, coach or player in a favorable light") but seemed to olive-branch the players while comparing their intractable togetherness in backing their peers to a police-department blue wall of silence. (Wish I'd thought of that.)
- Yes, the evidence on Jonathan Vilma offering \$10,000 to knock Brett Favre out of the NFC Championship Game three years ago had some holes shot in it in the testimony before Tagliabue ... even though Tagliabue writes, "There is more than enough evidence to support Commissioner Goodell's findings that Mr. Vilma offered such a bounty." And union boss De Smith is clear: He thinks it never happened -- though Tagliabue says it's "unequivocal" that two former coaches testified that Vilma offered the bounty. But I can't help but think that Favre's forgiving boys-will-be-boys reaction to the entire story -- after getting battered so much in the NFC Championship that three Saints were fined for vicious hits on him -- and his desire that the story simply go away helped the union say it never happened.
- I understand the former commissioner doesn't want to release the transcripts of his appeals hearings, because of unnecessary collateral damage on other issues not relevant to the case. I hear him, but I think the public good would be better served by a full airing of the testimony so we can decide for ourselves if former Saints coaches Gregg Williams and Mike Cerullo are to be believed.
- As Chris Mortensen reported Sunday, Vilma's defamation case against Roger Goodell will include evidence that Cerullo is having his legal fees paid by the NFL. That, Vilma's attorneys will argue, puts his pro-NFL testimony in doubt. But the question will be: Was Cerullo having his legal fees paid by the NFL at the time he first blew the whistle on the Vilma bounty charge? If so, it's a roundhouse to the NFL's case. If not, it's dicey, but I don't see how it affects what he originally told the league.
- Amazing the different directions the two men implicated most by Tagliabue for the Saints' program, directly and indirectly, are headed. Someone, probably the Saints, is going to pay Sean Payton \$8 million a year, or some such number, to coach. Williams will be hard-pressed to find a job in the NFL, or anywhere, for years.

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### **No team in L.A. until at least 2014**

That's the upshot of momentum-less franchise movement talks among the shaky teams -- the Raiders and Chargers, most notably -- as the new year approaches. In June, commissioner Roger Goodell laid out a scenario whereby a team would be allowed to move to Los Angeles, and a source at the league meetings in Dallas last

week told me none of the tenuous teams are close to meeting the requisites. A team wanting to move would have to demonstrate these three conditions:

1. A team has to establish market failure where it now plays.
2. A new stadium deal would have to be in place in Los Angeles with the moving franchise. Four sites -- downtown, Chavez Ravine, Carson or City of Industry -- are possible landing spots for a relocated franchise.
3. An interim stadium deal -- at the Rose Bowl or Coliseum -- would have to be in place for the 2013 season and beyond.

As of Thursday, I'm told no team had satisfied any of the three conditions, and none is in serious discussions for a temporary place to play while a new stadium is built. Though the window for satisfying all three conditions is open until Feb. 15, progress has been nil, and it's now impossible that a team could get all three things done in the next eight weeks. That means we won't see a resolution on a new team for Los Angeles until early 2014, at the earliest.

## **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, and this week it's an analysis of Baltimore quarterback Joe Flacco, days after the Ravens fired offensive coordinator Cam Cameron and replaced him with Jim Caldwell:*

"If the offensive output by Ravens was a referendum on the validity of the move from Cameron to Caldwell, it would qualify as an unmitigated failure. Flacco's box score figures themselves don't look too bad (20 of 40 for 254 yards with two touchdowns and an interception) but when you consider most of the "good" stuff came in garbage time and most of the bad getting them to garbage time, the true picture emerges.

"There was no blindingly obvious change in play-calling philosophy from Cameron to Caldwell, but when you go three-and-out on your first five possessions (netting only 25 yards in the process) it's difficult to spot trends anyway. Before having to go exclusively 11 personnel (three wide receivers) from the two-minute mark of the first half on, the Ravens used their base package -- two wides, two backs -- more than normal (48 percent as opposed to Cameron's average of 36 percent). If there were any difference, Baltimore ran more frequently, but the sample size was small because of the way the game played out.

"When the Ravens eventually did manage to move the ball late in the half, Flacco served up a terrible interception on a two-yard out, and it was returned by Chris Harris 98 yards for a pick-6. Flacco eyeballed Anquan Boldin from snap to throw and it was probably one of the easiest plays Harris has had to make all year.

"The truth is that Flacco is inaccurate and inconsistent. In ProFootballFocus.com's adjusted accuracy ratings (which counts drops as completions and discounts throw-aways, batted passes, spikes and when the QB was hit as he threw) he ranks 32nd of 37 qualifying players with a 68.1 completion percentage; by way of comparison Peyton Manning is fifth with 78.7 percent. Flacco has not played well now since the 55-20 demolition of Oakland five weeks ago. As an unrestricted free agent at the end of the year, he's not giving the Ravens the easy decision they hoped he might. And for one week, the change to Caldwell did not bear fruit."

## **Fine Fifteen**

**1. San Francisco (10-3-1).** This is the best example of what a strange year this is: The team that can't beat the Rams is, this morning, the best team in football.

**2. Denver (11-3). Won nine straight by an average of 13 points. What's most important: If the Broncos win out, New England would have to play in Denver in a playoff matchup.**

**3. New England (10-4).** Not too fired up over Andy Dalton's chances to beat an angry New England team in a wild-card game. Now, if it were Andrew Luck, I wouldn't like his chances much either, but I would like the drama of him trying to atone for his Week 11 Foxboro debacle.

**4. Houston (12-2).** Arian Foster (27 for 165 yards) shows week after week that there's only one back in the league more valuable, and that's the superior being playing in Minnesota. Foster is the biggest reason the Texans beat the Colts and won their second straight AFC South title.

**5. Atlanta (12-2).** Forty-nine weeks after losing to the Giants by 22, the Falcons, with basically the same cast, beat them by 34. Strange league.

**6. Seattle (9-5).** Next Sunday's game versus the Niners has morphed from an NFC West championship game at CenturyLink Field to Seattle trying to solidify its grip on the fifth seed in the NFC. Important, but not the way it would have been if the Niners had lost Sunday night. By the way, Russell Wilson made a pretty good case Sunday in Toronto for Offensive Rookie of the Year.

**7. Green Bay (10-4).** Green Bay's 25-5 in the last two regular seasons, best in the league over that span. Green Bay's getting healthier too. It owns Chicago; Sunday's win was the sixth straight in this series. Green Bay won the NFC North for the second straight year. Not a lot bad to say about this one -- except surviving one of the dumbest calls I've seen in years, the throwback on the punt return in the fourth quarter, en route to defeating the Bears at Soldier Field.

**8. Washington (8-6).** The Redskins enter the driver's seat in the NFC East, with an edge in the schedule too. At Philly and Dallas at home in the last two weeks, and if they go 2-0, the 'Skins play a home playoff game on Wild Card weekend.

**9. Cincinnati (8-6).** The Bengals are 5-1 in their last six, even if they haven't looked playoff-threatening doing so.

**10. Indianapolis (9-5).** The Colts clinch a playoff spot with one win in their last two (at Kansas City, Houston at home), and Andrew Luck is 22 passing yards from 4,000 with two games to play. Those are two things I didn't think I'd be writing early in the morning of Dec. 17, 2012.

**11. Dallas (8-6).** The Saints come to town Sunday, fresh off a shutout of Tampa Bay. That's trouble.

**12. New York Giants (8-6).** The Giants travel to Baltimore Sunday, fresh off being shut out at Atlanta. That's trouble.

**13. Minnesota (8-6).** The Vikes may have to win out to be a wild card, and I don't see them winning at Houston next Sunday. That they're in it at all is a tribute to Peterson, of course.

**14. Pittsburgh (7-7).** Stunned at all the Steeler fans who want to see Mike Tomlin fired. I read those silly message boards on Steelers fan sites. Part scary, part alarmist, part unwillingness to realize every team is 7-7 now and again.

**15. Baltimore (9-5).** This is a playoff team? The Ravens are 0-3 this month, and they've been outscored by 23 points, and their quarterback is completing 53 percent of his throws. Bad.

## **The Award Section**

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

**Colin Kaepernick, QB, San Francisco.** The first Niners quarterback to throw four touchdown passes in one game since 2003 walked into Gillette Stadium and beat the hottest team in football Sunday night, in a cold rain. What was most impressive was the fourth touchdown, coming on the first play from scrimmage after the Patriots stormed back from a 28-point deficit to tie the game. Kaepernick recognized the Patriots blitzing the house and giving him a Cover Zero look (no safety help for his corners), so he found Michael Crabtree for the winning touchdown. Jim Harbaugh has an amazing football player, if the Kaepernick's first five starting weeks are any indication.

**Russell Wilson, QB, Seattle.** A perfect game for Russell Wilson, just the way Wilson wants to play -- running a lot, playing option football, playing from the pocket. "Whatever we call, we know something good can happen with Russell right now," said coach Pete Carroll after the 50-17 rout of Buffalo in Toronto. Wilson rushed nine times for 92 yards and three touchdowns on runs of 14, 25 and 13 yards. He completed 14 of 23 for 205 yards and a touchdown.

Wilson's been such a revelation that, week by week, it's hard to fathom how good he's become versus the image of what 90 percent of the NFL coaching and scouting community had of him before the draft.

**Adrian Peterson, RB, Minnesota.** That's it. I'm retiring the Offensive Player of the Week award. Peterson has it forever. His 24-carry, 212-yard day leaves him 294 shy of Eric Dickerson's single-season NFL record of 2,105 rushing yards. We're watching one of the most amazing rushing seasons we've ever seen.

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

**J.J. Watt, DE, Houston.** Another in a string of amazing games for Watt. I read a note in Greg Bedard's excellent Sunday notes column in the *Boston Globe*. He quoted an anonymous offensive assistant and personnel man about the 49ers, and one of the quotes extolling the virtues of San Francisco's superb defensive lineman Justin Smith was that "Smith is 20 times better" than Watt. That would lead me to wonder: Does this expert actually watch football?

No criticism of Bedard here; he's just quoting someone he relies on as a source. But this expert has an interesting view. It's like a rock promoter saying Springsteen's 20 times better than Bono. Watt destroyed the Colts Sunday. Ten tackles. Three sacks. Three tackles of running backs behind the line. A forced fumble. In 14 games, this 3-4 defensive end has the impossible statistical resume of 19.5 sacks and 16 passes deflected.

Justin Smith is one of the best defensive players in recent history, but J.J. Watt is having one of the best seasons by a defensive lineman in years. It helped that the Colts' offensive line has been hit by injuries and backups were playing center and a guard spot, but Watt ruined everything in his path Sunday.

**Brandon Carr, CB, Dallas.** When the Cowboys signed Carr at five years and \$50 million, they did it in the hope he'd give them moments like Sunday's. Carr dove in front of Steelers wideout Mike Wallace on the second snap of overtime, intercepted a Ben Roethlisberger pass that hung up just a moment too long, and returned it 36 yards to the 1-yard line, setting up the winning field goal in a 27-24 Dallas win. "I saw [Roethlisberger's] eyes," said Carr. "I knew." He gets paid to know, and his pick drew the Cowboys into a three-way tie for first place in the NFC East.

### ***Special Teams Players of the Week***

**Bryan Braman, LB, Houston.** A second-year free agent from West Texas A&M, Braman continued his play as one of the premier special-teams players in league. With the Texans up 13-3 and Pat McAfee punting from his 29, Braman broke through protection, blocked the punt, chased it down, recovered it at the 8, and ran it in for the touchdown.

**Sebastian Janikowski, K, Oakland.** Only one person scored points in the Raiders' 15-0 home win over the Chiefs Sunday. Janikowski booted field goals from 20, 50, 57, 30 and 41 yards.

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

*The award for the offensive linemen who were the biggest factors 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.*

**Anthony Dixon, RB, and Larry Grant, LB, San Francisco.** An unusual choice this week, because of the most unique play of the weekend -- a fake punt on a diagonal Pistol snap from Niners long-snapper Brian Jennings to safety Dashon Goldson, playing a cockeyed personal protector. Goldson took the snap, and Dixon, playing left end, and Grant, playing left tackle on the punt team, were the keystones to a 31-yard run that made the play work.

Dixon crashed into rusher Brandon Bolden of the Patriots, and Grant caved in Patriots linebacker Mike Rivera. Once Goldson was around the end, he made a couple of moves and was in the clear. Dixon's a former sixth-round pick, and Grant came in as a veteran free agent, and all too often, it's those kinds of players who become huge factors down the stretch of the season.

### ***Coach of the Week***

**Steve Spagnuolo, defensive coordinator, New Orleans.** The game didn't mean a lot, this 41-0 shutout of the Bucs, because the Saints are out of playoff contention. But Spagnuolo has been preaching patience with his defense, knowing his players would eventually get it, and Sunday they did. The Bucs went up and down the field more than the Saints would have liked, but they never pierced the end zone, and afterward the players and coaches said it was a tribute to Spagnuolo's work and scheme that finally paid off.

Said interim coach Joe Vitt: "It's certainly a tribute to Steve Spagnuolo and his staff and players, the way they've stuck together. That's staying the course with the right players and the right coaches and the right attitude and the right teaching and the proper accountability."

### ***Goats of the Week***

**Joe Flacco, QB, Baltimore.** Playing his first game since offensive coordinator Cam Cameron was fired (a move he had to believe was long overdue), Flacco drove the Ravens deep into Denver territory, trailing 10-0 in the second quarter. Flacco threw to Anquan Boldin near the left pylon, and spying him all along, cornerback Chris Harris nabbed the interception at the Denver 2-yard line. Harris ran 98 yards to give the Broncos a 17-0 lead and effectively ending the game.

**Antonio Brown, WR, Pittsburgh.** Fumbled a punt return at a crucial time, allowing the Cowboys to come back and force overtime. Misplayed a punt by positioning himself too deep and letting the punt bounce to the Cowboys' benefit.

And he went out of bounds when he could have run for a first down. All contributed nicely to the Steelers' overtime loss in Dallas.

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

Expanding NFL playoffs a smart idea?

**Source:** SI

**SI.com's Don Banks discusses rumors that the National Football League will expand its playoff schedule.**

"Ed's charging \$1,000 an hour at his law firm."

*-- NBC's Al Michaels, on the interminable delay in the second quarter caused by referee Ed Hochuli's crew reviewing a bizarre punt play in the Patriots-Niners game. Hochuli, in his other life, is an attorney.*

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

"That's tough for me to answer right now. The second half we didn't do much of it, and that's disappointing."

*-- Pittsburgh quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, on the lack of a no-huddle offense called by offensive coordinator Todd Haley in the second half of the overtime loss at Dallas.*

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

"That's about as bad as I can play."

*-- Detroit quarterback Matthew Stafford, after throwing three interceptions -- two returned for touchdowns -- in the Lions' shocking 38-10 loss at Arizona.*

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

"We've heard a couple of times now of a black guy kind of distancing himself away from black people ... I've talked to some people down in Washington D.C., friends of mine, who are around and at some of the press conferences, people I've known for a long time. But my question, which is just a straight honest question: 'Is he a brother, or is he a cornball brother?' ... He's black, he kind of does his thing, but he's not really down with the cause, he's not one of us. He's kind of black, but he's not really the guy you'd really want to hang out with ... I keep hearing these things. We all know he has a white fiancée. There was all this talk about he's a Republican, which, there's no information [about that] at all."

*-- ESPN commentator Rob Parker, on Washington quarterback Robert Griffin III.*

Wh-wh-wh-wh-WHATTTTTT!

Separation of the races. That's what we need in America!

Parker was suspended by ESPN for his words.

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

President Obama wants to play basketball with Robert Griffin III this offseason, and that will almost certainly happen. Griffin has another idea, different from the kind of 5-on-5 that the president likes to play. Griffin wants to get his friend, Baylor women's star Brittany Greiner, and play a 2-on-2 match: Griffin and President Obama vs. Greiner and First Lady Michelle Obama.

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

So I'm walking into work Sunday at the NBC Studios in Rockefeller Center, and I come upon a tour group with a pleasant middle-aged man showing a group of tourists around the historic building. "I was giving a tour earlier this fall," he said, "when I saw Dan Patrick walk into the building!"

Just then, maybe 15 seconds behind me, Dan Patrick walked into the building, right by the tour group, having no idea what the man had said 15 seconds earlier. The tour guide said nothing. Apparently he didn't see Patrick.

### **Dawn Hochsprung Tweets of the Year**

Hochsprung, 47, was the principal at Sandy Hook Elementary, holding a staff meeting Friday morning when a man armed with three guns broke into the school and came looking for victims to kill. One of the first, if not the first, was Hochsprung, who tore out of the meeting when she heard the first shots from his semi-automatic machine gun inside the school.

Hochsprung used Twitter quite a bit, and you can see from her account how inspirational and how enthusiastic she was at her job. Who wouldn't want to work for Hochsprung? Who wouldn't want their children in a school run by Hochsprung?

How heartbroken must every parent of a child in that school be to know Hochsprung was assassinated and won't be there for their kids for one more day, one more hour?

Getting to know Hochsprung through her tweets since the school year began:

**Aug. 24, 5:53 a.m.,** on the first day of school for kindergartners: "Welcoming our Kinders this morning ... 74 new opportunities to inspire lifelong learning!"

**Aug. 24, 3:17 p.m.,** "Sandy Hook teachers, students, and parents planted a garden and donated their harvested veggies to the soup kitchen throughout the summer!"

**Sept. 2, 7:40 a.m.,** one of a series of philosophical tweets about learning: "Technology is just a tool. In terms of getting the kids working together and motivating them, the teacher is the most important. -- Bill Gates"

**Oct. 13, 4:56 p.m.,** "Mary Ehrenworth, 'When people ask me how much a child should read every day always I say, 'As much as humanly possible.' "

**Oct. 17, 9:47 a.m.,** and if you don't get chills from this ... "Safety first at Sandy Hook ... It's a beautiful day for our annual evacuation drill! "

**Nov. 6, 6:31 a.m.,** "Vote today... and talk to your kids about it!!"

**Nov. 9, 1:37 p.m.,** "In a fourth grade classroom right now... Completely blown away by the caliber of instruction and by students' deep thinking!"

**Nov. 23, 4:30 p.m.,** " 'Books are the perfect entertainment: no commercials, no batteries, hours of enjoyment for each dollar spent.' -- Stephen King"

**Dec. 4, 8:05 a.m.,** "30 Sandy Hook teachers gather for an early morning Appy Hour... sharing the best iPad apps for our classrooms!"

**Dec. 10, 11:45 a.m.,** "Sandy Hook kinders write lists, select grocery items, and pay the cashier at Mrs. Vollmer's new Supermarket Center! "

**Dec. 12, 2:42 p.m.,** "Sandy Hook students enjoy the rehearsal for our 4th grade winter concert - a talented group led by Maryrose Kristopik!"

Forty-three hours after that last tweet, Dawn Hochsprung ran at a crazed 20-year-old Newtown resident aiming a semi-automatic rifle, and the man, Adam Lanza, shot her dead.

After Lanza killed Hochsprung, he went down a hall in the school and banged on a door, demanding to be let in. The music teacher, Maryrose Kristopik, who her principal had been so proud of a day and a half earlier, locked one door, barricaded another with musical instruments, and locked her fourth-grade students in a closet in case Lanza was able to break in. In the closet, Kristopik told the fourth-graders she loved them. She told them they would be with their parents soon. She told them to be quiet. She told them to hug each other. Lanza moved on. And they survived.

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

"Nothing like Rex's night before the game speeches to get your mind right. I'm jacked out of my mind. Btw congrats to the Seahawks. 50 again?"

-- *@OfficialBraylon, Jets wide receiver Braylon Edwards, at 10:26 p.m. Eastern Time, back in his room in Nashville, presumably, after coach Rex Ryan's Sunday evening talk to his team in advance of tonight's game at Tennessee. Edwards was just picked up on waivers from Seattle last week.*

## **Tweet of the Week II**

"Kaepernick 6, Nerves 0."

-- @mattbarrows, 49ers beat man for the Sacramento Bee, tweeting live from Foxboro Sunday night after the Niners went up on the Patriots with an early Colin Kaepernick-to-Randy Moss touchdown pass.

## **Tweet of the Week III**

"My favorite part of the fine email from the NFL -- they end it with 'sincerely.' It's the little touches that let you know they care."

-- @chriswarcraft, Vikings punter Chris Kluwe, acknowledging the receipt of a fine letter from the NFL, saying he'd be docked \$5,250 for a uniform violation for covering a Pro Football Hall of Fame patch with "Vote Ray Guy" written on a piece of athletic tape.

## **Tweet of the Week IV**

"Felix Hernandez has just asked if he can play for the Seahawks. #RunSupport"

-- @PeterBotte, baseball writer for the New York Daily News, after the 'Hawks' 108-point explosion over two games, including Sunday's 50-17 win over Buffalo.

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

**1.** I think this is what I liked about Week 15:

- a. The amazing first-quarter pass rush by Houston's J.J. Watt, who swatted away the Colts' right guard, stormed past a whiffing running back trying to protect Andrew Luck, then slammed Luck down for a drive-killing sack.
- b. Leslie Frazier going for it on 4th-and-1 in a game that the Vikings had to have to stay in the playoff race -- with shaky Christian Ponder at quarterback.
- c. Ponder, somehow, evading about five Rams and lunging in for a touchdown on said 4th-and-1 call.
- d. Trent Richardson running like the season's on the line.
- e. Kirk Cousins, with a beautiful throw to Leonard Hankerson over the Cleveland coverage, on the run, evading traffic. Athletic play, strong-armed play ... and illustrative of why Mike Shanahan double-dipped with the rookie quarterbacks this year.
- f. Julio Jones with a 1,000-yard receiving season, which the Falcons should get used to.

g. With Giant defender Will Hill hanging onto him, Tony Gonzalez skying and grabbing a Matt Ryan touchdown throw.

**h. Knowshon Moreno (22 for 118) using Ed Reed like a high hurdle. With days and moves like that, he affords Willis McGahee time to get healthy.**

i. Number 37 for Charles Tillman -- the 37th forced fumble of his career, against Green Bay. Hard to imagine any future defender forcing more.

j. Asante Samuel, with an athletic tipped interception of Eli Manning to open the floodgates in Atlanta.

k. At least Joe Flacco can talk better than he plays -- for now: "It feels like we're 0-14."

l. Andre Johnson, 11 for 151. Old man river.

m. Rashad Johnson and Greg Toler, with 155 yards worth of interception returns for touchdown for the Cards.

n. The Panthers, for showing up.

**2. This is what I didn't like about Week 15:**

a. The Chargers, for not.

b. Sometimes coaches have to do tough things. John Harbaugh did it last week, firing Cam Cameron with three weeks left in a playoff season. Might be time for Mike McCarthy to do the same with his slumping kicker, Mason Crosby. In a scoreless game likely for the division title, Crosby missed as far wide right on a 42-yarder as you can miss. Later he missed a 43-yarder. Can't wait any longer.

c. Crosby's 17 of 29. That's 59 percent. In the NFL, that's a prehistoric field goal rate.

d. Some would look at the Texans' first drive against Indianapolis and say, "Good job. Getting three on the first drive and taking an early lead." I'd say: A bad Matt Schaub throw to Andre Johnson cost the Texans four points on the play. Schaub threw far too short for Johnson, who had to wait for the ball and got caught by Vontae Davis. What should have been a 7-0 lead morphed into 3-0 when Houston couldn't finish the drive.

e. Lawrence Tynes, with his third miss in three weeks for the Giants.

f. Kirk Cousins' 0-for-3 passing start, and his early interception, into traffic. Cannot take those chances.

g. Jayron Hosley, for getting beat on a double-move by Atlanta wideout Harry Douglas, setting up Atlanta's second score.

h. David Akers, who is giving the Niners plenty of reason to bring in kickers for tryouts this week.

i. Antonio Brown's judgment.

j. Patriots 0-for-7 in third downs in the first half Sunday night. Wes Welker with zero catches. In the wise words of Vince Lombardi, "What the hell's going on here!"

k. Kaepernick's dumb interception in the third quarter, into double coverage when he tried to force a throw into Randy Moss. Not a whole lot else dumb done by the young quarterback.

**3.** I think I loved the analysis by Bob McGinn of the *Milwaukee Journal* on Sunday. He wrote insightfully about the end of the Jermichael Finley run with Green Bay, and concluded he's gone.

Wrote McGinn: "Barring a shocking turn of events in the next month or so, tight end Jermichael Finley is playing his fifth and final season for the team. Sources familiar with the Packers' thinking say the club not only wants to get rid of Finley but has decided to do exactly that in the offseason. It means that if the Packers cannot find a trade partner, they are prepared to release Finley because of financial, competitive and behavioral reasons."

Someone's going to get a very good tight end, if Finley can learn to be quieter and more team-centric. But in a flat-cap era, I doubt he'll make \$7 million a year, which was his average under his current deal.

**4.** I think the design of the Seahawks regarding their Adderall-suspended starting cornerbacks is as smart as it can possibly be: Brandon Browner takes the last four games of the regular season as his suspension and would return for any playoff games. Richard Sherman tries to push his appeal off so he can finish the regular season.

**5.** I think, now that the Saints' appeal has been heard and adjudicated by Paul Tagliabue, one thing that has to happen is this: Roger Goodell and DeMaurice Smith have to rebuild their relationship. It's not good right now. It's not quite Obama-Boehner, but it's close. Too many important things at stake (HGH testing the first one) to have a cold war between the league and union.

**6.** I think the charity function of the week, and a very good one, is a live auction benefiting the valuable and important Gridiron Greats, which helps needy retired players. You can go online tonight at 7 Eastern Time and bid on a number of items, live. The coolest thing, by far, is bidding on dinner with Marv Levy at Ditka's in Chicago. Not just because you'd be able to dine with a guy who's coached in four Super Bowls, but because you'd be able to get a history lesson on football.

**7.** I think, as I've thought since news of the canceled Sean Payton contract in New Orleans broke, that the longer the stalemate lasted, the bigger the chance Payton would leave. And maybe Jay Glazer's strong report Sunday -- that Payton isn't close

to a deal and will not limit his options to New Orleans and Dallas if a deal isn't reached soon -- is posturing, but keep in mind that Glazer is closer than anyone in the media to Payton. He knows.

**8.** I think my biggest question of the day came at halftime of Panthers-Chargers, Carolina up 24-0: Will San Diego come out for the second half?

**9.** I think the bush league play of the day was Seattle running a fake punt up 47-17 on Buffalo in the fourth quarter. Pete Carroll took responsibility for it after the game, saying he could have called it off. But the call, likely by special teams coordinator Brian Schneider, should never, ever have been made. Why rub a team's face in it?

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

a. Three straight Sundays with moments of silence, homage to tragedies in Kansas City, Dallas and Newtown. Please don't let us get used to that, ever.

b. I don't have an intelligent solution to the gun violence in this country, the violence that can allow an unstable man to murder 20 children with between three and 11 shots apiece from a semi-automatic weapon firing terroristic hollow-point bullets designed to inflict the most damage possible. But smarter people than I must have ideas what to do, while protecting the right of law-abiding Americans to bear arms.

We have to stop cowering to those opposed to meaningful gun reform, to those who blindly and obediently say, "Gun don't kill; people kill." That's a nice slogan. It's also ridiculously and cruelly blind to the events of recent months in America, where a movie theater, shopping mall and idyllic New England elementary school have been shot up by sick people -- and, in the case of the Newton shootings, a sick person with access to the kinds of guns used in war zones.

c. Having said that, it's obvious too that we have to address the mental health aspect of this, and to care better for those on society's fringes. When our politicians are cutting budgets, as they certainly are on the eve of the fiscal cliff talks, they'd better be careful about slashing public funding for mental health in this country.

d. Your moves, President Obama, and leaders of the House and Senate, on both sides of the aisle. Be leaders. Do the right thing. Do something.

e. And for those who say to me, "Stick to sports," you've got the wrong guy. I won't be offended if you never click on this column again, or if you stop listening to me on radio or TV, or stop following me on Twitter. It's a free country, and we're not going to agree on everything. The media world has changed -- maybe for the better, maybe not. But it's different than the world was in 1989, when I was hired by *Sports Illustrated*.

A generation or two ago, a sportswriter covering the NFL might never have been asked for his opinion on anything -- he might have reported on the NFL and not

been opinionated about it, but rather have been right down the middle on everything. I was hired by the magazine strictly to be a reporter and writer 23 years ago; that started to change with the advent of the internet a few years later.

Now, my job in this multi-media world is to report on events in a straightforward way in stories for *Sports Illustrated* -- as happened a couple of weeks ago with my cover story on the Colts -- and on NBC's *Football Night in America*, then to be a reporter with football opinions and personal opinions in this column and others on SI.com. And to do pretty much whatever I want on Twitter, keeping in mind my SI bosses asked me in 2009 to interact with readers for a few minutes every day. So that's my job. It's not everyone's job in this business, but it's mine. And I respect you if you think I do it poorly, or you disagree with me. It's also your option to skip over my rantings if you wish, particularly in a long column like this. There should be enough football in it for anyone. Your call.

f. I bet a lot of parents, sitting around the dinner table Friday night, said to one another: "We've got to home-school our kids."

g. Saw *Lincoln* the other day and was wowed. Loved the movie, loved the story, loved the drama about getting the anti-slavery bill passed. Daniel Day-Lewis did one of the best acting jobs I've ever seen, showing Lincoln as a great compromiser, good Washington game-player, dealing with a troubled wife and angry son, and as a witty guy. I walked out of the theater thinking how history repeats itself. We see the rancor and intractability in Washington now and think it must never have been this bad ... and yet if anything 150 years ago, it was worse.

I also tried to think of what Roger Goodell thought when he left the movie -- assuming he's seen it. If he thinks he's doing the right thing on something (such as the Saints bounty sanctions), his backbone is such, with the family history of his father being a strong-willed New York politician, that he won't back down either.

h. The Angels are going to lose a lot of 14-9 games next year.

i. Josh Hamilton with a five-year contract worth \$25 million a year, with no language protecting the team in the event of a relapse by Hamilton, who freely admits he has sometimes struggled with his sobriety. Was Thursday "Free Reefer Day" in the Angels front office?

j. Rick Reilly, you hit a grand slam the other day with your ESPN feature on J.J. Watt being a big brother to the orphaned handicapped kids in Houston. Wow. What a story.

k. Coffeenerdness: I see you, Dunkin Donuts, infringing on Starbucks turf in Manhattan. You're everywhere! Coffee wars!

l. Beernerdness: Congrats to my old Jersey hangout, the Cloverleaf Tavern, for importing Allagash White and seasonal brew Allagash Black. Why'd I move again?

m. I am dizzy from following the Big East defections. Marietta College get invited in yet? And this Catholic basketball version of the conference ... What's that going to be called? I'd suggest The Vatican League.

### **Who I Like Tonight, and I Mean Aditi Kinkhabwala**

The former *Wall Street Journal* staffer, now with NFL Network and NFL.com, has a terrific profile on the Steelers' backup running back, Baron Batch, with an emphasis on just how far a person with intense desire can go in life. There can't be many athletes in sports today who have risen from as humble a childhood as Batch did, growing up hungry and shuffled from one caregiver to another, and "I'd much rather have nothing and now this than to be born with everything and not know how to work," Baron says in the story.

Now for **Tennessee 15, New York Jets 13**. Mike Munchak likely has to win two of his last three (Jets at home, at Packers, Jags at home) to have a good chance to come back for year three. And much of his success in the next 14 days will be up to the quarterback who is on his second coordinator of the season; Dowell Loggains took over for Chris Palmer last month, with the offense stalled.

You can change coaches all you want, but the issue for Jake Locker has been, and may always be, his accuracy. In his four seasons at Washington, Locker completed 47, 54, 58 and 55 percent of his throws, yet the Titans chose him eighth overall in 2011. Near the end of his second season in the NFL, Locker's accuracy rate is 56.2 percent.

Great guy, eager learner, very competitive ... Locker has all the things you want in a quarterback, except the most important one -- the ability to move the chains with accurate throws. At least so far that's the case. In the last three weeks, starting against a resurgent Jets defense tonight, he has to be better to help this coaching staff not get blown out at the end of the season.

### **The Adieu Haku**

Why I'm not a coach:  
Kaepernick over Alex.  
Harbaugh knows his craft.

# Broncos have no plans to rest Peyton Manning

Lindsay H. Jones  
USA Today  
December 17, 2012

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – The Broncos have won nine games in a row, clinched the AFC West and moved ahead of the New England Patriots for the No. 2 seed in the AFC playoff race.

But don't expect the Broncos to ease up, even with home games remaining against Cleveland and Kansas City, two teams that already have been eliminated from the postseason.

Broncos coach John Fox said Monday he has no plans to rest any of his starters, including 36-year-old quarterback Peyton Manning, who has come back from a neck injury.

"That has not been an option, and not something that we'll talk about," Fox said. "Right now, our main agenda is to get better and improve so we can be playing our best football in January."

Manning was pulled early from Week 17 games four times during his 13 seasons in Indianapolis when the Colts already had secured a first-round bye. The Broncos haven't yet made it that far.

Though the Broncos currently hold the No. 2 seed, they need to win their final two games – or hope New England loses its final two – to keep it. A loss to the Browns, who won three straight before Sunday's loss to Washington, or the Chiefs, who have won Week 17 games in Denver in two of the past three seasons, would put the Broncos back into the No. 3 seed.

"If we don't play our best against Cleveland this week, it will be all for naught," Fox said. "All our focus will be on the Cleveland Browns."

Still, Broncos players enjoyed watching the second half of San Francisco's win against New England when their charter flight landed in Denver after a nearly four-hour flight from Baltimore, where they beat the Ravens 34-17 on Sunday. It was the Broncos' first win in Baltimore since the city was home to the Colts in 1985.

"It's always nice to move up a slot, but what comes with that territory is you've got to take care of yourself," wide receiver Eric Decker said. "Play good football, make

sure you win your games, and just focus on yourself. Everything else will take care of itself."

Denver players know better than to assume wins will happen late in the season. Over the previous five seasons, the Broncos won a total of just six regular-season games played in December or January, including losing their final three games last year.

Those swoons came under three head coaches (Fox, Josh McDaniels and Mike Shanahan) and in 2008 and 2009 ruined postseason chances.

"Everybody understands the situation we're in," wide receiver Brandon Stokley said. "We haven't accomplished anything thing yet. It's all about playing your best football in January. You want to feel good about what you do at the end of the regular season."

# Eric Decker helps Denver Broncos get statement win vs. Ravens

Jim Reineking  
NFL.com  
December 17, 2012

These guys might not exactly be carrying a lunch pail to the stadium each week, but they did bring an industrious, blue-collar, working-man approach to Week 15. Take a look at all the nominees, then vote in the poll at the bottom of the right column for your choice for the Hardest-Working Man.

## **Chris Clemons, Seattle Seahawks**

It takes a lot of work from a lot of different sources to put together consecutive 50-burgers. Last week, much credit went to Marshawn Lynch. This week, we're going to focus on the defensive side of the ball and give Clemons a nod for his contributions in a 50-17 win over the Buffalo Bills at Toronto's Rogers Centre. Clemons had 2.5 sacks and a forced fumble as the Seahawks defense made life miserable for Bills quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick. With Sunday's win and the 58-0 victory over the Arizona Cardinals in Week 14, the Seahawks became just the third team in NFL history to post back-to-back 50-burgers during the same season. The last time this was done was in 1950, when the New York Giants and Los Angeles Rams accomplished the feat in the same season (it should be noted that the Rams' back-to-back scoring fiestas included a 70-burger -- a 70-27 win over the Baltimore Colts -- and a 60-burger -- a 65-24 win over the Detroit Lions).

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## **Michael Crabtree, San Francisco 49ers**

For much of his career, Crabtree -- the No. 10 overall selection in the 2009 NFL Draft -- had yet to live up to expectations. This season, however, Crabtree is 132 yards shy of his first 1,000-yard receiving season. Crabtree picked a good time to have the biggest game of his season. Crabtree caught seven passes for 107 yards and two touchdowns. The second touchdown came at the most crucial juncture in the 49ers' 41-34 win over the New England Patriots. Just after the Patriots scored 28 unanswered points to tie up the game at 31-31, Crabtree took a short pass from quarterback Colin Kaepernick and went 38 yards for what turned out to be the game-deciding score.

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## **Eric Decker, Denver Broncos**

One of the most emphatic wins on "Statement Sunday" was the Broncos' 34-17 victory over the Baltimore Ravens at M&T Bank Stadium. Helping the Broncos deliver that dominant performance was Decker, who caught eight passes for 133 yards and one touchdown. The addition of quarterback Peyton Manning has provided a career season for Decker, who already has career highs in receptions (72), receiving yards (923) and touchdowns (9).

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## **Asante Samuel, Atlanta Falcons**

Right from the second play from scrimmage, it appeared that the Falcons were bound for a statement win. New York Giants quarterback Eli Manning's first pass was picked off by Samuel. Four plays later, the Falcons put a touchdown up on the scoreboard en route to a thorough 34-0 defeat of the defending Super Bowl champions. Samuel's interception was notable for a couple more reasons: 1) He passed Ronde Barber for fourth-most interceptions among active players with 48, and 2) Samuel's 22 interceptions since 2009 are the most in the NFL. The interception set the tone for a historic defeat for the Giants, whose 34-point loss tied them for the worst margin of defeat ever suffered by a defending Super Bowl champion. It was also the Giants' first shutout since 1996, when their quarterbacks in a 24-0 loss to the Philadelphia Eagles were Danny Kanell and Dave Brown.

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## **J.J. Watt, Houston Texans**

Watt helped the Texans recover from an embarrassing 42-14 loss to the New England Patriots on "Monday Night Football" to defeat the Indianapolis Colts 29-17 and clinch the AFC South crown for the second consecutive year. Watt had three sacks of quarterback Andrew Luck, boosting his season total to 19.5. Watt is now three sacks short of tying Michael Strahan's record of 22.5 set in the 2001 season. Watt also became the first player since 1982 when sacks became an official statistic to have 15 or more sacks and 15 or more passes defensed in a single season.

# It's time to start talking Super Bowl in Denver

James Merilatt  
Mile High Sports  
December 17, 2012

What test do they need to pass now? What other questions do they need to answer before the naysayers finally believe?

Since an eight-game winning streak in a league where upsets are a weekly occurrence wasn't good enough for some people, perhaps extending it to nine with a dominating performance in one of the NFL's toughest venues will do the trick.

Yesterday, Denver went into a place they hadn't won since John Elway's rookie year and dominated one of the best teams in football. The Ravens were seen as the biggest test on the Broncos' second-half schedule, yet Baltimore was no match for the balanced offense and swarming defense that rolled into town on Sunday.

Denver's 34-17 victory, in a game that wasn't nearly as close as that score might indicate, was the Broncos' ninth-straight win. It was also perhaps their most impressive of the season, as John Fox's squad held a commanding 31-3 lead at one point in the most hostile of NFL environments.

That performance should be all anyone needs to see when it comes to evaluating Denver's playoff chances. On the road to the Super Bowl, there's not a hurdle the Broncos can't overcome.

As a result, it's time to start having grander aspirations in the Mile High City. Big things can be on the horizon, way ahead of when anyone thought they'd be possible.

The postseason is all about playing good football at the right time. And with Christmas on the horizon, the Broncos are the hottest team in the league.

None of the AFC teams currently in the playoff hunt would be favored if they had to visit the Mile High City. Denver can take care of the Steelers, Bengals, Colts or Jets in the first round, as well as the Ravens in a rematch if it ever materializes later in the postseason.

Thanks to last night's topsy-turvy game in Foxborough, the Broncos should be able to avoid a return trip to New England. If Denver can win out, with home games against Cleveland (5-9) and Kansas City (2-12) remaining, the Patriots will have to travel if another Tom Brady vs. Peyton Manning showdown materializes.

And a road trip to Houston, the lone place Denver would have to travel in the playoffs, shouldn't scare Broncos fans. Yes, the Texans beat the orange and blue

earlier in the season, but things have changed since then. Manning has settled into his new surroundings and the Broncos defense has emerged as one of the best in the game. As a result, a second go-around with the AFC's top team, even away from Sports Authority Field, has a very good chance of going a different direction.

So while it's certainly welcome news that the Broncos have slipped past the Patriots into the second spot in the conference at the moment, and it wouldn't hurt anyone in Denver's feelings if the Texans dropped their final two games of the season to fall from their No. 1 perch, those things aren't necessary for big things to happen this season.

An "easier" path to the Super Bowl might sound like a tantalizing thing, but it's not a route the Broncos need; they're good enough to make it no matter how the playoffs shake out. Great teams show up every week and take care of business against the team in front of them; ones that aren't quite elite fall no matter how the road in front of them is paved.

Denver's playoff history illustrates this fact.

In 1996, the Broncos were 13-3 and had home-field advantage throughout the playoffs. Yet the upstart Jaguars came into Denver and shocked them in the Divisional Playoffs at Mile High Stadium.

In 2005, the Broncos were again 13-3 and hosted the sixth-seeded Steelers in the AFC Championship Game. A week after shocking the Colts in Indianapolis, Pittsburgh repeated the feat when they came into Denver and stunned the home team at Invesco Field.

And in 1997, the Broncos finished 12-4 and faced the wild-card route through the postseason. It took a first-round win over Jacksonville, plus back-to-back road victories at Kansas City and Pittsburgh, for Denver to reach the Super Bowl.

The path doesn't necessarily matter; the team taking the journey is what it's all about.

The 2012 edition of the Broncos are in that type of elite class. They're guided by one of the greatest quarterbacks in NFL history and have a ground attack that is rounding into form (yes, feel free to jump on the Knowshon Moreno bandwagon). They boast one of the best pass rushes in all of football, which spearheads an opportunistic defense. And they have the look of a team on the cusp of something special, playing together in a championship form.

The Broncos are very, very good, folks. They've proven it throughout their nine-game winning streak, with yesterday's commanding performance providing the exclamation mark.

It's time believe it, Broncos fans. It's time to start having Super thoughts in Denver.

# Nevermore: Broncos Ditch Doomsday Scenario

Dave Krieger  
850 KOA  
December 17, 2012

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,  
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.  
'Tis some visitor,' I muttered, 'tapping at my chamber door -  
Only this, and nothing more.'*

Spoiler alert: 'Twas not a visitor. 'Twas the Raven. And this is what the Broncos said Sunday about the Ravens' previous dominance in the city of Edgar Allan Poe:

Nevermore.

No single Sunday has delivered results so promising for Denver's football squad since the Sunday in March when Peyton Manning elected to join it.

It was not merely that the Broncos expunged an ignominious losing streak in Baltimore, nor that they won their ninth consecutive game, a streak now tied for third-longest in franchise history.

It was mainly that they leapfrogged the defrocked New England Patriots in the conference standings, with a little help from the San Francisco 49ers, who blitzed the Pats on Sunday Night Football, then hung on by their fingernails in the second half.

If the Broncos win out at home against the hapless Cleveland Browns (5-9) and Kansas City Chiefs (2-12), they will finish the season as at least the AFC's No. 2 seed. (If the Houston Texans were to lose both of their remaining games, against Minnesota and Indianapolis, the Broncos could ascend to No. 1.)

Earning one of the top two seeds not only gets them a first-round bye, meaning they would need two playoff victories to reach the Super Bowl rather than three. It also exempts them from another postseason trip to Foxboro, Mass., and you may remember how the last one of those turned out.

This was widely assumed to be the Broncos' doomsday scenario. No matter how well they played in the regular season, if they finished with a playoff seed inferior to that of the Patriots, the season likely would end again in disappointment far from home. After all, last year's dream ended with a 45-10 spanking at Gillette Stadium. Even with Manning on board the Broncos' bus, the Patriots beat them at Gillette again, 31-21, earlier this season.

The combination of the Broncos' win at Baltimore and the Patriots' 41-34 loss to the Niners means that if the Broncos win out, any postseason meeting with Tom Brady & Co. will be in Denver, not New England.

And so, as surely as winter follows fall, here comes the Super Bowl talk. Whether you get your sports conversation from the radio, TV or social media, you will be treated to a barrage of excited Super Bowl talk for at least the next three weeks. The Broncos will do their best to ignore it.

"We're not measuring ourselves now," coach John Fox said after his team improved to 11-3 on the season. "We need to measure ourselves at the end to be the best. Right now, our guys have responded very well to just improving every week, and we've kept it as simple as that. The big challenge this week was to win the turnover battle and we were able to do that. I thought that was the biggest difference in the game. This (Ravens) team is a very good football team and we may run into them again."

To appreciate how hard it is to do what the Broncos did -- playing every phase of the game expertly with two rushing touchdowns, a passing touchdown, an interception for a touchdown, a stifling defense, two takeaways, no giveaways and a dominant time of possession -- you have only to observe the frustration along the other sideline.

"The thing about football is the offense can be playing really well and then the defense is not playing really well; it's lopsided," said Ravens running back Ray Rice, who was held to 38 rushing yards. "Today the defense was playing really well, and we didn't. Last week, it was the flip side. We have to find a way to come together and play as one unit. "

For all the Broncos' ultimate dominance, the key play in this one came at the end of the first half, with the Ravens on the verge of a touchdown that would have cut the Broncos' lead to 10-7. The home team, which had only four first downs and 119 yards before intermission, finally got its offense moving in the last two minutes, connecting on a 43-yard pass from Joe Flacco to Jacoby Jones to begin the drive and arriving at the Broncos' 4-yard line with a first-and-goal and barely 30 seconds showing.

Head coach John Harbaugh, new offensive coordinator Jim Caldwell and Flacco, the quarterback, had two choices. They could call timeout -- they had all three remaining -- and set up a play, or they could run to the line of scrimmage and run

a play out of the no-huddle offense in an effort to catch the Broncos off guard. They chose the latter. The Broncos were not caught off guard.

"There were 34 seconds when the ball was snapped," Harbaugh said. "With three timeouts left that's going to give us time to run three plays. That's plenty of time. Throughout the course of the drive, we wanted to score, but we didn't want to leave a lot of time on the clock. That's a strategic call. We have a number of plays we run with no-huddle that are not kill-the-clock plays, but they are run-route plays, and that was the play we had. And we thought that gave us a great chance to score, and that's what we ran."

The Ravens chose a pass play with one receiver running a fade to Flacco's left and another, Anquan Boldin, running a flat route beneath the fade. Flacco is supposed to check the fade first, then the flat. If neither is open, he's supposed to throw it away, stop the clock, try again.

"That's one of our plays that you kind of get a flat and a fade, and it's kind of like going up and clocking the ball," Flacco said. "It's kind of like calling a timeout in that situation because it's one of those things that you catch it and get out of bounds, you catch it in the end zone, or you throw it away, and you live for the next down. I just made a mistake, there's no other way to put that. I made a mistake. I wanted to have the fade, and I came down to the flat, and the guy undercut it, picked it and went the whole way. It's just a mistake on my part."

The guy was Chris Harris, the former undrafted free agent who took over for Tracy Porter opposite Champ Bailey earlier in the season and has not permitted Porter to get back on the field. He cut in front of Boldin, caught Flacco's pass at the 2-yard line and sprinted up the Broncos' sideline 98 yards for a touchdown, the longest regular-season interception return for a score in franchise history. The previous record -- a 93-yard return at Cleveland 32 years ago -- was authored by linebacker Randy Gradishar.

"Chris did a good job kind of hanging back there, and stepped in front, right in front of our bench," Fox said with a smile. "He had a lot of direction from the sideline on that (return)."

"A 14-point swing," Manning said. "Baltimore has some momentum there on the drive and looks like they're probably going to get the touchdown. Plus they get the ball the first series of the second half. So just a huge play by Chris, undercutting it. The turnover is good; the fact that he took it all the way to the house for a touchdown is even bigger. Big swing in the game, in the momentum, and I thought it kind of jump-started everything in the second half for us."

"I didn't really expect him to throw that out-route, but he threw it to me, and I just wanted to make sure I scored," Harris said. "That was a long run, but once I got to the 40, I was like, 'I just have to stride it on in.' "

Flacco tried to run him down, but managed only to dive at his feet as he flew into the end zone.

Asked to explain what happened on the play, Boldin, the intended receiver, replied: "I'd rather not."

Someone asked Flacco if he changed his mind at the last moment about where to go with the ball.

"No, I was just reading it out," he said. "The fade was just taking a little bit longer than I wanted. I was probably a little bit late on it because the sideline was squeezing with (Boldin) and all that. In hindsight, I should have just taken the ball and thrown it over Anquan's head and lived for the next play."

The Ravens did manage a scoring drive to start the second half, but they got only a field goal out of it. When the Broncos responded with consecutive touchdowns, it was 31-3 and all over but the excuses. The first of Denver's two third-quarter touchdowns came on a 51-yard bomb from Manning to Eric Decker, who finished with eight catches for 133 yards in an offense that seems to reward a different receiver each week.

"(We) were hitting some outs and some intermediate routes and we thought it was time to maybe send something down the field," Manning said. "They had good cover guys outside, so anytime you're playing against good cover guys you've got to give them the mix, you've got to give them the short, the intermediate and the deep stuff."

"It was a double-move by Eric, a good route, good protection. I really thought it was set up by the run game. We were running the ball well. It was off a run play we'd been running. Had a good fake. I don't know that it necessarily froze the safety or anybody, but it just gives you that good mix of run and the play-action when you're running the ball well."

Ravens safety Ed Reed undercut the route, leaving Decker with single coverage, perhaps because Decker had been running comeback routes for much of the day.

The Broncos ran the ball 45 times and threw it just 28. Even subtracting the final series -- two kneel-downs by backup quarterback Brock Osweiler and a no-gain run by rookie running back Ronnie Hillman -- this is a heavier dose of running plays than one normally associates with Manning, who set or extended two more NFL records Sunday (most 11-win seasons, 9; most 4,000-yard passing seasons, 12).

Manning said one series where he threw it on all three downs -- and went three-and-out, getting knocked down by the pass rush twice -- represented probably the worst play-calling of the day. Heavy reliance on the running game was not a plan solely for the Ravens. The Broncos are coming to understand it will be a good strategy in the playoffs against higher-scoring offenses as well. If the re-emergence of Knowshon Moreno is paired with veteran Willis McGahee, who could be ready to

return from injury for the AFC Championship Game, the Broncos' ground game could be nearly as formidable as their aerial attack.

"It's something we're going to have to be able to do," Manning told KOA. "Especially against teams that have these explosive offenses, you don't want to give them the ball back."

So let the fans and media types talk about the Super Bowl. Manning will make use of every moment of practice and game action between now and then to get in closer touch with his new teammates. They may not seem new to you anymore, but they do to him.

"You try to learn something every day," he said. "You get a little more comfortable with something every day, but it's still very new, there's no question about it."

"I think the goal is to get on the same page. Obviously, the more that the receivers and I are on the same page, the better for our offense, the better for our team. I do think the more games you play, the better you're going to be; the more practice reps you get, going against our secondary in one-on-one drills in practice."

"What are we, in Week 15 here, that's all the time we've had to improve our timing. It's not what it's going to be if you play with guys six, seven, eight years. So it feels like a scramble and you're trying to use every piece of practice that you have -- walkthroughs, meetings, special teams periods where you might get them off to the side. We try to use all those things to talk football."

"There's some things we've made strides on; there's some things that I think you just have to have more time in order to get more on the same page. But I appreciate the work ethic. I know Decker had a good day today. DT probably didn't have the numbers that he's been having, but his presence, I can assure you, is a huge part of what's going on out there. It's a huge part of why the run game is good."

"For the most part, those runs, Baltimore had their safeties and corners apart, or removed from the line of scrimmage. That's because the respect they have for a guy like Demaryius Thomas and Decker. So if you can run it versus those looks; when they come up, if you can throw it, that means you're playing good offensive football."

Winners of nine in a row, now in position to earn a first-round bye and second-round home game in the playoffs, the Broncos, according to their quarterback, remain a work in progress.

*But the raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only,*

*That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.*

*Nothing further then he uttered - not a feather then he fluttered -  
Till I scarcely more than muttered `Other friends have flown before -  
On the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have flown before.'  
Then the bird said, `Nevermore.'*

# Denver Controls Destiny, Remains Focused

Gray Caldwell  
DenverBroncos.com  
December 17, 2012

The Broncos can cement a first-round bye by winning out. But Denver is focused solely on this week's opponent.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- When it comes to playoff seeding, the Broncos control their own fate.

With New England's loss to the San Francisco 49ers Sunday night, Denver moved into the No. 2 spot in the AFC's postseason bracket.

Each of the top two seeds earn a first-round playoff bye. If Denver wins out, it will hold onto that bye. If the Houston Texans also lose out against the Minnesota Vikings and Indianapolis Colts, the Broncos would grab the No. 1 overall seed.

"Everybody understands the situation we're in," wide receiver Brandon Stokley said. "We haven't accomplished anything yet. It's all about playing your best football in January. You want to feel good about what you do at the end of the regular season."

Head Coach John Fox acknowledged on Monday that the team understands it controls its own destiny, but that's not the club's concern.

"If we don't play our best game against Cleveland this week, that will be all for naught," Fox said. "So all our focus will be on the Cleveland Browns, a team that's won three out of four games."

The talk of one-game-at-a-time doesn't ring hollow inside Dove Valley. The Broncos have prided themselves on giving each team they've played equal attention, and that attitude has brought nine consecutive wins with it.

It's a mantra that has been repeated again and again in the locker room, and it hasn't changed as the team prepares to take on the Browns at Sports Authority Field at Mile High on Sunday.

"Cleveland is a very good team," wide receiver Eric Decker said. "They beat Pittsburgh, they beat Cincinnati -- two playoff-contending teams. They've got a great running game, and their defense is stout. Our focus isn't on whether we get a bye or not. It's on beating (Cleveland) and taking care of this week."

Decker noted that if the Broncos take care of their own business in the next two weeks, "everything else will take care of itself." So there's no reason to scoreboard-watch or get too far ahead of the task at hand.

Fox doesn't anticipate that will be a problem.

"You get what you emphasize," he said. "We emphasize getting better every week and diving into the preparation. The old adage that you play like you practice has been the best measuring stick that I know of. At this point in the season, an old track coach told me way back — when I was more svelte and faster — you never look at the finish. You stay focused and you look straight ahead."

"That'll be our mindset."

# Spreading the Ball Around

Sam Davis  
DenverBroncos.com  
December 17, 2012

Ball distribution is a crucial component of Denver's offensive attack.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- "It doesn't matter how many yards you got, or how many catches you got," wide receiver Eric Decker said the day after Sunday's win in Baltimore. "As long as you're doing your piece to win the ball game."

That has been the mindset of the entire Broncos receiving corps throughout the 2012 season.

Denver is one of three teams in the NFL that has five pass-catchers with 35-plus receptions. All five of those receivers - wideouts Demaryius Thomas, Brandon Stokley and Decker, and tight ends Jacob Tamme and Joel Dreessen - have led the team or tied for the team-lead in receptions in at least one game this year. Running back Knowshon Moreno is a sixth player that has accomplished that feat.

"You never know when your number is going to be called," Stokley said. "We all continue to work hard and try to get better. Next week, it might be Demaryius getting a lot of balls thrown his way. The last few weeks, Decker stepped his game up and had the opportunities and made the most of it."

Spreading the ball around has been a huge part of the offense's identity, and a key reason behind its success. When defenses have paid too much attention to one player, Manning has looked the other way and found the open receiver. It shows that Manning not only has the vision to find the open man, but the trust in all of his receivers to be in the right place and make the catch.

"That's the great thing about this offense," Stokley said. "Peyton does a great job of spreading the ball around. I think everybody really realizes that not every week is going to be your week, but we all continue to work and strive and are prepared that if that's our week, we're ready to go."

As Stokley said, it's not who has the hotter hand. Head Coach John Fox said Manning will "take what the defense gives him," and that he is "probably as good as anybody" at finding the open receiver.

Manning said the presence and threat of one receiver can open things up for another. That was the case on Sunday in Baltimore.

"I know Decker had a good day today," Manning said after the team's win against the Ravens. "D.T. probably didn't have the numbers that he's been having, but his presence, I can assure you, is a huge part of what is going on out there."

No matter how many times a receiver is targeted in each game, the pass-catchers for the Broncos know they must be in the right place at the right time in case

Manning decides to go their way. It has spread accountability to all of the skill players on the offense. As a direct result, Denver is the second-highest scoring team in the NFL.

"With this quarterback playing," Offensive Coordinator Mike McCoy said, "the ball can go anywhere on any play."

# Next Day Notebook: Still Growing

Tyler Everett  
DenverBroncos.com  
December 17, 2012

The Broncos know they still have room to improve, running back Knowshon Moreno turns in another strong performance and kicker Matt Prater and punter Britton Colquitt show off their tackling abilities.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – Sunday's win over the Ravens marked one of the Broncos' most impressive victories of the season.

On the road in Baltimore against a playoff team, Denver jumped out to a 17-0 lead and led the Ravens 31-3 midway through the third quarter.

"I thought yesterday was a good test going to Baltimore," wide receiver Eric Decker said. "(It's an) intimidating place to play a good football team. To get through the scrambles in the first quarter and get that interception, to go into halftime and play solid offense in the second half, to have a good four-minute drive, I thought that we showed good flashes."

In addition to strong performances by both the offense and the defense, the Broncos also won the turnover battle 2-0, which marked the team's best performance of the season on that front.

"I think we're growing," Head Coach John Fox said. "Yesterday was the first game all season, I believe, we didn't turn the ball over. That's something that we have to get cleaned up. I think we went from minus-two to zero. So that's an area we've got two more weeks to get fixed."

But the solid overall showing in Baltimore doesn't mean the Broncos are a finished product. Denver allowed the Ravens to score twice in the fourth quarter on long touchdown receptions by Baltimore tight end Dennis Pitta. The late defensive lapses are among the team's priorities as it looks to round into form for the start of the playoffs.

"A lot of areas we need to improve on -- we did put it on the ground a couple times in the return game," Fox said. "We were a little better in the red area, still need to work on giving up a couple of explosive plays late in games on defense. I know that's something that needs to be addressed. So we still have a lot of work to do and a lot of improving to do."

Though room for improvement remains, Decker said the team is close to where it wants to be, and more importantly, is determined to get there.

"I think that we're getting closer and closer," Decker said. "There's stuff we do need to work on. We do need to get better. That's a good attribute of this team, is we're always focusing on what we can get better at, and pushing ourselves to get better."

## **MORENO SOLID AGAIN**

For the second consecutive week, running back Knowshon Moreno ran for more than 100 yards.

With 391 yards rushing in four games since returning to the lineup after eight straight weeks as a gameday inactive, Moreno has continued to show that he is capable of carrying the load for the Denver running game. With 121.8 scrimmage yards per game since stepping into the starting lineup, Moreno ranks fourth in the NFL in that time, second among running backs behind Vikings RB Adrian Peterson. His success has been a testament to his positive outlook, one that helped Moreno treat practice like a game throughout an eight-game streak without live action.

"I've said it many times, my hat's off to him, because there was a time he could've gotten frustrated or discouraged or whatever word you want to use," Fox said. "But he stayed positive. He kept working. This game's about getting your opportunity and then taking advantage of it when you get it. I think he's done an excellent job."

## **SPECIALISTS SHOW VERSATILITY**

As a team, one of the bright spots in Sunday's win was the Broncos' sound tackling.

Good technique and hustle by the defense bottled up Ravens running back Ray Rice, who gained just 38 yards on 12 carries. Without solid tackling, a defense can't hold an opposing offense to just three points in three quarters. But Denver's ability to bring down ballcarriers extended beyond the team's top tacklers in Sunday's victory.

Both kicker Matt Prater and punter Britton Colquitt also showed the ability to wrap up and take opposing players off their feet. Prater was credited with a pair of special-teams tackles, and Colquitt one. While the involvement of kicking specialists in the post-game tackles list usually isn't something coaches hope for, it doesn't make touchdown-preventing plays by kickers and punters any less impressive.

"Actually there were (three) fine tackles there -- one by our punter and a couple by our kicker," Fox said. "Ideally that's not something we're looking for. We do practice it, but we'd like to not use it as much as we did yesterday. Again, that's an area -- some of our coverage situations weren't as good as they've been. The team we play this week in Cleveland, they're one of the tops in both kickoffs, kickoff coverage as well as punt returns. With (Cleveland's Josh) Cribbs, he's an outstanding, Pro Bowl-type return man. Something that will be important for us this week."

Long snapper Aaron Brewer also got into the mix in kick coverage, recording a tackle of his own to give the Broncos' specialists a total of four tackles on the afternoon.

# Final Pro Bowl Push

Gray Caldwell  
DenverBroncos.com  
December 17, 2012

If you haven't voted for the 2013 Pro Bowl squads, now is the time.

Fan voting officially closes at the conclusion of tonight's Monday Night Football matchup pitting the New York Jets against the Tennessee Titans.

So whether or not you watch the game, make sure you get your Pro Bowl votes in.

At last check, seven Broncos were being voted starters for the AFC squad. Eight other Broncos were in contention for a Pro Bowl spot.

Among them are Peyton Manning, who leads all vote-getters, Champ Bailey, Von Miller, Zane Beadles, Ryan Clady, Elvis Dumervil, Wesley Woodyard, David Bruton, Trindon Holliday, Dan Koppen, Britton Colquitt, Demaryius Thomas, Chris Gronkowski, Rahim Moore and Matt Prater. At various times throughout voting, Eric Decker and Mike Adams have also been among the top five vote-getters at their respective positions.

Tonight marks a final chance to push Broncos into the game via fan voting.

Last year, Denver sent six players to Hawaii.

The final Pro Bowl squads — taking into account fan, player and coach voting — will be announced on Wednesday, Dec. 26 on NFL Network's "Total Access."

# Manning's Voice to Greet Travelers at DIA

Sam Davis  
DenverBroncos.com  
December 17, 2012

Passengers boarding the train cars at Denver International Airport will be greeted by a new voice.

Denver Mayor Michael B. Hancock has handed the duties over to quarterback Peyton Manning, whose voice will come on the intercom in the train cars as passengers board, starting Monday.

"For the holidays, I am handing off this very important duty of greeting visitors to our great city to someone known for the best audibles in the business," Mayor Michael B. Hancock said. "Peyton Manning earned this call by going long in his efforts to take the Broncos to another AFC West championship. We'll be cheering on him and the team as they drive toward another Super Bowl!"

Manning's holiday greeting to travelers passing through DIA will last until January 2, 2013.

The message will say:

"Welcome to the Mile High City. This is quarterback Peyton Manning of the Denver Broncos wishing everyone a wonderful holiday season."

# Decker Leads Air-Attack in Second Straight Week

Sam Davis  
DenverBroncos.com  
December 17, 2012

Cornerback Chris Harris provided a pivotal momentum swing just before the first half of Sunday's win against the Ravens ended with his 98-yard interception return for a touchdown.

Coming out of halftime, wide receiver Eric Decker saw to it that the momentum remained in the Broncos' favor.

On the team's first possession of the second half, Decker moved the chains with a 15-yard catch. Two Knowshon Moreno carries later, the third-year wideout was in the end zone on a 51-yard catch-and-run.

The score gave Denver a 24-3 second-half lead.

"We were hitting some outs and some intermediate routes and we thought it was time to maybe send something down the field," quarterback Peyton Manning recalled after the game. "They have good cover guys inside and anytime you're playing against good cover guys, you have to give them a mix. You have to give them the short, the intermediate and the deep stuff. It was a double move by Eric — a good route and good protection."

Manning spoke fondly of Decker's outing. He matched a career high for the second consecutive week with eight receptions. His 133 receiving yards were just 3 shy of tying a career-best in that category as well.

"We spent extra time this week just making sure we played a physical game, because that's what these guys are, they're very physical," Decker said. "They have a stout defense. Offensively they can be explosive. I thought overall we played a good game."

"We made plays when we had the opportunity."

Of Decker's eight catches, five moved the chains for Denver and a sixth was the touchdown.

"Decker made a lot of great plays today for us," wide receiver Brandon Stokley said.