

Tuesday Morning QB: From Manning to Dalton, quarterback playoff field is strong

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
December 31, 2013

It's a waste of time ranking the Jay Cutlers and Kyle Ortons of the quarterback world. And apologies to Ben Roethlisberger and Carson Palmer, who had very good years only to barely miss out on the playoffs.

But just as in the NFL, only the playoff-bound passers made the Tuesday Morning Quarterback cut this week. If Andy Dalton is ranked No. 12 of 12, you know this is a deep quarterback field.

The QB rankings entering the playoffs:

Quarterback (Last week's ranking)

1. Peyton Manning, Broncos (1)

I can see 55 TD passes holding till the end of 16-game season time. Has 9-11 postseason record with one Super Bowl title. Last win was in 2009 AFC championship when his Colts beat the Jets, 30-17. He threw for 377 yards, 3 TDs, 0 picks.

2. Aaron Rodgers, Packers (unranked)

Threw two bad picks deep in Bears' territory but came through with No. 1 clutch throw of the season with fourth-and-8 scramble and 48-yard TD throw to wide open Randall Cobb. Has 6-3 playoff record with 18 TDs, 5 INTs and one Super Bowl title. Home underdog against 49ers in first round.

3. Nick Foles, Eagles (2)

In win-or-go home final at Dallas, he won. Completed 17 of 26 for 263 yards, 2 TDs, 0 interceptions, 124.4 rating. Biggest Pro Bowl snub as he threw 27 TDs vs. 2 INTs for league-best 119. 2 passer rating. He's 0-0 in playoffs. Slight home favorite against Saints in first round.

4. Tom Brady, Patriots (4)

In steady Foxborough downpour, completed 14 of 22 for only 122 yards in win against Buffalo. Ranked 17th in passing. 17-7 in postseason with three Super Bowl titles, but 7-7 in last 7 appearances.

5. Drew Brees, Saints (10)

Finished with third consecutive season of at least 5,100 yards. Had 39 TDs against

12 INTs and ranked 6th with 104.7 rating. Has 5-4 playoff record with one Super Bowl title. A road underdog against Philly.

6. Cam Newton, Panthers (7)

Won first round bye by throwing for 2 TDs, running for 72. He's 0-0 in NFL playoffs but last time he played in postseason, he won Auburn a national championship.

7. Russell Wilson, Seahawks (19)

Ranked 7th in passing with 101.2 rating on 26 TDs against 9 interceptions. Threw for 3,357 yards and rushed for 539. Played well in both playoff games (1-1) as rookie last year.

8. Colin Kaepernick, 49ers (9)

Came through with terrific final-second, game-winning field goal drive in defeating Arizona on Sunday. Playing his best ball late in season, capped with 310 yards passing, 2 TDs, 0 picks against tough Cardinals defense. Went 2-1 in playoffs last year and nearly pulled out Super Bowl championship. Favored at Green Bay in first round.

9. Philip Rivers, Chargers (6)

Finished as 3rd-rated quarterback (9 or more starts) behind only Manning and Foles after throwing 32 TDs, 11 interceptions in first year with Mike McCoy. Has a 3-4 playoff record with 8 TDs, 9 INTs. Hasn't played in postseason since 2009 season. Road underdog at Cincinnati in first round.

10. Andrew Luck, Colts (8)

Ranked 18th in passing, although he threw 23 TDs against just 9 interceptions. Is 0-1 in the playoffs, losing 24-9 at Baltimore in first round last season. Slight home favorite against Kansas City in first round.

11. Alex Smith, Chiefs (13)

Didn't play in final meaningless final game for Chiefs, although not for the Chargers and Steelers. Finished as 12th-rated quarterback among those with at least 9 starts. Went 1-1 in playoffs with San Francisco in 2011, throwing 5 TDs with 0 picks.

12. Andy Dalton, Bengals (5)

Hated to rank him last in the playoff quarterback field, but it's a strong QB class. And Dalton is 0-2 in the playoffs with 0 TDs, 4 interceptions with both games at Houston. Threw four picks Sunday against Baltimore, but won going away 34-17. Ranked 6th in the league after throwing for 4,296 yards and 33 TDs but with 20 interceptions. Heavy home favorite against Chargers in first round.

Broncos Mailbag: Is Denver's 13-3 record with Peyton Manning an omen?

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
January 1, 2014

Denver Post sports writer Mike Klis posts his Broncos Mailbag on Wednesdays during the regular season.

Pose a Broncos- or NFL-related question for the Broncos Mailbag.

Is 2013 the year that the Broncos finally end the 13-3 Curse? I all-to-well remember the heartache in 1984, 1996, 2005 and 2012.

--Antonio, Pueblo

Yes, venerable sports radio host Sandy Clough had told me about that one. To review, the Broncos lost to Mark Malone, Frank Pollard, Louis Lipps and the Pittsburgh Steelers in a 1984 home playoff.

They were 1-3 when they lost to Mark Brunell, Natrone Means, Jimmy Smith, Tony Boselli and the Jacksonville Jaguars in a 1996 home playoff.

They were 13-3 when they lost to Ben Roethlisberger, Cedrick Wilson, Jerome Bettis and the Steelers in a 2005 home playoff.

They were 13-3 when they lost to Joe Flacco, Jacoby Jones, Torrey Smith and the Baltimore Ravens in a 2012 home playoff.

When the Broncos won the Super Bowl in 1997 and '98, their regular-season records were 12-4 and 14-2.

They are 13-3 and will play the AFC playoffs at home this year.

Then again, the Broncos didn't fare too well in the playoffs during their 10-6 and 11-5 seasons, either. I say keep taking your chances at 13-3.

How is Champ Bailey looking since he came back for the final two regular season games? Can we count on him contributing in the post-season?

--Eric Hemmer, Evergreen

Bailey has come off the bench and played nickelback the past two games. Chris Harris and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie are the every-down corners on the

outside.

I give credit to Bailey, a proud 12-time Pro Bowler, for accepting his reduced role. He is putting team ahead of personal pride. It helps that in today's game, the nickelback plays more than the middle linebacker. And Bailey understands his limitations because of his left foot injury.

I see Bailey sticking in the nickelback role through the playoffs, although it will be interesting to see how they work rookie Kayvon Webster back in from his thumb injury.

Hey Mike, please enlighten me on this: Peyton Manning just finished, arguably, the greatest single season a QB has ever had, yet his passer rating was 115.1. Brady, Rogers and even Manning himself (in 2004) all had a higher QB rating during previous "lesser" seasons. What gives?

--Ariel Belkin, Los Angeles

There are five passing categories plugged into the quarterback passer rating: Attempts, completions, yards, touchdown passes and interceptions.

The reason why Manning got slightly more docked than Rodgers in 2011 (122.5 rating), Manning in 2004 (121.1) and Brady in 2007 (117.2) is because his TDs and yards came off a whopping 659 pass attempts.

His 55 touchdowns in 659 attempts, for instance, came out to 8.3 percent TDs per pass attempt. In 2004, when he threw 49 TDs in 497 attempts, it came out to throwing a TD 9.9 percent of the time.

Rodgers posted the all-time best single-season rating in 2011 primarily on the strength of his TD-to-interception ratio of 45 to 6. That beats Manning's 2013 ratio of 55 to 10.

The passer rating gets ridiculed because it's easy to poke fun at something not easily understood. Nick Foles has a higher passer rating this season (119.2) than Peyton Manning (115.1).

But I do Tuesday Morning Quarterback rankings each week and I like the passer rating formula because I have found it accurately measures efficiency.

Jacksonville's Chad Henne threw for 331 yards and 1 touchdown in a 30-10 loss to Indy on Sunday while Indy's Andrew Luck threw for 282 and 1 touchdowns. But because Luck had 14 fewer attempts and one less interception, he posted a 101.4 rating while Henne came in at 76.5.

Is it just me or since the Kansas City game, do Peyton Manning's passes have a lot more zip and next to no wobble?

--Ryon, Gallup, N.M.

It's The Glove! I do believe Manning throws a slightly tighter spiral with The Glove than he does without it. I believe it has a chance to be a game-changer for him in regard to cold weather and the postseason.

Mike, what are the chances that when Ryan Clady comes back next year, they try moving Chris Clark over to right tackle and sliding Orlando Franklin over to guard? Can Clark play on the right side? That would give them two Pro-Bowl caliber guards, an All-Pro left tackle with a seemingly very capable center and right tackle. Thoughts?

--Scott Reynolds, Milliken

There's been talk of moving Orlando Franklin from tackle to guard almost from the time he was selected in the second round of the 2011 draft. Three years later, he's started 47 of 48 games at right tackle.

Your scenario, Scott, would only come into play if the Broncos don't reach an agreement with left guard Zane Beadles, who will become a free agent at season's end. Beadles has been a four-year starter so he figures to generate interest in the open market. I know he'd like to stay in Denver.

The other question would be whether Franklin or Louis Vasquez could switch from the right side to left or, for that matter, whether Clark can switch from left to right tackle. It's doable but all players have their comfort sides.

Your idea is possible, Scott. I'm not sure how likely it is, but it's possible.

Can you explain to me why the Broncos are slotted to play the late Sunday game on Jan. 12? The No. 1 seed should be given the Saturday afternoon game, in my opinion. That way, when the Broncos win, it would allow for an extra day to prepare for the AFC Championship game (against New England). Now, if the Patriots win, they get to study tape Sunday morning and then sit back and scout the Broncos on Sunday afternoon. Your thoughts? Explanation?

--Dan, New Jersey

The Broncos as the No. 1 seed communicated to the league and networks a preference to play on Sunday during their usual, mid-afternoon kickoff slot. They did not want to play Saturday night because the networks had already forced their

fans to attend six home night games this year, counting the two in preseason.

Another night game in January should be avoided in Denver, if possible. Also, the Sunday mid-afternoon start is closer to the Broncos' usual schedule, at least when the networks don't get involved. The thinking is a team has a better chance at approaching peak performance when playing on a regular schedule, rather than an irregular schedule.

The Broncos played on Saturday last year and it didn't work out too well. Given a choice, the Broncos understandably didn't want to play on Saturday again this year.

Think it's in the cards for Peyton Manning to restructure (give back a bunch of money) his remaining contract to free up some cash for upcoming free agents, such as Eric Decker?

--Sam Butler, Loveland

First, Manning at \$20 million might be the most underpaid player on the team. I'm sure moving money around is a possibility if it would help. But I don't think a guy coming off a record-setting passing season should take a pay cut.

I also don't think a Manning restructure will be necessary. The Broncos will have enough money cleared to re-sign Decker -- so long as the two sides agree on contract value. Remember, it took a while for the Broncos to reach contract accord with left tackle Ryan Clady.

A franchise tag is not an option for Decker, by the way, because the expected salary would be around \$10.5 million. That's based off the top five-paid receivers in the league. Decker is expected to command a new contract in the \$8 million-a-year neighborhood.

Do you think that Von Miller will be healthy again by the start of next season? And how is Quanterus Smith coming health-wise? If his college production is any indicator, he could step in and be that bookend to Von, perhaps?

--Tony, Kansas City

Miller suffered his torn ACL in week 16 -- the exact same week Minnesota running back Adrian Peterson tore his ACL in 2011.

Peterson rushed for 84 yards and two touchdowns in the opener of the following season and finished with 2,097 rushing yards, the second-highest, single-season total in NFL history.

Granted, no athlete in the history of sports has recovered from a torn ACL as Peterson did in 2012. But there is hope Miller will be better than ever in 2014.

Smith will be healthy. He had mostly recovered from the torn ACL he suffered in his senior season at Western Kentucky in 2012, but coach John Fox and football operations boss John Elway detected the fifth-round draft pick "dragging" his leg a tad during the preseason and felt he needed a year to strengthen.

We all know about the trophies each team receives for winning the Super Bowl and conference championships. I was wondering if teams get any hardware to put in the cooler for winning their division?

--Nate, Divide County, N.D.

This isn't baseball where they spray champagne after every playoff series win. There are no trophies, not even a plaque, for division titles.

The players do get ball caps and T-shirts. The only team championship trophies on display in the front lobby of the Broncos' headquarters in Englewood, which is formally called the Paul D. Bowlen Memorial Broncos Centre, are six Lamar Hunt trophies for winning the AFC championship, and two Lombardi trophies from 1997-98.

Tim Tebow ready to tell it like it is as college analyst

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
December 31, 2013

ESPN held a conference call today to formally introduce former Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow as a college football analyst for the SEC Network.

Tebow once dominated the SEC as Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback for the Florida Gators. He had a magical season for the Broncos in 2011, but after the team signed a free agent quarterback named Peyton Manning, Tebow was traded to the New York Jets.

Tebow was released by the Jets in March of 2013 and after going to training camp with the New England Patriots he was released again and did not play in 2013.

He said in the conference call he would continue to work toward trying to become an NFL quarterback, but in the meantime, he has the SEC Network gig waiting for him, starting in August.

Tebow was asked if, given his nice guy persona, he can be critical of plays, players or coaches' decisions.

"Well, thank you for saying that I'm someone who's positive," Tebow said. "I would love to continue to be someone who's positive but also be someone that is objective. I've never had a hard time saying what I believed or standing up for something, and hopefully I can continue to be that same person as an analyst and sharing what I believe about players, about teams, about games. I will look at it from an objective prism and try to share an insight with the viewers just like I always have any time I've had the opportunity to share."

Peyton Manning's passing record under review by NFL, could be reversed

By Joan Niesen
The Denver Post
December 31, 2013

Peyton Manning's single-season yardage record might be getting a second glance.

The Broncos quarterback was pulled from Sunday's rout of Oakland at halftime, immediately after he broke Drew Brees' record for the most passing yards in a single season — by exactly 1 yard.

Now, though, Manning's 5,477 yards are being called into question.

Every Monday, the NFL reviews plays and at times adjusts yardage to reflect the tweaks it has made in rulings, and one of Manning's passes might turn out to be naught.

With just more than a minute left in the first quarter, Manning completed what was ruled at the time to be a 7-yard pass to Eric Decker.

Upon reflection, though, the pass appears from certain camera angles like a lateral. It wouldn't count toward the record if the NFL were to rule it as such. Manning would finish the year with 5,470 yards, 6 short of Brees' mark, and certainly disappointed.

After all, he threw for 266 yards in the first half of the game, and if he'd fallen short of the record, he'd certainly have had a crack at it after halftime.

"That's hard to say," Broncos coach John Fox said Monday when asked if Manning would have gone back out after halftime had he fallen short of the record.

"What was very positive was I thought we played if not our best, (then) one of our better halves of football that put us in a position where we could do different things.

Number one, all those things are great — those individual accomplishments, team accomplishments — but not at the risk of putting a player at risk. So I don't know if I've answered your question, I'm just kind of telling you what would go through our minds in that situation."

Manning broke the record with a 5-yard touchdown pass to Demaryius Thomas. Elias Sports Bureau, which tabulates the league's statistics, routinely reviews plays and notifies teams of any changes in the days after games.

Broncos sign five players to future contracts

By Joan Niesen
The Denver Post
December 31, 2013

The Broncos announced Tuesday that they signed five players to future contracts. The players will officially join the team's roster on March 11, 2014.

They are:

Mike Farrell, OL, 6-6, 303 pounds: Farrell went undrafted out of Penn State in 2012, and he was signed briefly by the Steelers over the summer before being cut in August.

L.J. Fort, LB, 6-0, 230 pounds: Fort went undrafted out of Northern Iowa in 2012. He signed as a free agent with the Browns and made the active roster. He finished 2013 with 20 tackles.

Eric Hagg, S, 6-1, 205 pounds: Hagg was picked by the Browns 248th overall in 2011 out of Nebraska. He played in Cleveland in 2011 and 2012.

Ryan Miller, OL, 6-7, 320 pounds: Miller, a Littleton native, attended Colorado and was picked 160th in 2012 by the Browns. He's played in Cleveland since.

Jordan Norwood, WR, 5-11, 180 pounds: Norwood went undrafted in 2009 out of Penn State, and he's played for the Browns, Eagles and Buccaneers.

Broncos Q&A: Which fired NFL coach had the best Black Monday horoscope?

By Joan Niesen
The Denver Post
December 31, 2013

This one comes via Twitter from @mysc7, and frankly, I think it's the best question I've gotten for one of these all year. (Yeah, I know, it has nothing to do with football, and horoscopes are a load of you-know-what, but still! This is fun!)

After consulting the Huffington Post's horoscopes, because I don't know, the Huffington Post seems legitimate, the answer to this question was clear. Note that I'm interpreting "best" as "most fitting for such a day."

The winner: the one and only Mike Shanahan, born Aug. 24, which apparently makes him a Virgo. His Monday, Dec. 30, 2013 horoscope is reprinted here:

"You could take yourself too seriously today and may go too far trying to prove yourself to someone. You're ready to fight for your beliefs, but you need to chill out a bit because your passions are blown out of proportion now, especially if you bump into resistance. Even if it seems like others are purposefully blocking your way, it's smarter to work with the energy instead of attempting to overpower it. But don't succumb to fear; you can reach your destination by following the high road instead."

So, basically, you tried to hard to assert your authority. You benched RGIII and fought for your beliefs, but chill out. Daniel Snyder isn't going to take your lip anymore. The entire NFL world is plotting against you, and that job in Washington was terrible. Don't worry, though. Someone will hire you again someday.

Broncos' record-setting offense starts with strong line

By Irv Moss
The Denver Post
January 1, 2014

Ten years from now when followers of the NFL look back on the record-setting offensive performance of the 2013 Broncos, will the names of Clark, Beadles, Ramirez, Vasquez and Franklin be mentioned in the same breath with Peyton Manning?

Probably not, but the team's offensive linemen understand they're the no-name part of the Broncos' offensive machine.

"That's the nature of our position," right guard Louis Vasquez said when asked if the Broncos' offensive linemen are destined for mention in NFL history. "We know it from playing football for so long that we're not going to get the accolades. We know it starts up front. Even the players who get the accolades know that everything stems from up front."

"That's always how our position is," said Zane Beadles, who plays left guard. "We're happy to be part of it. We couldn't have done what we did (as an offense) without us doing our jobs up front."

The numbers tell the story. Fifty-five touchdown passes and 5,477 yards passing by Manning, 606 points scored as a team, all NFL records for a season. The work of Denver's offensive line made it all possible. Manning was sacked only 18 times.

If the minimal sack total isn't enough to get attention, Broncos coach John Fox offered a historical perspective as to what will.

"It struck me when we were in Oakland the other day," Fox said. "They honored their 1983 Super Bowl championship team before the game. People remember Super Bowl champions."

But first, Denver needs to win a couple of playoff games Fox didn't have to hint at what lies ahead if the Broncos want to enter the NFL history books.

"No doubt about it, we've put ourselves in the position we wanted to be in," Beadles said of being the No. 1 seed in the AFC for the postseason. "It's one and done from this point forward. We have to take advantage of the opportunity."

Beadles rated the work of the offensive line as "solid" this season. He noted the adversity of overcoming the loss of all-pro left tackle Ryan Clady to a season-ending injury after week two of the season. Chris Clark replaced Clady, joining center Manny Ramirez and right tackle Orlando Franklin to complete the starting five.

"We didn't live up to our expectations at times, but we've gotten better every week and that's where our focus has been," Beadles said.

Broncos sign five. The Broncos signed five players to future contracts. The players will officially join the team's roster March 11. They are:

Mike Farrell, OL, 6-foot-6, 303 pounds: Farrell went undrafted out of Penn State in 2012, and was signed by the Steelers over the summer before being cut in August.

L.J. Fort, LB, 6-0, 230 pounds: Fort went undrafted out of Northern Iowa in 2012. He signed as a free agent with the Browns and made the active roster. He finished 2013 with 20 tackles.

Eric Hagg, S, 6-1, 205 pounds: Hagg was picked by the Browns 248th overall in 2011 out of Nebraska. He played in Cleveland in 2011 and 2012.

Ryan Miller, OL, 6-7, 320 pounds: Miller, a Littleton native, attended Colorado and was picked 160th in 2012 by the Browns.

Jordan Norwood, WR, 5-11, 180 pounds: Norwood went undrafted in 2009 from Penn State, and he's played for the Browns, Eagles and Buccaneers.

Peyton Manning's passing record stands; NFL will not overturn

By The Denver Post
December 31, 2013

Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning will keep his NFL record for passing yardage in a single season.

The league and its statistician agency, the Elias Sports Bureau, reviewed a 7-yard completion from Manning to Eric Decker during the first quarter of the Broncos' 34-14 victory Sunday at Oakland and decided Tuesday evening that replays were not conclusive enough to overturn.

"The stats crew at the game scored this play as a forward pass," NFL spokesman Michael Signora said. "During the course of the season, there are many similar plays which could be reviewed by the Elias Sports Bureau, the league's official statistician. In this case, the determination of Elias is that the fairest resolution is for the ruling of the on-sight stats crew to stand."

Manning was pulled at halftime with the Broncos leading, 31-0. He had 266 yards passing at that point, which gave him 5,477 passing yards for the season — one more yard than the record 5,476 yards set by New Orleans' Drew Brees in 2011.

Broncos coach John Fox indicated he pulled Manning because of the sharpness of his team's play and to not further risk injury with the playoffs looming, but he did acknowledge he was aware during the halftime intermission his quarterback had broken the all-time yardage record.

The play was recorded as a pass by the Raiders' stat crew. However, TV viewers began tweeting out questions about whether the completion from Manning to Decker was thrown backward, and therefore should have been considered a lateral and running play. Deadspin and other websites picked up on the Twitter conversation, and replays of the Manning-to-Decker pass play mushroomed into cyberspace.

Elias reviewed and discussed its finding with league officials Tuesday before concluding not to make a statistical change. Besides the yardage record, Manning also set a single-season record with 55 touchdown passes and helped the Broncos establish a scoring record with 606 points.

Upon review, Manning's passing record stands

By Arnie Stapleton
The Associated Press
December 31, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — Peyton Manning's spectacular season was every bit the record-breaking sensation it appeared. The NFL said Tuesday that Manning's single-season mark of 5,477 yards passing will stand.

Elias Sports Bureau, the league's official statistician, reviewed a 7-yard pass from Manning to wide receiver Eric Decker and determined it will remain a forward pass and not a lateral, which would have made it a 7-yard run.

That would have subtracted 7 yards from Manning's total, leaving him with 5,470 yards, six shy of Drew Brees' 2011 record.

"The stats crew at the game scored this play as a forward pass. During the course of a season, there are many similar plays which could be reviewed by the Elias," NFL spokesman Michael Signora said. "In this case, the determination of Elias is that the fairest resolution is for the ruling of the on-site stats crew to stand."

The play in question occurred with just over a minute remaining in the first quarter of Denver's 34-14 win at Oakland on Sunday.

Remember that camera angles can be deceiving, depending on where the camera is located. But there were two angles that would back up whichever argument one wants to make.

Manning's pass clearly looks like a lateral in one camera angle. Another angle, from above, however, appears to show Decker gathering in the ball at the Denver 48-yard line with Manning about a foot deeper than that.

Manning finished with 266 yards passing before sitting out the second half, and his final throw was a 6-yard TD toss to Demaryius Thomas which gave him 5,477 yards for the season and also 55 TD passes, five more than Tom Brady's record set in 2007, considered a much more significant achievement than the single-season yardage mark.

With Denver safely ahead 31-0 at halftime and the home-field advantage throughout the AFC playoffs secured, Manning watched backup Brock Osweiler play the entire second half in his place.

Elias routinely reviews plays and often tweaks totals in the days following games, then notifies teams of corrections to totals such as yardage or sack numbers.

Manning broke the TD record two weeks ago at Houston and was all smiles afterward, crediting his coaches and teammates and saying it was a significant mark that meant a lot to him because it came in the midst of a successful season. The Broncos (13-3) are the AFC's top seed in the playoffs for the second straight season. They have a bye this weekend and will host a divisional round game Jan. 12.

He was much more nonchalant about the yardage record.

Had the play in question originally been ruled a lateral, Manning would have finished the first half six yards shy of Brees' record of 5,476 yards, and that might have prompted the Broncos to send him out to start the third quarter even with the big lead and the playoffs looming.

Then again, maybe not.

Coach John Fox demurred when asked Monday if he would have considered sending Manning out for another series after halftime if he hadn't already broken Brees' mark.

"That's hard to say. ... What was very positive was I thought we played, if not our best, one of our better halves of football that put us in a position where we could do different things," Fox said. "No. 1, all those things are great, those individual accomplishments, team accomplishments, but not at the risk of putting a player at risk. So I don't know if I've answered your question, I'm just kind of telling you what would go through our minds in that situation."

After breaking Brady's TD record, Manning said he expected Brady to break the mark again soon, adding that all sorts of marks will fall like dominoes if NFL owners get their way and expand the regular season from 16 to 18 games.

Had Elias' ruling gone the other way, his yardage record wouldn't have even lasted 48 hours. Now, it'll stand for at least a year and maybe much longer.

Broncos Rewind: Defense and special teams

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

January 1, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The Denver Broncos checked an awful lot of things off the to-do list in Sunday's regular-season finale against the Oakland Raiders.

They set some records, including the league's single-season scoring mark at 606 points, put their 13th 30-point game of the year in the 34-14 victory and rested some starters along the way as they had largely earned the AFC's top seed with a 31-0 halftime lead.

And after a long look at the video from Sunday's win, here are some thoughts on the team's defense and special teams:

- Jack Del Rio has made a habit of playing plenty of personnel groupings in his time as the Broncos' defensive coordinator. He says it helps players maximize whatever they can bring to the defense as well as keeps them engaged with the lure of at least some playing time always in front of them. But he has also consistently found roles for players the Broncos signed after they had been cast aside by others. Even on short notice.

The latest is former first-round pick Michael Huff. Huff has struggled at times in his career to live up to his lofty draft status -- seventh overall in 2006 by the Raiders -- and was released earlier this season by the Baltimore Ravens, who weren't exactly loaded on the defensive depth chart at that time. The Broncos signed Huff on Nov. 19 and played him for two special teams snaps on Dec. 1.

Over the last two games, Del Rio has found a place for him in the defense. Huff has played in the nickel (five defensive backs), dime (six defensive backs) and when the Broncos go to their seven defensive-back look. Del Rio has played Huff deep at safety and played him as a weak-side linebacker. He's also played Huff along the line of scrimmage in rush situations -- Huff ran down Raiders quarterback Terrelle Pryor on one of those snaps Sunday. Huff played 15 snaps in the Broncos' win over Houston and then followed that with 25 snaps on Sunday against the Raiders. The Broncos were moving some people out of the game in the second half with a 31-0 halftime lead, but it does show Del Rio has found a niche for the veteran safety. And with Duke Ihenacho expected to be under the guidelines of the league's

concussion protocol for "a while," as John Fox put it, Huff figures to be in the rotation plenty in the postseason as well.

- Raiders coach Dennis Allen was on John Fox's staff with the Broncos when the Broncos launched the read-option on the NFL world as a predominant offensive set in 2011 with Tim Tebow at quarterback. So, you would think Allen would have known. But since the Broncos have consistently defended others' attempts to run the offense, especially when it comes to limiting the rushing yards out of the quarterback position. Fox has routinely played something that looks far closer to a 3-4 look on defense with three down linemen and five-man fronts to hold the edges. The Broncos did so again Sunday and with the benefit of a big lead as well to mute the Raiders' attempts to run the ball. Pryor finished with 49 yards rushing in the game and the Raiders ran for 64 yards overall. In the Sept. 24 meeting Pryor rushed for 36 of the Raiders' 49 yards. Against the Redskins, the Broncos held Robert Griffin III to seven yards rushing on his five carries.

- Necessity has dictated the Broncos' desire for defensive end Robert Ayers to have a big part in the team's postseason plans after Von Miller. Ayers led all Broncos players with 44 snaps in Sunday's win and it was the first time all season Ayers has led the defense in playing time. During Miller's six-game suspension to open the season, the soon-to-be unrestricted free agent, played 70 snaps in the opener, 59 in Week 2 against the Giants and 42 against the Eagles in Week 4. The Broncos need Ayers to regain his early momentum when he had 4.5 sacks in the first five games. He had one after Miller returned to the lineup with Miller and Shaun Phillips getting the majority of the work in the rush positions. Beyond the lure of chasing a Super Bowl trip, the open market awaits Ayers at season's end, a big postseason push would certainly help his cause.

- In what was a rare turn of events for what has been a difficult season at times, the Broncos defense did not play a snap on its own side of the 50-yard line in the first half of Sunday's win. The Raiders never advanced the ball past their own 48-yard line in their six first-half possessions. The Raiders didn't have a drive longer than 28 yards until the fourth quarter. They scored on two of their three possessions in the fourth quarter against some Broncos reserves.

- The Broncos special teams continue to find themselves a little wobbly on the doorstep to the postseason. Since the Week 7 loss in Indianapolis Trindon Holliday has muffed the ball on six returns, losing one of those. Over that span the Broncos have also surrendered a 108-yard kickoff return for a score to the Chiefs, from running back Knile Davis, a 95-yard kickoff return to the Titans' Leon Washington and a 51-yard punt return to the Texans' Keshawn Martin. And now add the first blocked punt of Britton Colquitt's career to the list, on his 317th punt. Raiders'

running back Jamize Olawale came untouched through the heart of the Broncos' formation for the first-quarter block. The Broncos defense held and the Raiders missed the field goal attempt that followed, but it was a quality design by the Raiders with an overload off the ball and it will be a surprise if an upcoming playoff opponent doesn't try something similar.

It also continues a troubling trend for the Broncos, who have been consistently solid on those units in recent seasons. While they can't add significant help to the roster and injuries have taken their toll on the depth chart, they still have to find the assignment discipline they showed so often early on this season.

Broncos Rewind: Offense

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

December 31, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The Denver Broncos checked an awful lot of things off the to-do list in Sunday's regular-season finale against the Oakland Raiders.

They set some records, including the league's single-season scoring mark at 606 points, put their 13th 30-point game of the year in the 34-14 victory, played defense with a bit of an edge and rested some starters along the way as they had largely earned the AFC's top seed with a 31-0 halftime lead.

And after a long look at the video from Sunday's win, here are some thoughts on the team's offense:

- The Broncos have sported the kind of balance in the passing game all season that gives migraines to defensive coaches everywhere. And quarterback Peyton Manning has powered a record-setting attack with precision and his power of preparation. But add patience to that list and the offense goes to the next level. With the Raiders having deployed early to take away the downfield look and limit opportunities to the Broncos' outside receivers with Wes Welker out of the lineup as he recovered from a concussion, Manning quickly found a different avenue to move the ball. Four of his first six completions went to running backs. And by the time he had completed nine passes in the game, Manning had five of those to running backs, including a short catch-and-run by Knowshon Moreno and the Broncos had already built a 14-0 lead because of it. The result was a methodical chiseling of the Raiders' defensive plan. The Broncos backs were circulating among linebackers or a defensive lineman or two who had dropped into a passing lane and the Broncos moved the ball 12 plays for 71 yards to score on their first possession. And Manning just kept attacking in a disciplined fashion. His first 15 completions overall were all for 16 or fewer yards, 10 were for 10 or fewer yards. The Broncos didn't punt in the first half and scored on all five of their possessions, that's a lot of scoring virtue in that patience.
- That discipline then led to the biggest play of the game. With the Broncos having already chipped away for a 17-0 lead the Raiders safeties had to be mindful of all of the underneath routes. And on a third-and-4, with the Broncos in a two-tight end look, Oakland's Charles Woodson got caught moving toward the line of scrimmage as he tried to jump in on yet another

underneath route. That left Raiders with a single safety deep and Brandon Ross had looked far more comfortable playing toward the line of scrimmage than he is in coverage in the two meetings with the Broncos this season. And as Broncos wide receiver Demaryius Thomas approached, Ross remained with his hips square to the line of scrimmage, facing Manning. When Ross did finally try to turn and run with Thomas, it was too late as Thomas was already clear and Manning dropped a perfectly tossed ball in for a 63-yard catch-and-run score. Manning said the play set the tone for the game and it was the payoff for the patience shown before it. Long-time offensive coordinator Ron Erhardt often said it's like chopping a tree down, you do the grunt work to get the glory of finally pushing it over.

- Many personnel executives around the league have said throughout the season the Broncos are able to construct so many catch-and-run plays on quick-hit throws because their players have bought into the benefits of blocking downfield for whoever has the ball. The Broncos linemen consistently get down the field for those second-level blocks and the team's wide receivers and tight ends consistently help make some room as well. Even those players who haven't been regulars have chipped in. On Moreno's 7-yard catch-and-run score in the first quarter, wide receiver Andre Caldwell got just enough of a downfield block to get Moreno into the endzone.
- The edges of the Broncos' formation, especially when they open things up and spread things out in either their three-wide receiver set or two tight end set when they put both Jacob Tamme and Julius Thomas out wide, will be tested by opposing pass rushers in the postseason. The Raiders' Lamarr Houston, who wasn't a defensive end in his career until Allen moved him there to fill a need, made plays from both sides of the formation. Houston beat left tackle Chris Clark with an outside move to force a holding call in the game and later beat Clark with an inside move for the Raiders' only sack on Manning. Houston also forced right tackle Orlando Franklin into a holding penalty in the third quarter with a nice strike off the ball with a power move to the inside. It's going to be the matchup to watch in pass protection in the coming weeks.
- Manning left the game at halftime, which gave backup Brock Osweiler his most playing time of his two seasons in the league. And while he took a sack he shouldn't of and constructed a field-goal drive in his two quarters of work, he did show he's learned his lessons well. Seeing much the same looks on defense Manning did early on, Osweiler didn't force the issue. Eight of his nine completions went to the team's tight ends. While he said later "I know I can hit some of those deep throws," especially potential long plays to Caldwell and tight end Jacob Tamme. But at this point it's far better for

Oswelier to show the ability to work with what he see from a defense rather than jamming a throw or two in where they shouldn't go. Manning has always said one of the toughest lessons for a quarterback is "a punt is not always a bad play."

- After looking at it at least 10 times, Tamme's one-handed highlight in the closing minutes of the game still looks like a catch. It looked like he was not given credit for dragging his back foot as he reeled the ball in.
- The Broncos four rushing attempts for negative yardage in the game, including a 5-yard loss on their first rushing attempt of the game, was their highest total since the Dec. 1 in Kansas City.
- When the Broncos recovered a bad snap fumble and the offense then turned it into a touchdown four plays later, it amounted to the 14th touchdown of the season the Broncos have scored after being given the ball by a turnover. Overall the Broncos have scored 107 points this season off turnovers, or 17.7 percent of their season total.

Power Rankings: No. 2 Denver Broncos

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

December 31, 2013

A weekly examination of the Broncos' ESPN.com Power Ranking:

Preseason: 3 | Last Week: 2 | ESPN.com Power Ranking since 2002

Seventeen weeks, 606 points, 55 passing touchdowns from their quarterback and plenty of drama later, the Broncos closed out the regular season at 13-3 and as the AFC's No. 1 seed heading into the playoffs.

The September-to-December run was good enough for the Broncos to finish at No. 2 in ESPN.com's Power Rankings, just behind the NFC's top seed heading into the postseason: the Seattle Seahawks.

And now the Broncos get down to the real business of things, having ridden a roller-coaster of a season, including a suspension for Von Miller for the first six games, some off-field issues, plenty of injuries and coach John Fox's open-heart surgery.

It leaves them, the Broncos say, a tested bunch as they head toward the one-and-done games. And with three teams from the AFC West, a much-maligned group before the season opened, the Broncos also feel they are plenty tested on the field as well with a 3-1 mark against the Chiefs and the Chargers in the regular season.

"I think two years ago they were talking about this being the sorriest division in football and I can also remember not too long ago they were saying the same thing about the NFC West," Fox said. "It's cyclical. There are obviously some good football teams, well-coached football teams. To weather the 16-game regular-season schedule and get in -- it's not easy. It's very competitive, very close. Some teams came down to the last weekend; I just think it's all along great for the game."

When all was said and done, the Broncos scored 76 touchdowns and Peyton Manning scored 55 himself, a mark that beats that of any other team overall this season. The Bengals finished second in the league with 54.

Gase declines interviews until season over

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

December 31, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- While both of his coordinators have already drawn some interest from teams with head coaching vacancies, Denver Broncos head coach John Fox said he has no doubt where the focus is for all of his assistants these days, including offensive coordinator Adam Gase and defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio.

"I just know that, to a man -- player or coach -- in that locker room or in those offices is totally focused on our next opponent and what we have to do to win that game," Fox said. "Whether it was USC earlier in the year or 'Black Monday' candidates -- it's all speculation. I can just assure you that all of our focus is on the Denver Broncos."

Gase, who called the plays for the Broncos' record-setting offense, has drawn quick interest. The Cleveland Browns and Minnesota Vikings had already formally requested permission to interview Gase before the close of business Monday. According to a source, however, Gase has informed each of those teams, either himself or through a representative, that he would not interview for any job until the Broncos' season is over.

In the wake of the Broncos' double-overtime loss to the Baltimore Ravens last January, which knocked them out of the playoffs as the AFC's top seed, there has already been plenty of attention given to the team's preparation this time around. Inside the Broncos' complex, there is little surprise that Gase would say he wants to wait for any interview. That would force any team interested in speaking to Gase to wait until at least Feb. 3 if the Broncos were to advance to the Super Bowl.

That would require some patience from teams that may be looking to get a new head coach in place as quickly as possible. The Broncos are again the AFC's top seed and have a bye this weekend and will open their postseason on Jan. 12 with the divisional round game in Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Just 35 years old with no head coaching experience, Gase is a popular candidate because, even in these pass-happy times, what he has done with the Broncos offense has gotten plenty of notice. He's constructed a read-option look to enable

Tim Tebow to have some short-term success as well as the current attack for Peyton Manning.

The Broncos, with 606 points, set a new single-season scoring record this season as Manning set new league records for touchdown passes (55) and yards passing (5,477). Gase has also been lauded by many in the league for his work with the team's receivers when he arrived on Josh McDaniels' staff in 2009.

Gase started coaching at Michigan State when Nick Saban was the school's head coach.

Del Rio, who interviewed for the USC head coaching job during the Broncos' bye week is also expected to draw some interest from the Vikings. Del Rio is a former Vikings linebacker and has plenty of head coaching experience with nine seasons with the Jacksonville Jaguars. This season he was the Broncos' interim head coach for four games when Fox took a leave of absence for open-heart surgery.

Because the Broncos have a bye this week, the coaches could interview with teams on Sunday if they chose to. After that, interested teams would have to wait until the week following the conference championship games if the Broncos were to win their first postseason game.

Asked about any timetable for interviews for his assistants, Fox said Monday afternoon; "We're going to keep that in-house, but they're focused on the job at hand."

Peyton Manning's record to stand

By ESPN.com

December 31, 2013

After further review, history will stand.

Peyton Manning's single-season passing yardage record which came into question will remain, an NFL spokesman confirmed.

Manning's stat line from the Denver Broncos' 34-14 win Sunday over the Oakland Raiders was 25-of-28 passing for 266 yards and four touchdowns. The four TD passes gave him 55 for the season, extending his record total to five more than Tom Brady's former mark. The yardage total gave Manning 5,477 -- one more than Drew Brees' 2011 record.

However, there was an issue with a 7-yard completion from Manning to Eric Decker late in the first that could've changed the play to a run, allowing Brees to keep the record. In one camera angle, the pass to Decker looks like a lateral, which would make it a running play. Another angle, from above, shows Decker receiving the ball at the Broncos' 48-yard line, with Manning slightly deeper than that.

Elias Sports Bureau made the final call after reviewing the play, which will remain a pass.

"The stats crew at the game scored this play as a forward pass. During the course of a season, there are many similar plays which could be reviewed by the Elias Sports Bureau, the league's official statistician. In this case, the determination of Elias is that the fairest resolution is for the ruling of the on-site stats crew to stand," NFL spokesman Michael Signora said.

In recent weeks, Manning has said the touchdown record was more significant because it represented the result of an offense scoring points as it tried to win games. Even Sunday, after he'd set the yardage record, he replied to a question about that mark with: "I don't really have much to say about it, to tell you the truth."

Information from ESPN.com Broncos reporter Jeff Legwold was used in this report.

A revealing year in the NFL

Manning, Belichick and the Seahawks led the way in the 2013 NFL season

By Rick Reilly

ESPN.com

December 31, 2013

Here's what we found out about the NFL in 2013:

- Bill Belichick proved he is one exit past genius. He won the AFC East with the best tight end in the game lying in the hospital, another top-10 tight end in jail, his best receiver in Denver and his run-stopper in a cast. Belichick is the NFL Coach of the Year, unless it's Peyton Manning.
- It's possible for a man to break the single-season passing TD record twice in one career -- nine years, 1,000 miles and four neck surgeries apart.

That's got to go on the plaque.

History is right under our noses. Manning's 55 passing TDs record might last longer than landfill Styrofoam. Second best this season? Thirty-nine by Drew Brees. That's Reagan over Mondale.

- The NFL seedings make as little sense as ever. Explain, please, how 12-4 San Francisco has to go to Green Bay to play the 8-7-1 Packers. In January.

Insanity.

The fix is simple: Reseed them based on record and give no standing to winners of divisions thinner than a Goth drummer.

- The hottest teams heading into the playoffs are Carolina and Philadelphia The best is Denver. The worst is San Diego, where they really must be starved for good news. The Chargers went positively mental after beating a KC team that was resting 20 of its 22 starters -- at home.

Nonalcoholic beer for everybody!

- Tom Brady is God, and Tony Romo is Satan. Except they finished 11th and 12th in QBR this year.
- Cam Newton doesn't worry about anything. Not your deadline. Not your blitz. Not your opinion of him. The man is titanium.
- Mike Shanahan was canned for one reason: He risked RG III's career at the end of last season by putting him back in the game. Lost the kid's trust. Fatal mistake.

Poor Shanahan. What can he do now except move back into his 35,000-square-foot Denver house -- the one with its own bowling alley -- collect \$7 million in 2014, and hang around at his world-class steak joint?

- Jason Witten is going to the Hall of Fame after all this.
- The Cleveland Browns' front office must have a vault of Bitcoin somewhere. The Browns are willing to eat \$10.5 million firing a head coach whose name fans hadn't even learned to spell yet when they have the worst linebacking corps this side of Rice. This is known as setting squirrel traps while elephants stomp you into pancakes.
- Fire the coach, fire the coach, fire the coach. Remember September? When 80 percent of a certain town's fans wanted the head coach fired after his 1-3 start? His name? Riverboat Ron Rivera, who has the Panthers skillet-hot and holding the No. 2 seed in the NFC.
- Speaking of job termination, it is very hard for an official to be fired. Example: Bill Leavy, whose San Diego field goal screw-up this past week means his crews have made more big mistakes than Custer.
- Much easier to fire players, though. Seattle CB Brandon Browner just got a year ban for a positive pot test while in Stage 2 of the substance-abuse program. But Browner went from Stage 1 to Stage 2 while he wasn't even an employee of the NFL. He was playing in Canada when he missed two tests, which was strike two. If you switch jobs from McDonald's to Wendy's, do you still have to take McDonald's drug tests? "The letters went to my ex's house," Browner told me. "How am I supposed to get those?"
- These are parched days in New York. Not a single player on the Jets or Giants made the Pro Bowl.

Luckily, there's always the Knicks. The Nets? Never mind.

- Guess the Green Bay Packers became the No. 4 seed in the NFC using the old reattaching rope trick. They don't have a single player going to the Pro Bowl, either.
- Roger Goodell needs someone near him who gets young NFL players. Leslie Frazier, just axed at Minnesota, would be perfect. He loves them, and they love him. They just don't play all that well for him.
- It's going to be a very quiet Easter dinner at the Manning house this year.

One brother threw 37 more touchdowns and 17 fewer interceptions than the other.

And probably won his fifth MVP to the other's zip.

Here's something Eli can bring up: Peyton had his worst season ever -- rushing the ball. Went backward 31 yards this year, worst in the league.

- Grown men with wives and kids and house payments don't appreciate the gung-holier-than-thou routine. Take Greg Schiano, dumped Monday by the Bucs. Blowing up kneel-down plays. Diving at knees. Gipper halftime speeches. Back to Saturdays, Coach.
- Coaches might not matter in the NBA, but they matter more than ever in the NFL. The New Orleans Saints, without Sean Payton last year, went 7-9. This year, with him -- and almost the exact same team -- they went 11-5.
- Logic doesn't visit Chicago. Josh McCown led the NFL in QBR, yet it looks as if the Bears will still re-sign Jay Cutler. Meanwhile, their defense can't stop a sniffle.
- Chip Kelly has changed the league like nobody since Don Coryell. Here it is heading into January, and his players are fresher, happier and more dangerous than anybody.

Kelly's jailbreak offense isn't about throwing. It's about running. It was at Oregon, where his leading rusher was never worse than third in the Pac-12, and it has been in Year 1 in the pros, where LeSean (Shady) McCoy led the league.

Playing really loud hip-hop at practice is about to trend.

- Denver's Matt Prater is some kind of wizard. He missed one -- 1 -- field goal try all year, from 52 yards. Made all 74 of his PATs. And broke the league record with a 64-yarder. You say it's all altitude? Then why was he a perfect 13-for-13 on the road?
- Seattle, the fourth-youngest squad, is going to be scary good for a very long time.
- One man's ego can wreck a team.

Exhibit A: When OL Jonathan Martin stomped off the team instead of trying to mend his personal feuds like an adult, the Dolphins' offensive line collapsed. They wound up giving up by far the most sacks in the league -- 58. Talk it out already.

Exhibit B: Jerry Jones.

NFL: Manning's single-season passing record will stand

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
December 31, 2013

Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning gets to keep his single-season passing record.

Elias Sports Bureau, the NFL's official statistician, has decided that the "fairest resolution" to a dispute about a 7-yard completion to Eric Decker in Sunday's win against Oakland was to consider the play as a forward pass, as was initially ruled by the Raiders' stats crew, and not a lateral, which would be considered a rush for Decker.

Manning, who left at halftime of Denver's Week 17 game, finished the regular season with 5,477 passing yards, one yard more than Drew Brees' previous record. Had Elias changed the Decker play to a lateral, Manning would have lost the record.

"The determination of Elias is that the fairest resolution is for the ruling of the on-site stats crew to stand," NFL spokesman Michael Signora said in an email to USA TODAY Sports on Tuesday evening.

The passing yards record was one of two major records the Broncos set on Sunday, along with the most points scored in a season, with 606, to break the Patriots' record of 589 from 2007.

Manning broke the single-season touchdown record with his 51st touchdown a week earlier against Houston. With four touchdowns against Oakland, that record now stands at 55.

Peyton Manning gets to keep single-season record for passing yards

By John Breech
CBSsports.com
December 31, 2013

You can go ahead and scratch Drew Brees' name out of the record book because Peyton Manning's passing record will stand.

Manning set the single-season record for passing yards on Sunday when he reached 5,477 yards for the season after throwing for 266 yards in one half of action against the Raiders. Manning broke Brees' old record by one yard.

Unfortunately, breaking records isn't as easy as it used to be, at least not in the internet age. A user on Reddit noticed that one of Manning's first quarter passes to Eric Decker may have not been a pass at all. The seven-yard pass looked like it might have gone slightly backward, which would make it a lateral and Decker would have to be credited with a run. If the NFL decided to credit Decker with a run, then the league would have had to take seven passing yards away from Manning and give the record back to Brees.

The Elias Sports Bureau reviewed the play and along with the NFL decided "that the fairest resolution is for the ruling of the on-site stats crew to stand," NFL spokesman Michael Signora said.

Here's a picture of the play to give you an idea of how ridiculously close this was to being a lateral. For a complete look at the play, be sure to check out Will Brinson's breakdown here:

According to the NFL rulebook, a forward pass requires "the ball initially moves forward (to a point nearer the opponent's goal line) after leaving the passer's hand(s)."

The Audibles' All-Pro Team

By Doug Farrar
Sports Illustrated
December 31, 2013

Everyone wants to put together their own All-Pro teams around this time of year, and we're no different. Hopefully some of the names will be a bit different, though — we've taken a look through our tape notes and stat sheets and assembled a team who we believe to be the best at every position, star status notwithstanding. (Unless otherwise indicated, all metrics come from our friends at Football Outsiders and Pro Football Focus.)

Quarterback: Peyton Manning, Denver Broncos

This is the most obvious of our picks, but it bears mentioning just how amazing Manning was this season. He had a 114.9 passer rating at home, and a 115.3 passer rating on the road. He ranked fourth in the NFL in touchdown passes (12) on throws 20 or more yards downfield. He completed 69 percent of his passes when under pressure. He completed 69.1 percent of his passes with play-action, and 68 percent without. When the 44 drops by his receivers were factored out, along with other weird passing plays, he completed 77.2 percent of his passes. And beyond all the numbers, it's possible that we still don't give Manning enough credit for making the players around him better. He's the NFL's Most Valuable Player, the NFL's best player at the most important position and he's doing this at age 37, a couple years after common perception had him never playing again. It may take some distance from this season to see just how rare it really is.

Alternates: Philip Rivers, San Diego Chargers/Nick Foles, Philadelphia Eagles

Running Backs: LeSean McCoy, Philadelphia Eagles/Jamaal Charles, Kansas City Chiefs

McCoy didn't just lead the NFL in rushing yards (1,607) and total yards from scrimmage (2,146) — he also paced the league in runs of 15 yards or more (26) and pure highlight plays. Charles became the latest version of the perfect Andy Reid runner by adding 693 receiving yards on 70 catches to his 1,287 rushing yards.

Alternates: DeMarco Murray, Dallas Cowboys/Marshawn Lynch, Seattle Seahawks

Receivers: Calvin Johnson, Detroit Lions/Brandon Marshall, Chicago Bears/Wes Welker, Denver Broncos

Megatron was his usual self, and he got in the end zone more often this year — he upped his touchdown total from five in 2012 to 12 in '13. He was not part of the problem in Detroit this season. Marshall wasn't just one of the league's most valuable receivers; he also helped Alshon Jeffery become a great secondary weapon and continued his progression from willful, undisciplined young player to productive veteran who has become a willing voice for those afflicted with borderline personality disorder. He doesn't get enough credit for his maturity, on and off the field. As for Welker, he continued his role as the NFL's most valuable slot receiver in the game, with 89 targets and seven touchdowns in that role.

Alternates: Josh Gordon, Cleveland Browns/Jordy Nelson, Green Bay Packers/Kenny Stills, New Orleans Saints

Tight Ends: Jimmy Graham, New Orleans Saints/Vernon Davis, San Francisco 49ers

Graham has become the best overall and most productive tight end in the NFL, but it's Davis' season that bears mentioning. With several of San Francisco's targets out of the picture with injuries, Davis was dominant as a pass-catcher — not only in the short game, but also in deep passing, where he caught six touchdowns on 23 targets and 11 receptions on passes thrown 20 yards in the air or more.

Alternates: Julius Thomas, Denver Broncos/Jason Witten, Dallas Cowboys

Offensive Tackles: Tyron Smith, Dallas Cowboys/Joe Thomas, Cleveland Browns

Smith is still learning the advanced points of the pro game and he'll get beaten once in a while, but it didn't happen too often in 2013 — he allowed one sack and three quarterback hits on 629 passing snaps. Thomas allowed just two sacks in a league-leading 751 passing snaps despite a quarterback situation that could be charitably described as "unacceptable."

Alternates: Joe Staley, San Francisco 49ers/Michael Roos, Tennessee Titans

Offensive Guards: Josh Sitton, Green Bay Packers/Larry Warford, Detroit Lions

Sitton didn't miss a single snap all season and allowed just one sack at left guard. This was made all the more impressive by Matt Flynn's egregious lack of pocket awareness when filling in for Aaron Rodgers. In addition, Sitton maintained his well-deserved reputation as one of the league's best power blockers. Warford, a third-round rookie from Kentucky, played every snap at right guard for the Lions, allowing no sacks and becoming an integral part of Detroit's vastly improved offensive line.

Alternates: Louis Vasquez, Denver Broncos/Jahri Evans, New Orleans Saints

Center: Dominic Raiola, Detroit Lions

Raiola was one of the NFL's most improved players in 2013, and one key to that development was the Lions' acquisition of running back Reggie Bush. The veteran center showed an impressive ability to hold at the point of attack and charge upfield for Bush's screen receptions.

Alternate: Evan Dietrich-Smith, Green Bay Packers

Defensive Tackles: Gerald McCoy, Tampa Bay Buccaneers/Geno Atkins, Cincinnati Bengals/Brandon Mebane, Seattle Seahawks

McCoy was an absolute diamond throughout the Buccaneers' dismal season — he amassed 54 total pressures and was very strong against the run. No three-tech tackle was more disruptive than Atkins in 2013; one can only wonder what effect he would have had with a full season. Mebane doesn't show up in the stat sheets as often, but if you were to poll players on the most effective pure nose tackles, he'd certainly be at the top of the list. Mebane can push a pocket from anywhere and has the root strength to destroy chunks of any offensive line.

Alternates: Jurrell Casey, Tennessee Titans/Ndamukong Suh, Detroit Lions

4-3 Defensive Ends: Robert Quinn, St. Louis Rams/Greg Hardy, Carolina Panthers

Quinn led all NFL defenders with 91 total pressures and was an unholy terror from the right side of the Rams defense all season. Hardy was the splashiest pass-rusher on a Carolina frontline that remains underrated, and he's heading into the playoffs on a serious hot streak — eight sacks and 27 total pressures in his last three games.

Alternates: Michael Bennett, Seattle Seahawks/Rob Ninkovich, New England Patriots

3-4 Defensive Ends: J.J. Watt, Houston Texans/Sheldon Richardson, New York Jets

Watt didn't get the same love from the national media that he did in 2012 because the Texans had a horrid season overall, but he may have been just as good in 2013, even without the same sack totals. The ultra-confident Richardson insists that he's the NFL's Defensive Rookie of the Year, and the point is tough to argue — we've put him in as an end, but he's just as effective when he's moving double teams inside.

Alternates: Kyle Williams, Buffalo Bills /Cameron Jordan, New Orleans Saints

4-3 Outside Linebackers: Lavonte David, Tampa Bay Buccaneers/DeAndre Levy, Detroit Lions

David was the best combination of pass pressure and run-stopping at his position, while Levy re-invented himself as a tremendous pass defender — for a while near the end of the season, he looked like he might be the first linebacker ever to lead the NFL in interceptions.

Alternates: Vontaze Burfict, Cincinnati Bengals/Thomas Davis, Carolina Panthers

3-4 Outside Linebackers: Robert Mathis, Indianapolis Colts/Trent Cole, Philadelphia Eagles

Mathis is the sackmaster here, finishing the regular season with a career-high and league-leading 19.5 sacks. But when it comes to versatility, it's tough to top Cole. He added 31 run stops to his 51 total pressures.

Alternates: Tamba Hali, Kansas City Chiefs/Kiko Alonso, Buffalo Bills

Inside Linebackers: NaVorro Bowman, San Francisco 49ers/Luke Kuechly, Carolina Panthers

Bowman has been an underrated star since he came into the NFL in 2010, but he played at a different level in 2013. Jim Harbaugh is correct when he says that Bowman deserves recognition when the Defensive Player of the Year award is discussed. However, if any linebacker grabs that award, it should probably be Kuechly. No player at his position best exhibits the many traits needed to excel.

Alternates: Karlos Dansby, Arizona Cardinals/Stephen Tulloch, Detroit Lions

Cornerbacks: Richard Sherman, Seattle Seahawks/Alterraun Verner, Tennessee Titans/Brandon Boykin, Philadelphia Eagles

Since we added a slot receiver to our All-Pro team, let's get a great nickel corner to cover him. Few are better than Boykin, who sent the Eagles to the playoffs with his late-game pick of Kyle Orton last Sunday and amassed six total picks alternating between the slot and outside. Verner was a lockdown guy all season, and Sherman may be the best pass defender since Darrelle Revis was in his prime. The next quarterback to actually get a deep sideline pass over on him will be the first in quite a while.

Alternates: Brent Grimes, Miami Dolphins/Chris Harris, Denver Broncos/Tyrann Mathieu, Arizona Cardinals

Safeties: Earl Thomas, Seattle Seahawks/Eric Weddle, San Diego Chargers

Weddle's outstanding play was a rare highlight on a San Diego defense that needs a lot of help. Thomas has a rare combination of demon speed, coverage awareness

and controlled aggression. At his best, he's an evil combination of Troy Polamalu and Ed Reed.

Alternates: Chris Clemons, Miami Dolphins/Antrel Rolle, New York Giants

SI.com's picks for 2013 NFL Season Awards

By Robert Beck
Sports Illustrated
December 31, 2013

With the 2013 NFL season in the books, it's time to hand out the hardware.

SI.com NFL experts Don Banks, Chris Burke, Ben Eagle, Doug Farrar, Tom Mantzouranis, Austin Murphy and Jim Trotter make their picks for MVP, Defensive Player of the Year, Coach of the Year and more.

Don Banks						
MVP	Off. Player	Def. Player	Off. Rookie	Def. Rookie	Coach	Comeback
Peyton Manning Broncos	LeSean McCoy Eagles	Luke Kuechly Panthers	Eddie Lacy Packers	Sheldon Richardson Jets	Ron Rivera Panthers	Philip Rivers Chargers
Chris Burke						
MVP	Off. Player	Def. Player	Off. Rookie	Def. Rookie	Coach	Comeback
Peyton Manning Broncos	LeSean McCoy Eagles	Robert Quinn Rams	Keenan Allen Chargers	Sheldon Richardson Jets	Bruce Arians Cardinals	Jason Peters Eagles
Ben Eagle						
MVP	Off. Player	Def. Player	Off. Rookie	Def. Rookie	Coach	Comeback
Peyton Manning	Jamaal Charles	Luke Kuechly	Eddie Lacy	Sheldon Richardson	Chip Kelly	Philip Rivers

Broncos	Vikings	Panthers	Packers	Jets	Eagles	Chargers
Doug Farrar						
MVP	Off. Player	Def. Player	Off. Rookie	Def. Rookie	Coach	Comeback
Peyton Manning Broncos	LeSean McCoy Eagles	Earl Thomas Seahawks	Eddie Lacy Packers	Sheldon Richardson Jets	Bill Belichick Patriots	Pierre Garcon Redskins
Tom Mantzouranis						
MVP	Off. Player	Def. Player	Off. Rookie	Def. Rookie	Coach	Comeback
Peyton Manning Broncos	Jamaal Charles Chiefs	Luke Kuechly Panthers	Eddie Lacy Packers	Sheldon Richardson Jets	Bruce Arians Cardinals	Darrelle Revis Buccaneers
Austin Murphy						
MVP	Off. Player	Def. Player	Off. Rookie	Def. Rookie	Coach	Comeback
Peyton Manning Broncos	Jamaal Charles Chiefs	Luke Kuechly Panthers	Keenan Allen Chargers	Sheldon Richardson Jets	Pete Carroll Seahawks	LeSean McCoy Eagles
Jim Trotter						
MVP	Off. Player	Def. Player	Off. Rookie	Def. Rookie	Coach	Comeback
Peyton Manning	Jamaal Charles	Robert Mathis	Keenan Allen	Sheldon Richardson	Ron Rivera	Philip Rivers

Broncos	Chiefs	Colts	Chargers	Jets	Panthers	Chargers	
---------	--------	-------	----------	------	----------	----------	--

Hernandez trial, O'Bannon case, Top 10 moments for sports law in 2013

By Michael McCann
Sports Illustrated
December 31, 2013

It was an extraordinary year in sports and the law in 2013. While current athletes remain unwilling to use the legal system to "right wrongs", 2013 saw more than 5,000 retired NFL, NHL and NCAA athletes wage litigation against their former leagues.

This year also saw legal issues in sports betting, performance-enhancing drugs and NFL locker room bullying rise to the forefront. Three star athletes—Lance Armstrong, Alex Rodriguez and Aaron Hernandez—also commanded a great deal of attention for their very different legal problems.

Last, but certainly not least, a major American sporting event, the Boston Marathon, was struck by an act of terrorism. The cowardly and diabolical actions led to an amazingly heroic response by law enforcement, first responders and many other citizens.

Here are my top 10 sports law stories from 2013 and my scouting report on each for what to expect in 2014.

10. Governor Chris Christie wages fight to legalize sports betting in New Jersey

2013 Significance

New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, a potential presidential candidate, is staking part of his reputation on sports law. Specifically, he wants to legalize sports betting in New Jersey. Christie thought he did so in 2011 by signing the New Jersey Sports Betting Law. The law legalized betting on pro and college games at casinos and race tracks, though bets on games played by New Jersey colleges and on college games played in the Garden State remained barred. The law was expected to generate millions of dollars in tax revenue, some of which would have been set aside to help New Jersey's disabled and elderly.

The NCAA, the major pro leagues and later the U.S. Department of Justice had other ideas for New Jersey. They sued, arguing that Christie's law violated the federal Professional and Amateur Sports Prohibition Act (PASPA). PASPA prohibits sports betting across the country. . . by in large.

PASPA, enacted in 1992, applies only to 46 states. Oregon, Delaware, Montana and Nevada, which annually nets around \$20 million from taxing sports betting, were grandfathered. Each had previously legalized the practice that Congress decried as a "national problem" for triggering human hardship and discrediting games. PASPA also furnished New Jersey a 1-year window to authorize sports betting. Despite the pleas of Atlantic City's casinos, the Garden State declined.

Christie, in the view of the NCAA and pro leagues, now wants to rewrite history. In *NCAA v. Christie*, sports gambling is portrayed as endangering "honest athletic competition" and as undermining "the public's faith and confidence" in team sports. The economic impact of sports betting is also described as extending across states. This is an important argument: the U.S. Constitution's "Commerce Clause" authorizes the federal government to regulate interstate commerce.

In February, U.S. District Judge Michael Shipp agreed with the NCAA and leagues. He upheld PASPA and blocked Christie's law. Christie appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, but in September it affirmed Judge Shipp's ruling. Christie's last hope is to convince the U.S. Supreme Court to take the case. He has until February 2014 to seek review.

2014 Scouting Report

Although the U.S. Supreme Court only takes about 1 percent of cases, there's a fair chance it will hear Christie's. Christie's legal argument emphasizes a different part of the Constitution that may appeal to at least five of the nine justices. Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito and Anthony Kennedy tend to hold a broad view of the 10th Amendment, which reserves to states' powers not delegated to the federal government in the U.S. Constitution.

So-called "police powers" to regulate health, safety, and morals of citizens are generally reserved to states. In Christie's view, PASPA is not about regulating interstate commerce—especially for local office pools—but rather imposing moral judgment and removing personal choice. Expect Christie to depict leagues and the NCAA, which attract fans' dollars in part because many fans bet on games, as disingenuous. These five justices also hold a relatively narrow view of the Commerce Clause, which they recently interpreted as failing to justify the new federal health care law (a.k.a. "Obamacare").

Don't expect a final resolution on *NCAA v. Christie* before Super Bowl XLVII, but its potential impact reaches far beyond the Boardwalk Empire. If New Jersey wins and the federal prohibition is lifted, additional states would legalize sports betting. Does the nation, with very different attitudes than it held in 1992, still support a federal ban? The odds have surely changed.

9. NHL concussion litigation and the future of NHL fighting

2013 Significance

In November, a group of 10 retired NHL players filed a federal lawsuit against the NHL for failing to protect them from concussions and other neurological problems. The players would like to see their lawsuit, which in some ways mimics NFL concussion litigation, become a class action. The plaintiffs' attorneys say that 200 retired players have since joined the case, although one of the 10 named players -- former Maple Leafs captain Rick Vaive -- asked to be removed.

The legal case against the NHL for concussions is less persuasive than the one brought against the NFL. Retired NHL players focus on how the league knew of information but didn't share it. For instance, the NHL allegedly knew about published studies on brain injury from the 1920s but didn't notify players of those studies' findings.

Even if that contention is true, it probably wouldn't constitute unlawful conduct: the NHL could not have concealed publicly-available information.

Other allegations, such as that the NHL should have adopted more sophisticated brain monitoring, seem tempered by the fact that the NHL negotiates most safety rules with the NHLPA, which was noticeably unmentioned in Leeman's 13,700 word complaint.

The NHL has not changed its policies since the lawsuit was filed. Commentators expected, following an especially brutal Bruins-Penguins game in December, that the league would impose a lengthy suspension on Bruins forward Shawn Thornton for repeatedly punching Penguins defenseman Brooks Orpik and concussing him. The thinking was that the NHL did not want to "go light" on Thornton as lawyers for the retired players would use it against the league in court. Instead, the NHL suspended Thornton for 15 games, an amount that is generally viewed as consistent with previous suspensions.

2014 Scouting Report

The filing of the NHL concussion suit after the NFL announced a proposed \$765 million settlement in its concussion case was not coincidental. It stands to reason that the retired players may hope to extract a similar, albeit smaller, settlement from the NHL. Even if the NHL believes the retired players' case is weak, the league has incentives to strike a deal. For one, pretrial discovery may require NHL officials and owners to testify and share guarded information about league and team finances. Also, concussion litigation can damage a league's image, thereby imposing a cost by not settling. If other retired NHL players join the Leeman group

or file their own lawsuits, the NHL may feel the weight of litigation on its shoulders and seek relief through settlement.

The NHL, however, may decide to wage a litigation battle. The league knows that it can cite the role played by the NHLPA in crafting safety rules. The NHLPA, in fact, has resisted player safety changes over the years. For instance, the NHLPA opposed requirements that players wear helmets and, more recently, eye visors. The NHL is also prepared to argue that it is impossible to know when players suffered brain injury, given that every NHL player has taken thousands of shifts in other games and practices before their first NHL game. The NHL can also argue that players simply assume the risk of injury by playing such an obviously dangerous sport.

The most important outcome of NHL concussion litigation may be how it impacts fighting. The connection between NHL fighting, which triggers a penalty but not a suspension, and brain injury is not obvious. Proponents of fighting say it deters cheap shots, including to the head, that might transpire if draconian penalties all but outlawed fighting. Opponents stress how punches cause brain injury and cite anecdotal evidence of several retired enforcers dying by apparent suicide. One thing is clear: the NHL is increasingly isolated among hockey leagues in tolerating fighting. Fighting is banned in NCAA, international and Olympic hockey, and in January USA Hockey's directors may vote to ban fighting at all levels of U.S. amateur hockey.

8. Jonathan Martin-Richie Incognito bullying saga, potential impact of Wells Report 2013 Significance

In October, Dolphins tackle Jonathan Martin left the team due to emotional distress. He never returned. The alleged main source of Martin's distress was veteran teammate Richie Incognito. Reports surfaced that Incognito texted Martin racist comments, made physically-threatening remarks and forced Martin to pay five-figure team dinner tabs. If proven, Incognito's conduct would open the door for Martin to sue him for intentional infliction of emotional distress and civil extortion. The Dolphins suspended Incognito indefinitely in November.

The Martin-Incognito story goes beyond these two players. It's rumored that Dolphins coaches wanted Incognito to "toughen up" Martin, a Stanford grad from an Ivy League family. Those allegations hint at potential vulnerability for the Dolphins to a negligent supervision lawsuit. There are also allegations Dolphins' "bullying" extended beyond Martin to other younger players, particularly in regards to buying meals for veterans. Moreover, there are questions about Martin's credibility. Some wonder if he believed Incognito was merely sarcastic, especially if they were -- as Dolphins quarterback Ryan Tannehill insists -- "best friends."

In November the NFL tapped prominent attorney Ted Wells to investigate the Dolphins' workplace conduct and to submit a report to NFL commissioner Roger Goodell. Wells' report is expected sometime in early 2014. Martin's predicament has caused friction with the NFLPA, which has the awkward responsibility of advocating for both Martin and Incognito. Martin's attorney, David Cornwell, revealed that Martin excluded NFLPA representatives from Martin's meeting with Wells.

2014 Scouting Report

The Wells Report will surely prove controversial. While Goodell assured the public that the report will be "independent," it should be remembered that Wells is an attorney paid by the NFL. He presumably will not author a report that suggests either the league or Dolphins acted in an unlawful way. Along those lines, the Wells Report may not tell the whole story.

Wells lacks the subpoena power to force coaches or players to speak or provide key information. Additionally, persons he interviews do not speak under oath, and thus would not perjure themselves if they knowingly lie to him. Still, NFL employees have contractual obligations to cooperate with league investigations and it appears Wells has generally found Dolphins coaches, staff and players to be cooperative.

In his report, Wells has to be cautious to avoid describing Martin, Incognito or other Dolphins employees in ways that could trigger defamation lawsuits. The NFL learned its lesson from Jonathan Vilma's lawsuit in the wake of the "Bountygate" report: be careful attributing specific acts to specific players. Watch for Wells to offer generalities in terms of wrongful conduct attributed to named players. In contrast, his report will likely offer specifics in terms of suggested policy changes. One nearly certain recommendation will be that teams limit ways veteran players require rookie players to pay meal tabs.

For their part, the Dolphins are poised to trade or release both Martin and Incognito. It is unlikely that Martin would pursue legal action against Incognito or the Dolphins, as doing so could have the unintended effect of scaring away other teams from employing him. Still, if Martin cannot find employment with another NFL team, the prospect of suing the Dolphins or NFL may become more appealing. Similarly, Incognito is unlikely to pursue any legal action, such as a defamation suit against the NFL and Dolphins, though unemployment could change his mind.

The greatest QB season ever? 2013 may not even be best of Peyton Manning's career

By Peter Bukowski
Sports Illustrated
December 31, 2013

Recent bias, knee-jerk reactions and hot-sports takes cloud the discussion surrounding Peyton Manning's historic 2013 season. The Broncos' future Hall of Fame quarterback smashed the NFL record for touchdowns and holds the single-season passing yards record, barring a reported league review of a throw in the last game of the regular season.

But how great was Manning this year? Where does his year rank in terms of the greatest season ever by a quarterback?

The answer seems obvious: it was the best ever. Look at the stats. But the numbers may mislead you.

Consider the following: In 1984, Dan Marino set the NFL record for single-season touchdowns with 48. It took 20 years for Peyton Manning to break that record, with Manning tossing 49 as a member of the Colts in 2004. Just three years later, Tom Brady broke Manning's record, throwing 50 in 2007. Now, six years later Manning has the record once again.

After Week 17, when asked about the record, Manning quipped that Brady would probably just break his record again next year.

He might. And that's part of the problem with trying to put this season into perspective; we've reached a new normal in terms of passing. When Drew Brees set the passing yardage mark in 2011, three other quarterbacks threw for 5,000 or more yards. If Aaron Rodgers had played in Week 17, he likely would have been the fourth (Rodgers passed for 4,643 yards and sat out Week 16 with the Packers sitting 14-1).

In the last six seasons, the touchdown and yardage marks have been broken twice each. The single-season completion percentage mark –nearly 30 years old – was toppled (Drew Brees posted a 71.2 completion percentage in 2011), as was the passer rating record (Aaron Rodgers finished with a 122.5 QB rating in 2011). And Philip Rivers had a shot at the percentage record most of this season.

Here's a look at the four most recent record-breaking seasons side by side.

Player (Year)	Completions / Attempts	Completion %	Yards	Yards per Attempt	TDs	INTs	Rating
Tom Brady (2007)	398/578	68.9	4806	8.3	50	8	117.2
Drew Brees (2011)	468/657	71.2	5476	8.8	46	14	110.6
Aaron Rodgers (2011)	343/502	68.3	4643	9.2	45	6	122.5
Peyton Manning (2013)	450/659	68.3	5477	8.3	55	10	115.1

Manning's sheer production, in the lens of the current season, seemed overwhelming. Compared to these recent record-breaking seasons, Manning's numbers aren't all that special.

Manning and Brees attempted nearly the same amount of throws and finished with essentially identical yardage totals. Had Brady thrown the ball as often as Manning, his touchdown pace would have exceeded that of Manning's. And Peyton's efficiency is second-lowest as measured by passer rating.

In fact, 2013 may not even be the best Peyton Manning season ever. That distinction must go to 2004, at least statistically speaking.

Player (Year)	Completions / Attempts	Completion %	Yards	Yards per Attempt	TDs	INTs	Rating
Peyton Manning (2013)	450/659	68.3	5477	8.3	55	10	115.1
Peyton Manning (2004)	336/497	67.6	4557	9.2	46	10	121.1

Together, Manning has put together two of the best seasons of the last generation, but it's hard not to notice the difference in efficiency — specifically that the 2004

version of Manning was much better on a per-play basis. In fact, had Manning maintained his per-attempt average from '04 in '13, he'd have topped 6,000 yards. The gross stats like yards and touchdowns are a direct result of Manning tossing it 162 more times this season than in 2004 — the equivalent to an extra five games based on his 2004 averages.

Therein lies the rub: Teams are passing more than ever in a league tailoring rules to benefit offensive players, particularly quarterbacks. To wit, Brady has had two rules created essentially for plays he's been involved in.

Aggregate stats have always been misleading, but it seems we're slowly figuring out how to parse them

It's why Aaron Rodgers, in a season in which Drew Brees finished with better gross numbers, was the MVP: he had the most efficient season in modern NFL history.

Manning's 2004 season was tops in this group in terms of touchdown percentage (the number of touchdowns based on total attempts) and his season is probably the only one capable of standing up to Rodgers in 2011 by efficiency standards.

Not surprisingly, the two worst figures in that regard are Brees in 2011 and Manning this season; both threw the ball significantly more than their peers.

The more you throw, the bigger the numbers grow, inflating the same way baseball statistics did in the steroids era. Only it would be like if baseball suddenly had six plate appearances per game instead of four.

It's why baseball gurus developed statistics like Wins Above Replacement (WAR), and other combination stats like OPS+ and average on balls in play. Traditional metrics simply come up short when comparing players side-by-side.

Football Outsiders has developed several football metrics to help us reconcile this issue, particularly in the face of a sport where so-called advanced metrics are difficult to come by.

For quarterbacks, they have three statistics we can use, DYAR, DVOA and Effective Yards. DYAR is yards above replacement adjusting for opposing defenses, while DVOA is the same but on a per-play basis. Effective Yards translates DVOA into yards per attempt metric and accounts for total usage.

Player (Year)	DYAR	DVOA	Effective Yards
Peyton Manning (2004)	2434	58.9%	6109

Tom Brady (2007)	2674	54.1%	6946
Drew Brees (2011)	2259	38.3%	6763
Aaron Rodgers (2011)	2121	48.4%	5671
Peyton Manning (2013)	2490	43.4%	7061

Manning's 2013 season leads the group only in Effective Yards, which is mostly a result of his incredible usage rate. On a per play basis, he was significantly better on 2004, as his DVOA shows.

It's easy to get caught up in the story building behind Manning's season. One of the greatest players ever, coming off a gut-punch loss in the playoffs, starts the year by torching the defending Super Bowl champions and lights the league on fire the rest of the season.

And all of this from a guy who turns 38 this offseason.

It was another great regular season from the greatest regular-season quarterback in the history of the NFL. No, it wasn't the greatest season by a quarterback ever, but it was one of the most fun to watch — unless you're a fan of an AFC rival.

While "greatness" is a nebulous term, oft used to describe something the user struggles to define, the greatness of this storybook season will be written in the postseason. None of the quarterbacks on the above list won a Super Bowl in his record-setting seasons. In fact, only Tom Brady even made it past the divisional round of the playoffs.

But lucky for Manning, he can still go into the postseason, rewrite the narrative about his playoff failures, win it all and cement his place in history.

The greatest season ever by a Super Bowl-winning quarterback? Now, we're talking.

The Tuesday Mailbag

Why the NFL must give the single-season passing record back to Drew Brees ... plus responding to readers' questions. Yes, Browns fans, you can have hope

By Peter King

The MMQB.com/Sports Illustrated

December 31, 2013

The NFL has an interesting statistical dilemma on its hands on the final day of 2013. Should Peyton Manning own the single-season record for passing yards? We call this column "On Further Review," and that's exactly what I did on Tuesday morning to see whether Manning should have the record.

Late in the first quarter of Denver's final regular-season game against Oakland on Sunday, Manning threw a seven-yard pass to Eric Decker, who was lined up tight in the left slot and caught a quick bubble screen. The statisticians working the game ruled it a forward pass. And so when Manning reached halftime with a 31-0 lead, the Broncos thought he had 266 passing yards—good for 5,477 on the season, one more than Drew Brees had in 2011. With such a commanding lead and the desire to get backup quarterback Brock Osweiler some game competition, coach John Fox removed Manning. On Sunday night and Monday, Manning was congratulated for breaking the record.

But legitimate questions have surfaced about that quick throw to Decker. Was it backward pass? A lateral? If so, the play should have gone down as a seven-yard run for Decker—not a seven-yard completion for Manning. If the league were to change it retroactively, Manning's season passing yards would be reduced to 5,469. And Brees would still own the record by six yards.

I went to the video on Tuesday, calling up the Broncos-Raiders game on NFL Game Rewind, and watched the play in question eight times. It's a close call. Manning appears to throw the ball approximately one yard backward to Decker, who catches it and runs seven yards past the line of scrimmage before being stopped.

On all plays regarding statistical questions, the NFL's statistician, the Elias Sports Bureau, reviews the plays and recommends either a change in what the game stat men ruled, or no change at all. As of 11 a.m. ET on Tuesday, the play was in Elias's hands. I spoke to a league official late Tuesday morning and there is no timetable on when, or if, a change will be made. I believe that Elias and the league should take the pass completion away and make it a run. That's what it was; that's the way I see it.

There are two things the NFL will have to wrestle with here:

Surely the Broncos will argue that the statisticians on site told them that Manning had 266 yards at halftime. Had Denver known Manning was short of the record, it's very likely that Fox would have kept him in the game to get the record in the third quarter. So the team will rightfully be angry if the yardage is taken away.

There is little question that Manning would have broken the record had he played an additional series in the third quarter. Taking it away from him seems in some ways unfair.

I understand both of those points. But the fact is, records should not be manipulated based on would-haves and could-haves. Either Manning broke the record, or he didn't. Every week, sacks are added and subtracted, and rushing and passing yards are adjusted based on mistakes made by press-box statisticians. A mistake was made here. It's a shame in many ways, because Manning appeared to have broken the record—and he no doubt would have padded the numbers had the Broncos known that one of his passing plays would be reviewed by Elias.

But, the way I see it, I don't believe the league can just say that Manning would have had the record anyway, so let's just give it to him. I think the league needs to take seven yards away from Manning and hand the record back to Drew Brees.

* * *

* * *

Now on to your email ...

Like many people, I have been reading your work for years. I respect your opinion, even if I don't agree with it. You have taught me a lot about football. So now that the dust has settled and Haslam and Banner had their press conference, my question is this: Is there any hope in Cleveland? Can you give me three reasons to continue being a fan?

Thanks,

Jeremy

Yes I can.

1. Cleveland has the fourth pick in this draft and an additional first-round pick. If there's a quarterback they really want, and they obviously need one, they should have the draft capital to acquire him.

2. The men who run this team are not unintelligent. Joe Banner might be a bit impulsive, and Mike Lombardi has made his share of mistakes in personnel evaluation. But I've seen scores of personnel people and club executives over the

last three decades covering the NFL, and believe me, these guys deserve some benefit of the doubt. They're not Ron Wolf and they're not Ozzie Newsome, but they're bright guys who are capable of building a good team. I know you've heard this before, but I would give them a chance.

3. If you're a true fan of a team, there's something that gets deep down in your soul that's so hard to let go. I can only imagine how frustrated you are. When I was a kid, I loved the New York Giants, and the Giants never won a darn thing. This was back in the '60s and '70s. But I rooted for them anyway, and I looked forward to the start of every new season. I don't root for teams anymore, but I sometimes go against my neutral policy about NFL teams in cities like Cleveland, where there has been such a long dry spell. For the sake of everybody in Northeast Ohio and around the country who love the Browns, I really hope this isn't the debacle that it appears to be today.

Is it my imagination, or are the Seahawks and 49ers benefiting in the salary cap constraints by having non-first round rookie contract QBs playing decent to great football? That leaves them with salary cap room to hire more talent across their roster than, say, New England, Denver, and New Orleans. Do you have any thoughts on the salaries that Wilson and Kaepernick will command when their rookie contracts expire, and what effect that will have on the overall talent level of those two teams?

All the Best,

Kenneth R. Cone, CPA
Sacramento, Calif.

Great question. It isn't just that Kaepernick and Wilson weren't first-round picks. When the new salary structure went into effect in 2011, all rookies had their pay slashed. It's really impossible to predict what they will make in the future, because you can't predict how much they will win and the kind of numbers they'll have put up by then. A couple years ago, I would have thought that Jay Cutler would be among the top three richest quarterbacks right now. But Cutler has been injured some, and he hasn't played great, so now I really have no idea what his market value will be come March. I would just say this: If I were a team desperate for a young quarterback, I would be thrilled to have either one of those guys on my roster in the coming seasons, no matter how much it hamstrung the rest of my salary structure.

You mentioned one boneheaded play in the Bengals-Ravens game, but it was a series of downright Detroitian moves toward the end of the game that had me shaking my head. When the Bengals were up by 10, Vontaze Burfict and Adam Jones both managed to get unnecessary 15-yard penalties on the same play. Then,

when the Bengals were up by 10 with 7 minutes left—with 1st-and-goal at the 1—they threw an interception. Why not three runs to chew up clock, followed by a field goal if the need arises? And not to be outdone, on fourth down Joe Flacco threw one up for grabs at the Cincy 15, which Dre Kirpatrick promptly intercepted for a net -35 yard play and then celebrated as if he had won the Super Bowl. Isn't this indicative of an undisciplined team and cause for pause in the playoffs?

— **Reed**
Columbus, Ohio

First of all, it was revealed on Monday that Dalton audibled to the play that resulted in the interception. I was critical of Jay Gruden in my column on Monday, but assuming the audible part of that play is true, then it's all on Dalton. In general, toughness and discipline have been worries for the Bengals in recent years, and it's something that every Bengals fan should be concerned about heading into the playoffs.

I really enjoyed Peter King's series on referees. There was one thing I didn't see addressed in the articles, however, and I was wondering if it was asked: Why aren't the refs employed full-time by the league? After all, it seems only logical that the quality of the refereeing, especially with regard to knowing all the rules (see Chargers-Chiefs field goal screwup) would be improved if refs were not distracted by one or sometimes two other jobs. Is there some reason they don't employ these guys full-time, or is it just that the NFL feels that the costs outweigh the benefits?

— **Andy**

That's a good question. All but one of the officials on the crew felt that officials are nearly full-time anyway, seeing that they spend approximately 40 hours a week doing the prep work and meetings and film study for the job. I have a very strong opinion on this. I don't think full-time officials would help much at all in trying to limit the number of mistakes NFL officials make. Most of the truly difficult calls in the NFL stem from big hits and physical contact that is so bang-bang that you really can't tell what the exact call should be unless you watch it in slow motion. The only way to get experience in making calls like that is to make more plays like that. By going to a team practice everyday, for instance, what good would that do? Teams don't practice at full-speed. Teams don't have full contact during practice. I think the way to improve officiating is to continue to drill officials so that they don't make the kind of bonehead mistakes we saw in the San Diego-Kansas City game. And if they do, I think officials should be suspended. That would drive the point home better than anything else.

While I agree with your praise of Mike McCarthy for holding the Packers together during Aaron Rodgers' absence, I believe that your Coach of the Week would have been the Goat of the Week if Green Bay had failed to complete the fourth-down pass from Rodgers to Cobb and lost by one point. McCarthy's decision to kick the extra point with about 11 minutes left, rather than go for a tying two-point conversion, was mind-boggling. It's all a moot point now (as Joey Tribiani would say), but I just don't understand the rationale behind McCarthy's decision. At that point in the game there was very little difference in trailing by one or two points, so the potential reward of the two-point try far outweighed the minimal risk of going for it. The only scenario in which it makes sense is if Green Bay fails to convert the two-point try and Chicago follows with a drive for a touchdown; then, the kick keeps it an eight-point spread and a one-possession game. However, using that logic shows that McCarthy didn't have confidence in his offense to convert or in his defense to stop the Bears. I wonder what the reaction of the players would have been if the Packers had lost by one. Peter, what did you think of McCarthy's decision?

***— Dan
Ankeny, Iowa***

I agree with you. My naming of McCarthy as Coach of the Week was more of a seasonal award for not letting the Packers fall to pieces with 17 guys on IR and his All-Pro quarterback missing half the season. You are right, he should have gone for two, and I should have pointed that out.

Peyton Manning's passing yards record will stand

By Chris Wesseling

NFL.com

December 31, 2013

Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning's single-season passing yards record will stand.

Elias Sports Bureau reviewed Manning's 7-yard pass to Eric Decker during the first quarter of the Broncos' Week 17 victory and decided against changing it to a lateral.

"The stats crew at the game scored this play as a forward pass," league spokesman Michael Signora told NFL Media Insider Ian Rapoport. "During the course of a season, there are many similar plays which could be reviewed by the Elias Sports Bureau, the league's official statistician. In this case, the determination of Elias is that the fairest resolution is for the ruling of the on-site stats crew to stand.

We applaud the decision.

The play was too close to reverse. Had Manning and the Broncos known at the time that those passing yards would be negated, he would have stayed in the game to ensure that the record would be broken.

It would have set a bizarre precedent for the statistics service to overturn a record that had stood for over two days.

Manning finished the season with 5,477 passing yards, only one more than Drew Brees' total from 2011.

In an era of offensive fireworks, Manning understands that his 2013 passing marks aren't exactly etched into the record books.

Peyton Manning passing yardage record to stand following review

By Curtis Crabtree
Pro Football Talk
December 31, 2013

Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning will remain as the league's single-season record holder for passing yards.

The Elias Sports Bureau was taking a closer look at a 7-yard completion from Manning to Eric Decker late in the first quarter of the Broncos victory over the Oakland Raiders on Sunday. Replays showed the pass very likely could have been a backward pass and therefore a lateral.

However, the play was remain as a completion and Manning will continue to hold the record after further review.

NFL Spokesman Michael Signora confirmed the determination Tuesday in a statement to PFT.

"The stats crew at the game scored this play as a forward pass. During the course of a season, there are many similar plays which could be reviewed by the Elias Sports Bureau, the league's official statistician. In this case, the determination of Elias is that the fairest resolution is for the ruling of the on-site stats crew to stand."

Taking away the completion would have left Manning six yards shy of the record. He played just long enough into the game to pick up the record before finding a seat on the bench for the remainder of the game. Manning finished the season with 5,477 yards, breaking the previous record of 5,476 by Drew Brees in 2011.

Broncos not having trouble selling playoff tickets

By Mike Florio

Pro Football Talk

December 31, 2013

Amid news of struggles by the Colts, the Bengals, and the Packers (yes, the Packers) when it comes to selling playoff tickets, one of the teams getting ready to host a playoff game has experienced no difficulties at all.

Via 9News.com, available tickets to the Broncos' divisional-round game disappeared quickly on Monday.

The tickets became available at 10:00 a.m. MT. Twenty minutes later, only single tickets remained. Within two total hours, all tickets were gone.

Even more could have been sold, based on complaints from folks who weren't able to make their desired purchases. If they really want to see NFL playoff football in person, they can make a weekend trip to Indianapolis, Cincinnati, or Green Bay.

Five Players Signed to Future Contracts

By Gray Caldwell

DenverBroncos.com

December 31, 2013

On Tuesday, the Broncos signed five players to future contracts. They will not officially join the roster until the start of the new league year in March.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- On Tuesday, the Denver Broncos signed five players to future contracts.

They will not officially join the team's roster until the start of the new league year -- March 11, 2014.

Name	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Age	Exp.	College
Mike Farrell	OL	6-6	303	24	1	Penn State
L.J. Fort	LB	6-0	230	23	1	Northern Iowa
Eric Hagg	S	6-1	205	24	3	Nebraska
Ryan Miller	OL	6-7	320	24	2	Colorado
Jordan Norwood	WR	5-11	180	27	5	Penn State

Top 13 of '13: Videos

By Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
December 31, 2013

Relive the top moments of 2013 through the 13 most-viewed videos on DenverBroncos.com.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- With 2013 coming to a close, the Broncos are the No. 1 seed in the AFC entering the postseason for the second consecutive season. Along the way, there were plenty of highlights. Relive them below with the top 13 most-watched videos of the year.

13) Elway, Fox Tell Ball He's a Bronco -- April 26, 2013

In the second round of the 2013 NFL Draft, the Broncos selected Wisconsin running back Montee Ball. Watch as Head Coach John Fox and Executive Vice President of Football Operations John Elway congratulate Ball and welcome him to the Denver Broncos.

12) Houston Locker Room Celebration -- December 22, 2013

A win in Houston in Week 16 locked up the AFC West for the Broncos. Go inside the locker room for the celebration after the victory, which included a game ball presentation from Fox to quarterback Peyton Manning, who set a new NFL record for passing touchdowns in a season in the game.

11) Highlights from Day 1 of Training Camp -- July 25, 2013

The excitement was palpable as Training Camp 2013 kicked off in late July at Dove Valley. Broncos TV provided exclusive highlights from the session -- the first for a number of notable Broncos, including new wide receiver Wes Welker. The crowd was fired up as play after play was made -- relive the early buildup to the season here.

10) BTV Highlights: Broncos vs. Ravens -- September 5, 2013

The Broncos were the only show in town as the NFL season officially kicked off in Denver. The defending Super Bowl champions were the opponent -- the same team that knocked the Broncos out of the playoffs in 2012. Manning threw seven touchdowns in a commanding Broncos win, and Broncos TV chronicled it all from field level.

9) BTV Highlights: Broncos at Cowboys -- October 6, 2013

Week 5 this season brought one of the most exciting Broncos games of the year. Denver traveled to Dallas to take on the Cowboys in what turned out to be an offensive shootout. The two teams traded blows until an interception of Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo by linebacker Danny Trevathan turned the tide in the Broncos' favor. Matt Prater sealed the victory with a game-winning field goal and Denver left Dallas on top, 51-48.

8) Prater's NFL-Record 64-Yard Field Goal -- December 8, 2013

Just before halftime of the Broncos' Week 14 tilt with Tennessee, tight end Jacob Tamme's catch on the sideline set up Matt Prater for an NFL-record field goal. CBS' Jim Nantz and Phil Simms provide the call of Prater's attempt at history -- which, of course, was successful. His 64-yard field goal provided momentum for the Broncos going into the locker room, and Denver exploded in the second half for a win.

7) Highlights and Reaction in the Rain -- August 3, 2013

The Broncos -- and their fans -- didn't let a torrential downpour dampen the enthusiasm at the annual Summer Scrimmage at Sports Authority Field at Mile High. Despite a lightning delay, the team got a full scrimmage in on their home field, and the fans that braved the rain were treated to a show.

6) Peyton Manning Mic'd Up -- December 26, 2013

On the day after Christmas, NFL Network provided a look at Manning's game against the Houston Texans in which he set a new NFL single-season passing touchdown record. He was mic'd up throughout the contest, which provided for plenty of entertainment and excitement as he made history.

5) Everything You Need to Know About the Bag Policy -- September 4, 2013

The NFL's new bag policy -- a league-wide initiative -- was a big topic of conversation this offseason. While fans are likely used to the new regulations by now, this video, posted in advance of the NFL Kickoff Game featuring the Broncos and Ravens, goes through every detail of the policy. The video is hosted by Denver Broncos Cheerleader Tara.

4) Broncos vs. Ravens: Sprint to the Summit -- September 4, 2013

As soon as the schedule was announced in April, all eyes were on the first game of the season -- the NFL Kickoff Game -- featuring the Broncos and the defending Super Bowl champion Ravens. NFL Network provided a movie trailer for the event titled "Sprint to the Summit," and it got everyone sufficiently fired up for what was to come.

3) Baltimore Locker Room Celebration -- September 5, 2013

After the Broncos defeated the Ravens to open the season, Broncos TV took you inside the locker room for the postgame celebration. Coach Fox gave Manning the game ball after he tied an NFL single-game record with seven touchdown passes. Manning gave a quick speech to the rest of the team as he broke down the huddle with a "Broncos on three."

2) Moreno Emotional During Anthem -- December 1, 2013

This video caught the attention of the nation, as CBS' cameras caught running back Knowshon Moreno crying during the National Anthem. "Pretty much like that every game," Moreno said when told the cameras caught his emotional moment. "Just really hyped up and excited to play."

1) Peyton Manning's Slip-N-Slide -- August 5, 2013

The Broncos got a full scrimmage in at Sports Authority Field at Mile High despite some rain during the Summer Scrimmage. But before that, Manning and his teammates got to have a little fun. The entire team ran out to celebrate with the fans who braved the rain, and on the way out the now-13-time Pro Bowler and his teammates dove head first onto the field. The loose atmosphere that night provided for the most-watched video of 2013.

Top 13 of '13: Articles

By Stuart Zaas

DenverBroncos.com

December 31, 2013

Relive the top moments of 2013 through the 13 most-read articles on DenverBroncos.com.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Re-live the Broncos' 2013 calendar year with the 13 most-viewed pieces of written content from DenverBroncos.com.

13) First Look at Week 1 Depth Chart, Aug. 31, 2013

Julius Thomas made his debut atop the Broncos' depth chart at the tight end position in the team's first unofficial depth chart of the season. On the other side of the ball, Duke Ihenacho, who didn't play on defense at all as a rookie in 2012, was listed as the starting strong safety.

12) Broncos Add College Free Agents, April 27, 2013

Following the 2013 NFL Draft, the Broncos' personnel staff took to the phones, adding 16 college free agents to the roster. Denver entered the 2013 season with a nine-year streak of at least one CFA making the team's Week 1 roster. That streak was pushed to double digits this year as running back C.J. Anderson made the club's opening-day roster.

11) Broncos Trim Roster to 77, Aug. 25, 2013

After three preseason games, with the NFL's deadline to cut the roster to 75 two days away, the Broncos announced 11 transactions take the roster from 88 to 77. Of the players waived, cornerback Mario Butler was the most tenured player. The other 10 players were either rookies or first-year players.

10) Mr. Bowlen's Letter to Broncos Fans, Jan. 15, 2013

Three days after the Broncos' 2012 season came to an end, Broncos Owner and CEO Pat Bowlen wrote a letter to Broncos fans. The letter covered his thoughts on the 2012 season, thanked the fans for their support and looked forward to 2013.

9) Manning Updates Health, Nov. 11, 2013

Late in the fourth quarter, quarterback Peyton Manning took a hit on a play in which he completed a 9-yard pass to wide receiver Demaryius Thomas for a first down. Manning was hit low and stayed down for a bit after the hit. After the game,

Manning said that he was "pretty sore" and that while he would get an MRI the following day, he "certainly planned" on being available for the next game.

8) Broncos' 53-Man Roster Finalized, Aug. 31, 2013

The Broncos made 22 transactions to take their roster from 75 to 53 in advance of Week 1 of the 2013 season. Five veterans were released, 13 players were waived, three went on injured reserve and one was placed on the reserve/suspended list.

7) Preseason Schedule Finalized, April 4, 2013

A few weeks before the regular-season was announced, the NFL released the finalized preseason slate. Denver's four games all came against NFC West opponents with trips to San Francisco and Seattle preceding home games against St. Louis and Arizona.

6) 2014 Opponents Finalized, Dec. 26, 2013

The end of the 2013 season meant Denver's 2014 opponents were finalized. Along with the AFC West, the Broncos will face the entire AFC East and NFC West, along with AFC North-champion Cincinnati and AFC South-champion Indianapolis.

5) Full Ron Burgundy-Peyton Manning Interview, Dec. 6, 2013

During the Broncos' bye week, Manning taped an interview with Ron Burgundy in advance of the *Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues* release. The interview was done on behalf of ESPN's SportsCenter.

4) Huff Signed; Moore to IR, Designation to Return, Nov. 19, 2013

After safety Rahim Moore underwent surgery for a condition known as lateral compartment syndrome, he was placed on injured reserve with a designation to return. The same day, the Broncos signed eighth-year safety Michael Huff, who began the season with the Ravens.

3) Manning the Multitasker, Dec. 11, 2013

Even when Peyton Manning's ankle injury kept him from participating in practice, he still found a way to stay involved in the session. A photo of Manning soaking his right ankle in the cold tub, while watching film on an iPad with his helmet on was broadcast on CBS and then made its rounds on the internet. The explanation behind the photo: Manning was listening to Offensive Coordinator Adam Gase's calls to backup quarterback Brock Osweiler while watching film, while rehabbing his ankle.

2) Moreno Expands on Pregame Emotions, Dec. 2, 2013

CBS' cameras found Knowshon Moreno with tears streaming down his face at the end of the National Anthem that preceded the Broncos' Week 13 game at Kansas City. When slow motion effects were added, it made for a shot that went viral. Moreno explained that he gets emotional before most games and that the slow motion effects made it look a lot worse than it was.

1) 2013 Denver Broncos Schedule, April 18, 2013

After months of anticipation, the NFL unveiled the Broncos' 2013 schedule. The original slate had the Broncos playing five primetime games, but with Denver's Week 11 game vs. Kansas City getting flexed to Sunday Night Football, that number ended up at six.

Upon Further Review: Broncos at Raiders

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
December 31, 2013

Independent analyst Andrew Mason breaks down Peyton Manning's record-setting performance in the Broncos' 34-14 win over the Raiders in the regular-season finale.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The record books will record the 5-yard touchdown pass from Peyton Manning to Demaryius Thomas as the one that provided Manning's final yardage and touchdown total for his 2013 season, one that was unlike any other in NFL history.

It was that touchdown about which Thomas was quizzed after the game. It was the football with which that touchdown was scored that was saved.

But it was the score that preceded it -- the 63-yard strike to Thomas -- that showed more about the offense and how the realized threat of the deep pass in the second half of the season helps take it to a higher level as the postseason arrives.

It also shows one of the aspects that makes Manning so uniquely successful: the ability to use his eyes and face to draw a defense in one direction, then cross it up by going in the other.

Manning spent most of the play looking to his left, where Eric Decker, Jacob Tamme and Julius Thomas were bunched at the snap. He even pointed in that direction as the offense set up for the snap. Until Manning throws, everything he does is to his left.

Then, with a pass rush kept at bay by his blockers, he made a slight turn and threw down the middle to the only target lined up outside and to the right: Demaryius Thomas, who by then had already beaten Phillip Adams on a post route.

Safety Brandian Ross as playing deeper than fellow safety Charles Woodson, who was in zone coverage at just inside the 50-yard-line. Woodson was monitoring the receivers coming from the left side on their intermediate routes; this left the deep responsibility to Ross, who watched Manning and looked in the same direction as he did.

Then Manning looks down the middle and fires. Ross tries to recover and changes direction at the Denver 40-yard-line, but by this time, Thomas is in full stride and has a step on Adams. Ross is slow to arrive, and Thomas easily grabs the pass.

And then there is the pass: 46 yards through the air, placed in the perfect spot for Thomas to catch it in perfect stride, from which he could easily outrun two Raiders defenders to the end zone. It was so perfect, it seemed as though it was out of a video game played at the rookie level.

The wide receiver, who capped another stellar season with his two touchdowns Sunday, said that the football with which he scored his final touchdown of 2013 was headed to Manning, to commemorate his yardage record. But the football with which he scored from 63 yards away is headed for a destination equally special -- that of a Broncos fan who had braved the hostile crowd to watch the game in Oakland's notorious "Black Hole."

"He was sitting by himself in his orange with all black around him, so I felt like he deserved it," Thomas said.

That fan now has a souvenir of the Broncos offense offering another reminder to the Chiefs, Colts or Chargers that the deep pass is alive, quite well, and demands the attention of both safeties, which could open up avenues underneath, which further helps the Broncos offense as it looks to improve on its regular-season form.