

# Derek Wolfe update

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
January 6, 2014

The Broncos had hoped second-year defensive lineman Derek Wolfe would return to practice Monday. He did not. Wolfe has been out since suffering a seizure-like episode on Nov. 29.

"He's having some medical appointments," said Broncos coach John Fox. "They haven't given him back to us. Our concern is first for Derek's medical well-being."

After missing games 12-15 of the regular season, Wolfe returned to practice on Christmas Day in a limited capacity. But he was stricken with the flu the next day, practiced again on Dec. 27, but didn't play in the Broncos' final game at Oakland and hasn't practiced since.

"I wouldn't say he had a setback," Fox said. "This isn't like an ACL or ankle injury. He's gradually getting a little more physical activity."

Wolfe, who has also suffered from food poisoning, a neck injury and weight loss during the season, would need at least two consecutive weeks of full practice participation before he would be cleared to play in a game. That means the soonest he could play is if the Broncos reach the Super Bowl. And even that would be a longshot.

The team did sign veteran defensive end Jeremy Mincey last month to replace Wolfe.

# Broncos' Wesley Woodyard keeps "captaining" despite no longer starting

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
January 7, 2014

Team captains are named to serve and lead.

Often, captainship is bestowed upon star players because ... well, who wants to follow a third-stringer?

But sometimes life doesn't go the captain's way. Three of the Broncos' five captains this season are not starters. David Bruton is a special-teams captain who competed for a starting safety job in the offseason but has played all season in "sub" packages.

Champ Bailey was a starter his first 14 seasons and earned 12 Pro Bowl berths at cornerback. He's now a nickel back.

Wesley Woodyard went from being a full-time starter in 2012 and half this season to nickel-package linebacker in recent weeks.

It's difficult for any player to endure a demotion. It's a little trickier for a captain. To Woodyard's credit, he has "captained up" and accepted his role.

"It's tough, but I'm still leading my guys out there on the field," Woodyard said. "My teammates still look to me for guidance and leadership. That's something that's going to never go away."

Denver's other captains are quarterback Peyton Manning and slot receiver Wes Welker. They're starters.

Wolfe update. The Broncos were hoping defensive lineman Derek Wolfe would return to practice Monday. He did not. Wolfe has been out since his seizurelike incident Nov. 29.

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"I wouldn't say he had a setback," Fox said. "This isn't like an ACL or ankle injury. He's gradually getting a little more physical activity."

Footnotes. Defensive end Shaun Phillips missed practice Monday because of the flu. ... Free safety Rahim Moore hasn't returned to practice. Moore has been out since Nov. 18 because of a lower left leg circulatory condition.

# Tuesday Morning QB: Elite Eight of NFL quarterbacks

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
January 7, 2014

The ratings always stir debate, but one indisputable ranking from last week was Cincinnati's Andy Dalton at No. 12 in the 12-QB playoff field. Now we're down to eight teams.

You have to love the remaining Elite Eight of NFL quarterbacks. They can be divided into two distinct groups:

- The old, slow and skilled: Peyton Manning, Tom Brady, Drew Brees and Philip Rivers. Each has at least 10 years of NFL experience. Each operates strictly from the pocket. Rivers is the youngest, at 32. He's also the slowest.
- The young, mobile and talented: Andrew Luck, Colin Kaepernick, Cam Newton and Russell Wilson. Each has two or three seasons of NFL experience. All are 24 to 26 years old. All can convert third downs with their legs. All can pass from the pocket but don't mind bailing.

Luck is the best pure passer in this group and probably is the only quarterback who fits in both groups in terms of style.

To show how strong the final eight-man field is, Rivers is ranked No. 8 this week. A look at the eight quarterbacks who have reached the playoffs' Elite Eight:

Quarterback ranking (Last week's ranking in parentheses)

1. Peyton Manning, Broncos (1) Even though Manning and his Colts were 0-2 against Philip Rivers and the Chargers in past playoff games, it's better to take on San Diego than to go through the first-game distraction of playing Andrew Luck and the Jim Irsay-owned Colts.

2. Tom Brady, Patriots (4)

First-round bye. Brady takes a 17-7 playoff record against Luck and the Colts in the second round. Should destroy the Colts' weak secondary.

3. Andrew Luck, Colts (10)

Still makes too many mistakes (three interceptions against the Chiefs), but he makes enough big plays (443 yards, four touchdowns, 45 yards rushing) in the

clutch. Wouldn't want to play against him after he just overcame a 38-10 deficit and beat the Chiefs 45-44.

#### 4. Colin Kaepernick, 49ers (8)

His legs were the difference in a bitter-cold, first-round win at Green Bay. He led all first-round players with 98 yards rushing and also threw for 227 yards and one touchdown. He's 3-1 in the playoffs.

#### 5. Drew Brees, Saints (5)

Overcame two first-half interceptions at Philly to gain his first road playoff victory, although he led the Saints to 32 and 36 points in two previous road playoff losses. He completed 20-of-30 passes for 250 yards at Philly. Saints are 8½-point underdogs against Seattle in the divisional round.

#### 6. Cam Newton, Panthers (6)

Cam vs. Colin: It's a classic matchup of third-year, multi-dimensional quarterbacks who are big, can zing it from the pocket and can run. Cam's Panthers are the only second-round home team to come off a bye as an underdog.

#### 7. Russell Wilson, Seahawks (7)

First-round bye and a 7½-point favorite in the divisional round against Brees and the Saints.

#### 8. Philip Rivers, Chargers (9)

Bob Griese-like playoff performance in San Diego's first-round victory at Cincinnati: 12-of-16 passing for 128 yards, one touchdown, no interceptions. His stats might look similar this weekend if Chargers coach Mike McCoy's time-of-possession plan works again against the Broncos. Again, the Chargers are the biggest playoff underdogs (9½ points) of the week.

Best of the rest

#### 9. Alex Smith, Chiefs (11)

It's not always about the quarterback in the playoffs. No one played better. Smith ran like Kaepernick (57 yards rushing) and passed like Brady (378 yards, four TDs, no picks) in a 45-44 loss.

#### 10. Aaron Rodgers, Packers (unranked)

The only losing quarterback who had to play in near-zero temperatures and against the 49ers' defense.

11. Nick Foles, Eagles (2)

Outplayed Brees in their first-round game, throwing two TD passes and no interceptions. But again, it's not always about the quarterback in the postseason.

12. Andy Dalton, Bengals (12)

He threw two interceptions and lost a fumble, and lost again at home. Threw for 334 yards — which explains why Peyton Manning didn't care much about his NFL season record for yards passing. Dalton fell to 0-3 in the postseason, with one TD pass and six interceptions.

# Broncos have motivation for playoff game against Chargers

By Joan Niesen  
The Denver Post  
January 7, 2014

Nothing about this Broncos season has been under the radar. Peyton Manning twitches, and it's national news.

That hasn't been the case for the San Diego Chargers, who sneaked into Denver in early December and left with a victory as a huge underdog. Two weeks later, the Chargers sidled past Kansas City in Week 17 and into the playoffs — with some help from the officiating — and Sunday they crept into Cincinnati and advanced, only a bit more assured this time, a bit louder.

Now, finally, the football world is noticing. The Broncos certainly have. Philip Rivers' band of Cinderellas is dancing, and Denver will be more than happy to shatter that glass slipper come this Sunday in the divisional playoff round.

"I was a little happy, you know, because they put one on us the last time," Denver receiver Andre Caldwell said of learning his team's opponent when the Chargers won in Cincinnati. "I feel like we owe them a little something. It adds a little punch. We're already motivated, but it adds a little punch, makes us go a little harder, work a little harder."

A month ago, the Broncos were the bullies, poised to bruise the Chargers and kick them swiftly out of Denver. Instead, the Chargers dominated time of possession and pulled off the upset, keeping their slim playoff hopes alive.

And, as much as vengeance plays into this matchup, after what happened last January, the Broncos were going to be chippy no matter which team landed on their doorstep.

"It really didn't matter who we played," receiver Demaryius Thomas said Monday. "I'm excited just to be in the playoffs and play again. So that was the main thing. But it's a great opponent."

Denver has the home field and is a 10-point favorite, similar circumstance to a season ago when it lost 38-35 in double overtime to Baltimore. Since 2005, No. 6 seeds such as the Chargers have gone 6-2 against top-seeded teams, such as the Broncos.

Upset is the currency of the NFL playoffs of late. So the Broncos would be wise to look back at that last loss to San Diego as much as look forward to avoiding a

Round 2 upset. They're not talking blame — a Thursday night home game, missing Wes Welker — but lessons.

"I think you always look back," said Broncos coach John Fox. "You try to learn from that. You try to get motivated by the future. But you want to keep your focus in the present, in the now, and that's what we're trying to do with our football team."

For now, the Broncos will need to focus on matching the Chargers physically, something receiver Eric Decker said will be one of the biggest challenges after not doing so in the Dec. 12 matchup. The Broncos will have to stop San Diego's running game and combat its improving defensive line. Oh, and there's Rivers, who has re-emerged as one of the NFL's best quarterbacks. In a game that likely will come down to offense, offense, offense, he could give Manning a run for his money.

Unlike the Broncos, who have been steadily good all season with few major dips, the Chargers are on the upswing. Fox pointed out that San Diego has played well when it needed to — late in the season with this five-game winning streak — which in the end is all that counts.

What counts comes Sunday, not a loss in December. What counts is whether Manning — and his team — can deliver when it matters.

If playing the Chargers brings that extra punch, as Caldwell suggested — well, that wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

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Eye on ...The Chargers

San Diego at Denver, 2:40 p.m. Sunday, KCNC-4

For the record: San Diego is 10-7, including 1-0 in the playoffs.

Streaking: The Chargers have won five consecutive games, most recently beating the Bengals 27-10 in Cincinnati in the first round of the playoffs. With help from Ryan Mathews' 127 yards rushing, the Chargers defeated the Broncos 27-20 in Denver on Dec. 12.

Who's hot: Shareece Wright had a 30-yard interception return against the Bengals. The cornerback also made five tackles and a quarterback hit.

Who's not: San Diego's passing game. Philip Rivers threw for only 128 yards against the Bengals. Rookie of the year candidate Keenan Allen made only two catches for 21 yards.

Key stat: The Chargers turned two interceptions and one fumble by Bengals quarterback Andy Dalton into only two field goals in their playoff opener.

FYI: The Chargers began their winning streak Dec. 8, when they beat the New York Giants 37-14 in San Diego. Coachspeak: "We misaligned on it," Chargers coach Mike McCoy said of a missed Kansas City field goal on an illegal formation by the Chargers that got his team into the playoffs as the AFC's sixth seed. "I'm not going to deny it. But, hey, those calls all balance themselves out over the year. They're part of the game. We're all human."

# Derek Wolfe, Rahim Moore out as Broncos practice for Chargers in cold

By Joan Niesen  
The Denver Post  
January 6, 2014

The Derek Wolfe and Rahim Moore watch is still on.

The Broncos, after giving Wolfe the week off last week, had planned to bring him back for Monday's practice, but he remained absent. Moore, too, was nowhere to be found; after being placed on injured reserve designated to return in November, he was eligible to practice last week but has not done so.

Shaun Phillips was also missing from the practice. He was ill, had a fever and was sent home. Coach John Fox was not required to give a full injury report Monday and thus did not give any further updates.

Other than that, though, the Broncos were healthy in Monday's frigid temperatures as they began preparing to play San Diego on Sunday afternoon. After a light week without knowing their future opponent, it's time to get down to business.

"It was just a matter of time," Fox said. "They had to play the games, and those are completed, and now we know we're playing a division team at our place."

"You get into the playoffs, and they're all difficult. That's why they have the playoffs. Regardless of if they're in your division or how many times you've played them, it's a single-elimination tournament, and whoever plays the best wins."

# Three remaining AFC teams have beaten Broncos: Big deal or no biggie?

By Joan Niesen  
The Denver Post  
January 6, 2014

Bring on that tiny hint of fear.

Bring on the reminder of mortality, the knowledge that this won't be easy, the memory of a loss exactly one month to the day before.

That was Dec. 12, Chargers-Broncos, 27-20. Philip Rivers rejoiced in his bolo tie, Manning fumed in his suit, and the Broncos' formerly perfect season became even less so.

Now, it's a blessing in disguise, what with Sunday's Broncos-Chargers III. After last Saturday's first wild-card game, in which the Indianapolis Colts beat the Kansas City Chiefs, Denver knew that whichever team it were to draw would have beaten it this season. Once the Chargers beat the Bengals not 24 hours later, the truth got even harsher. The Broncos' path to the Super Bowl will now go through two of the three teams to which they lost this season: San Diego and either New England or Indianapolis.

Call me crazy, but that might be the best news I've heard all week.

I wasn't here last season, but I can only imagine what it was like when the Broncos drew the Ravens, a much weaker team on paper that they had beaten handily not a month before. At least subconsciously, that had to have given the Broncos a twinge of superiority. We're riding an 11-game winning streak, this team is worse and, oh, we have the best quarterback of his generation. No biggie.

You know the story. It turned out to be very much of a biggie, and a year later, there's no room for any of that line of thought. Drawing the sneaky-scary Chargers and knowing either Tom Brady or Andrew Luck — Manning's nemesis and his successor — come next have to instill a sense that this matters in a big way. Which it does. Which the Broncos need.

Which means, bring on the Chargers.

Maybe these Broncos would have been hyper-focused no matter the opponent. Maybe, but this only helps, that lingering knowledge that these guys beat them, that they're on a hot streak, that they could do it again in a second, and wouldn't that be embarrassing?

So yes, all three teams remaining in the AFC playoffs have beaten the Broncos, and you know what? That's pretty great.

# Denver fans feel excitement, angst as city prepares for Broncos game

By Anthony Cotton  
The Denver Post  
January 7, 2014

Although he's been retired from the National Football League for five seasons, Rod Smith uses the word we when it comes to the Denver Broncos, proving there's still a player's anticipation for Sunday's AFC divisional playoff game against the San Diego Chargers.

"It's exciting; there are only eight teams in the league still playing, and we're one of them," Smith said Monday.

Even the idea that the contest is the third meeting of the season between the teams, or that the most recent contest resulted in a Denver loss — at Sports Authority Field at Mile High, no less — didn't matter to the former star receiver.

"To me, it's perfect," he said. "If you want to be the best team in the NFL, you don't want to duck nobody — you want to play the Chargers, you want to play the Colts, two of the teams that beat you earlier in the year. Then there's no whining from anybody."

On Monday, while Broncos players returned to work after enjoying a bye week during the opening round of the postseason, Denver started preparations for the first step in a hoped-for march to the Super Bowl. That would begin with dispatching San Diego back to California, lightning bolts tucked between their legs.

"I've just been on pins and needles ever since I found out that's who we're playing," said Shadd Ring, president of the Denver Broncos Booster Club. "We beat (Chargers quarterback) Philip Rivers and let the Colts take care of New England. Then Peyton Manning shows he's over the emotions of playing Indianapolis, and we're going to the Super Bowl."

Rather than planning ticker-tape parades, there were any number of people who, for now, would settle for avoiding a repeat of last season, when the heavily favored Broncos lost their opening playoff game to the Baltimore Ravens.

In the aftermath of that contest, said Dustin Schmitt, manager of Jackson's Denver bar and grill in LoDo, one disgruntled fan threw a pitcher of beer at a big-screen television, knocking it out of commission. There were also a couple of skirmishes between crestfallen fans.

Even more disappointing, he said, was the loss of potentially big windfalls at the bar from the AFC championship and the Super Bowl.

"That loss cost us quite a bit, so we're hoping there isn't a repeat this year," Schmitt said. "That next game would have ranked as one of our top 25 days of the year. If you don't count baseball, it probably would have been in the top three."

The loss to Baltimore was played on a bitterly cold Saturday. Conditions are expected to be much more favorable Sunday, with the forecast calling for temperatures to reach a high of 53 degrees, according to [accuweather.com](http://accuweather.com).

On the team's website, Sunday's game is listed as a sellout. As of late Monday, ticket broker StubHub said it had about 4,500 seats for sale, at prices ranging from \$139 for upper-level seats to almost \$10,000 for a field-level corner spot.

A few miles from the stadium, along the 16th Street Mall, workers began hanging "United In Orange" banners provided by the team. According to a representative for the Downtown Denver Partnership, there are also plans to install orange lights in some of the informational signs along 14th Street to show Broncos spirit.

At the nearby SportsFan store on the mall, one worker said Monday there may have been more shoppers purchasing Chargers gear than Broncos swag. At the store's location on 17th and Federal, near the stadium, manager Jim LaRoche said the next couple of days represent the calm before the storm.

"The hype really doesn't start until later, right before the weekend," he said. "Then everyone comes rushing in, asking 'What did I forget?' "

As far as Smith is concerned, the only thing the Broncos players need to concern themselves with is football.

"Right now, the guys are all getting hit up by friends and family looking for tickets, and there's a lot of emotion," he said. "But you've got to get back to football."

"That's another reason why having a bye was good — you get a chance to get some rest and heal up a little bit, and then you come back to work and dial in on what we do well to be ready for Sunday."

# Hochman: Denver Broncos' defense is confident entering playoff opener at Mile High

By Benjamin Hochman  
The Denver Post  
January 7, 2014

Malik Jackson talked with the hiccups, but this was not a hiccup.

Told about San Diego quarterback Philip Rivers' 6-2 record in Denver, the Broncos defensive tackle said Monday: "That (expletive) don't matter now. We'll see what he is after this game."

You've got to love Jackson's confidence, especially since he plays for the Broncos' defense, whose starters aren't even starters. Think about this: The Broncos are the favorites to win the AFC, and of their base defense starters, only four heading into camp were projected to start.

"But we only lost three games this year. Why shouldn't you be confident?" Jackson said between hiccups. "Yeah, we struggled in some points, but it's a learning game."

The Broncos' defense won't win them Sunday's playoff game, but as long as it doesn't lose them the game, Denver's offense will do the rest.

The 2013 Broncos are the 2010 Green Bay Packers. Those guys were decimated heading into the playoffs. At one point that season Paul Hornung got some carries. Numerous key defensive starters were injured, and in the Super Bowl, star cornerback Charles Woodson broke his collarbone. But the defense was deep enough to remain relevant. Oh, and they had a great quarterback.

It is disproportional how important a quarterback is to a football team, compared with all the other positions. Not just in football. In all sports. Besides maybe a hot hockey goalie in the playoffs, no position is more important. Look at the teams still in the playoffs. See a connection? Drew Brees, Andrew Luck, Colin Kaepernick, Tom Brady, on and on. Jamaal Charles got hurt early in the Kansas City Chiefs' playoff game — he's an elite running back — but the Chiefs still scored 44 points at Indianapolis. If Alex Smith had gotten hurt early — and he's hardly an elite quarterback — would the Chiefs have even had a shot to win on the road?

Well, the 2010 Packers had quarterback Aaron Rodgers playing at a crazy level, and the 2013 Broncos have Peyton Manning, playing at a level even Peyton Manning hadn't ascended to before.

The Broncos' defense? It's fared as well as Eli Manning in some of his games this past season. Denver linebacker Wesley Woodyard admitted Monday that the defense didn't have "that edge" it needed in the Dec. 12 loss at home to San Diego. That game was embarrassing. The Chargers came into Denver and ran the show, running all over the Broncos, running the clock down. And the Broncos didn't have Wes Welker that night. The wide receiver is a key third-down target, and Denver was 2-for-9 on third down in that loss.

But I'll take this Denver team with two weeks to prepare.

I get it. No one wants to see these Chargers. They're spunky, playing with house money, on a five-game winning streak and have a playoff victory, on the road, already in their back pockets. Five of the past seven Super Bowl champs won a wild-card game. But when was the last time there was a second-round opponent any team wanted to see? That's the point. There's no smooth sailing in January.

The pressure is on at Dove Valley. Even the chef had better cook lunch at a playoff level. But this defense, filled with "next men," is confident it can at least control Rivers, who on Sunday worried aloud that the No. 6-seeded Chargers should make sure they're not overly confident.

In Denver, the confident Jackson explained: "We need to get Philip Rivers off his spot, in the run game, we need to stuff the holes, and make sure we make tackles. Wrap up, do our jobs. ... (The regular season) was pretty much just preseason. Now we need to get ready for the real season."

# Broncos feel late losses make them better

By Arnie Stapleton  
Associated Press  
January 6, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — A year ago, Denver roared into the playoffs riding an 11-game winning streak and promptly lost for the first time in 98 days.

So much for momentum.

This year, the Broncos are again 13-3 and the AFC's top seed, two home wins away from the Super Bowl.

Only, they're far from the overconfident, sauntering unit they were at kickoff on that frigid day in Denver last January when the Baltimore Ravens would outlast them 38-35 in double-overtime.

For one thing, the team they're facing Sunday, the San Diego Chargers (10-7), beat them last month 27-20 in Denver, handing the high-scoring Broncos their only home loss of the season.

And the other teams left in the AFC playoffs also beat the Broncos this season, the Colts by six points in Peyton Manning's homecoming in October and the Patriots by a field goal in Wes Welker's return in November.

Terrell Davis, the current NFL Network analyst who led the Broncos to their last Super Bowl win following the 1998 season, said the Broncos would have been better off last year if they had lost a game or two in November and December.

"Last year, (I) just felt like they were winning games too easily and I always felt that there's something to be said about a quality loss," Davis said on a visit to Denver during training camp. "Not to say that you go out there and try to lose a game, but it's a chance for the team to refocus, recalibrate, look at the things that you've been sweeping under the rug because you've been winning games."

Coming off their first Super Bowl title, the Broncos started out 13-0 in 1998 before back-to-back losses to the Giants and Dolphins. They won their last game before sweeping through the playoffs to win another title in John Elway's farewell.

It's common for NFL teams that win to have "Victory Mondays," when players are excused from mandatory practices or film sessions. It's a chance for them to get both a physical and mental break.

But Davis pointed out the downside of winning regularly: Mistakes can get glossed over and it sometimes takes a loss to make adjustments. Good teams can go months without that opportunity.

Davis actually came to appreciate the Broncos' 20-16 loss to the Giants that ended their shot at perfection in '98 because it gave them a chance to reflect, reboot and rectify.

It's something the Broncos didn't have a chance to do last year when they won their last 11 after starting out 2-3.

This season, the Broncos lost a game in October, one in November and one in December.

"Victory Mondays" in Denver nowadays consist of team captains running the film sessions instead of coaches. But after a loss, it's the coaches harping on all the mistakes.

Wide receiver Eric Decker said errors look worse through the prism of a loss, and "you start to focus on details more. Maybe you correct certain things that in a win wouldn't look so bad. You just really dissect it way differently."

Losses have a way of galvanizing a team, too.

"Absolutely," Welker said. "A lot of times when you win, a lot of the mistakes get shoved under the rug and when you lose they kind of get amplified. You really need to be on top of that stuff and not have those mistakes week to week."

Tight end Jacob Tamme said the Broncos learned plenty from their loss last month to the Chargers.

"It taught us a lesson," Tamme said Monday. "We did kind of reboot after that and yes, I think we know that we need to play our best ball going forward and that's what we're planning on doing."

# Broncos' new rallying cry: Remember the Chargers

By Arnie Stapleton  
Associated Press  
January 6, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — Forget the Ravens.

Remember the Chargers.

Kickoff in the Broncos' AFC Divisional round game this weekend comes exactly a year after Jacoby Jones' 70-yard last-gasp touchdown catch sparked Baltimore's upset of Denver in double-overtime.

But the Broncos don't have to go all the way back to their playoff pratfall against Baltimore for inspiration when they host San Diego on Sunday.

The Broncos, again the AFC's top seed after another 13-3 regular season, can draw plenty of motivation from their latest slip-up just a month ago, when the Chargers (10-7) handed them their only home loss of the season, 27-20.

"We beat the Ravens in the opener, so we checked that one off our list already," defensive end Malik Jackson said Monday. "Now, we need to check the Chargers off our list."

The Broncos were held to their lowest output of their record-breaking season by the Chargers on Dec. 12, when Peyton Manning spent most of his night stewing on the sideline.

Manning had complained about the short week of preparation leading up to that game and some of his teammates acknowledged afterward that they had their minds more on the long weekend of R&R that followed that final Thursday night game of the year than on fending off a good team scrapping for a playoff berth.

The Broncos have the bye-week advantage this time while the Chargers had to play over the wild-card weekend, upsetting Cincinnati on the road 27-10 Sunday to earn a return ticket to Denver.

"That rest, it really helped a lot," Jackson said. "Sitting there and watching these teams play really made you realize that you don't want to be there the next few weeks sitting there watching other teams play. So, it let us rejuvenate our bodies and our minds and now we're ready to go out there and start this new season."

These two original AFL franchises have met 108 times, but never in the playoffs.

The Chargers, coached by Mike McCoy, the Broncos' former offensive coordinator, gave Denver fits this season. They held the Broncos to an average of 24 points in their two AFC West matchups, almost two touchdowns below their 37.9 average, which was the highest of any team in the Super Bowl era.

Denver won at San Diego in November by eight points when Demaryius Thomas scored three TDs, but the Broncos were without slot receiver Wes Welker for the rematch and sorely missed him on third down. Welker is back from a concussion that kept him out for the final 3½ games.

In San Diego's win at Denver, the Chargers played keep-away from Manning, controlling the clock for 38 minutes. Ryan Mathews (127 yards on 29 carries) became the only running back to top 100 yards against Denver all season, and the Chargers gained 103 yards on first down.

Mathews has been bothered by a sore ankle and had just one carry after halftime against the Bengals. The Broncos also shored up their run defense after losing to the Chargers by signing Jeremy Mincey, who was released by Jacksonville. Defensive tackle Sylvester Williams, Denver's first-round draft pick, has also picked up his play.

For the Chargers to stay close to the Broncos' record-setting offense led by Manning, who set NFL records with 55 TD passes and 5,447 yards through the air, they will need their own quarterback, Philip Rivers, to make lots of big plays.

He has certainly done that over the years in Denver, where he's 6-2 in his career. He'd be 7-1, too, if not for Ed Hochuli's blown call on Jay Cutler's last-minute fumble in 2008.

"Yeah?" Jackson retorted. "(Stuff) don't matter now. We're about to get a ninth game. We'll see what he is after this game."

Even though the Broncos say they needn't look back at last year's playoff flop any longer, they also can't forget how they failed to parlay a stellar regular season into a great playoff run.

"You don't harp on the first time you fell off your bike, but you remember falling off and you know you don't want to do it again," tight end Julius Thomas said. "So, it's not that we're dwelling on the Ravens or even if it's about the Ravens. It could have been any team that we lost to. But we do have a fresh reminder of if you don't come out and play your 'A' game in this tournament, you're going to lose."

Notes: DE Shaun Phillips was sent home sick Monday. ... It looks increasingly unlikely DE Derek Wolfe will play in the postseason. He has only practiced twice — on Dec. 25 and 27 — since suffering seizure-like symptoms on the team bus Nov. 29.

# Bolts earn another postseason shot at Manning

By Bernie Wilson  
Associated Press  
January 6, 2014

SAN DIEGO (AP) — To keep their improbable playoff run going, the San Diego Chargers will have to beat Peyton Manning in January for the third time in seven seasons.

The Chargers won 27-10 at Cincinnati on Sunday to earn a shot at Manning and the top-seeded Denver Broncos on Sunday, the first time the AFC West rivals have met in the postseason.

When Manning was with Indianapolis, the Chargers eliminated the Colts from the playoffs in the 2007 and '08 seasons.

Manning has beaten the Chargers three of four times since joining the Broncos, although the Chargers pulled a shocker in Denver last month.

Says Pro Bowl safety Eric Weddle: "Do we believe we can win? Yes. Do we know what a tough challenge it is and how great we have to play? Yeah."

# Ex-NFL player Caldwell charged in gambling case

Associated Press  
January 6, 2014

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — Former NFL and University of Florida player Donald "Reche" Caldwell has been arrested by Tampa police on charges of operating an illegal gambling house and bookmaking.

Police say Caldwell was one of three leaders of the operation. Five other men are facing a variety of charges including probation violations, possession of a control substance and illegal gambling.

The 34-year-old Caldwell was a standout wide receiver at Florida and was chosen in the second round of the 2002 NFL draft by the San Diego Chargers. He also played for the New England Patriots and Washington Redskins. His younger brother Andre Caldwell is a receiver for the Denver Broncos.

Jail records show Caldwell is free on \$4,000 bail in the gambling case. Court records Monday didn't list an attorney for him.

# Broncos have to turn rest into ready

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
January 6, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The video, shot by the San Diego Chargers staff and posted on the team's website, is less than a minute long, but it provides a tidy glimpse into what the Chargers will bring with them to Denver this weekend.

They will bring the usual assortment of football items, but they will also pack a hefty helping of the why-not factor. And what's the why-not factor worth? It's been worth plenty in recent years since the last three Super Bowl winners played on the wild-card weekend and upset at least one of the top two seeds in each conference on the way to the title.

But it's there, in a jubilant Chargers locker room immediately following the team's 27-10 victory Sunday over the Cincinnati Bengals in Paul Brown Stadium, when Chargers head coach Mike McCoy addressed the team with this:

"We knew it wasn't going to be easy, we knew that for sure ... There is 53 of us in here that believed and everybody else in the organization. It's us against the world and that's all we need men."

Ah, us against the world. Yes, the 11 years McCoy spent on Fox's coaching staff has shown itself a bit there. McCoy has used plenty of things from his experiences with the Broncos and the Panthers as he pushed the Chargers into the playoffs in his first year as head coach, including practice schedules, meeting schedules to go with several other day-to-day items.

And while the us-against-the-world mantra certainly was used long before Fox was a football coach, it is a foundation principle for Fox, no matter where his team actually sits in the standings at any given moment. Fox is fond of walking through the Broncos' complex offering "we're under attack men," in relation to all of the outside influences that peck away at whatever the plan is on the drawing board, including media, endorsements, media, distractions, media and the like.

Wilt Chamberlain said "nobody cheers for Goliath" and the Broncos will certainly have to wrestle with the Goliath side of the equation this week. McCoy will portray his team as the why-not-us upstart that has won its past five games, including Sunday and six of the past seven to get this far.

Fox has already warned the Broncos the Chargers are the hot team, offered a reminder or two about the Chargers' victory in Denver Dec. 12, the second victory of the current San Diego win streak.

"They've been playing hungry. I think from our game on, it's been playoff football

for them," said Broncos wide receiver Eric Decker. "They've been playing well as a team. For us, our biggest thing is we've got to match them physically. We've got to bring some energy. I think that is something we didn't do last time around. But again, that is in the past. We're focused on the present and really our matchup this weekend at home."

The question of rest versus momentum is weighed in each postseason and over the past eight years or so momentum is winning the battle more often than not. Six of the past eight Super Bowl winners played on the wild-card weekend. That means in six of those eight years, the top two seeds in each conference, the ones who said they wanted that week off to open the postseason, who got at least one home game, did not turn those luxuries into a Super Bowl win.

Some in the league simply believe it's a factor of free agency and the salary cap, that the separation of talent between the 12 playoff teams is wafer-thin and that translates into lower seeds winning Super Bowls.

Or that having a quarterback such as Aaron Rodgers, Eli Manning or Joe Flacco -- the Super Bowl winners of the past three years -- makes you a contender if you can do just enough along with him.

Either way, the last time a No. 6 seed came to Denver for a playoff game, the Pittsburgh Steelers used a first-half dissection of the Broncos' defensive game plan to power them to a win on the way to a Super Bowl victory to close out the 2005 season. Cornerback Champ Bailey is the only current Broncos player who was on the field that day and has repeatedly talked of the importance of a good team playing like a good team when asked to explain that game.

And that is really the Broncos' task this week. To handle being the favorite and then simply playing like it when it's time.

# Wolfe, Phillips don't practice for Broncos

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
January 6, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Denver Broncos defensive end Derek Wolfe continues to work toward his potential return to the field, but he was held out of practice again Monday.

Broncos coach John Fox had initially said Friday Wolfe would "be back Monday," but the team's medical staff is still working with Wolfe and team officials said Monday afternoon Wolfe has had scheduled visits with physicians that have kept him from other team activities. Wolfe is not expected to play Sunday against the San Diego Chargers, but Broncos officials were quick to point out Monday they didn't believe Wolfe had suffered a setback in his return and the team still has at least some optimism he will play if the Broncos continue to advance in the postseason.

They have not placed him on injured reserve despite having several opportunities of late when a roster move needed to be made.

"When he's cleared, he'll be back," Fox said. "That's all in the hands of the medical people."

Wolfe did not take part in the team's two practices last week during their playoff bye week. The Broncos will not release an injury report this week until Wednesday.

Wolfe has not played since suffering "seizure-like symptoms" Nov. 29 on the team's bus ride to the airport for a trip to Kansas City. He took part in the Broncos' Christmas Day practice, missed the next day with the flu and then practiced on a limited basis Dec. 27.

Those were the only two practices Wolfe has participated in since his incident.

Wolfe was then left home when the Broncos went to Oakland for the regular-season finale. The Broncos have put Wolfe through some conditioning work in recent weeks and the Broncos have seen enough to have kept him on the active roster to this point.

Defensive end Shaun Phillips was sent home Monday because he had arrived to work feeling ill and with a fever, Fox said. Phillips and Wolfe were the only players on the Broncos' 53-man roster who did not take part in Monday's practice.

Safety Rahim Moore, who has been designated for return from injured reserve, after surgery on his lower leg to alleviate bleeding in the muscle, is eligible to practice this week. Moore, however, did not take part in Monday's practice.

By rule Moore could play in the AFC Championship Game if he is cleared by the team's medical staff before then.

# A year later playoff loss still trails Broncos

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
January 6, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The Denver Broncos will now spend a football week in an odd little space between what they want to leave behind and what the city around them simply cannot, will not, let go.

Even the calendar won't cooperate with the team because when it opens its postseason Sunday afternoon in Denver – Jan. 12 – it will be a year to the day the Broncos were ushered from last year's Super Bowl festivity with a double-overtime loss to the Baltimore Ravens on the same field where the Broncos will go to work Sunday against the San Diego Chargers.

So, on one hand you have the Broncos, who have essentially answered for last winter's playoff loss in each of the 52 weeks that have followed, trying to recognize it, acknowledge it, then push it aside to focus on the task at hand. And on the other you have a Broncos-mad region that has essentially looked at nothing else over the past year using it as the frame around the 2013 season, even as Peyton Manning and team's offense carved up the league's record book.

Or as former Broncos defensive end Alfred Williams put it so bluntly this past August, that the Broncos were the only team in the league "with 20 preseason games."

And it's going to be an important line to walk for the Broncos in the coming days, especially in this time in the NFL when fortune has seemed to favor those who played during wild-card weekend and the pressure of waiting has taken down more than one No. 1 seed in recent seasons. The last three Super Bowl winners came out of games on wild-card weekend.

"It's like the NCAA basketball tournament: At the end of the day, you can get hot and a lower seed can win," said Broncos head coach John Fox. "It's just been that way here in recent history anyway, hasn't always been the case ... but you get hot at the right time, that's the key."

The Broncos have done their level best for 12 months to own the crushing loss to the Ravens. They have answered the questions, shown the proper amount of disappointment, done a franchise's due diligence as it sifted through the football rubble.

But now, right now, they'd really like to worry about this year. So, while they will spend much of their days working on the Chargers, much of the conversation outside the team's walls will likely be on how these Chargers look like those Ravens

looked when they came to Denver last year.

A topic many of the Broncos' players don't much feel like holding on to right now as a talking point, at least in the public domain. Asked in recent days if the loss to the Ravens has been mentioned since the end of the regular season, Broncos running back Knowshon Moreno simply said, "It doesn't matter."

Asked about what he learned from last year, Moreno added: "I'm not worried about last year, to tell you the truth. I'm ready for this year, ready for this new season. Last year is last year. Let's get it going this year."

And that is what you would expect from those inside the Broncos' locker room, right out of the if-you-get-this-question playbook. Their problem right now is on the field, their problem is the Chargers, a team that handed them the only other home loss – 28-20 on Dec. 12 – since the Broncos lost to the Ravens, a task the team's veteran players have said that needs to be elevated above all of the other football matters this week.

Fox has consistently talked of his desire and the necessity of keeping the team's "focus small," as in the dilemma right in front of it, rather than continually picking at what's already happened or worrying about what's to come.

"You always look back, that what's the past is, you try to learn from that," Fox said. "You try to get motivated by the future, but you want to keep your focus in the present, in the now, and that's what we're trying to do with our football team."

It will certainly take some work. If the Broncos lock the gates to the castle and hunker down inside, unplug the cable, confiscate all manner of smartphones, perhaps then, and only then, could they avoid being awash in questions about where the Ravens loss fits in whatever becomes of this postseason. Questions about whether heartbreak is really enough fuel to win a championship.

But in the end, the simple truth remains: That loss has trailed the Broncos every inch of the way since they left the field a year ago, a procession of stunned expressions at the level of the opportunity that had just been lost. It will trail them after Sunday, no matter what the scoreboard says, until there is a win big enough to shove it aside in the minds of their faithful.

That's just the bottom line and the Broncos will have to find a way, in the present, to deal with it.

"It was hurtful," said wide receiver Demaryius Thomas. "But now it's something new. We've looked past that. I think we've got ourselves in a great situation and position to know we don't want that to happen again. ... We just go to work, that's what we do."

# NFL divisional playoffs previews: Going from eight to a final four

By Pete Prisco

CBSsports.com

January 6, 2014 3:07 pm ET

The divisional round of the NFL Playoffs, to me, is the best weekend in sports -- eight teams to get to four.

But it will be tough to top what we saw this past weekend in the three of the four wild-card games.

To get a jump on what to expect, here's a quick look at each of the four games this weekend.

NFC: Saints at Seahawks, 4:35 p.m. Saturday (Fox)

The skinny: The last time the Saints went into Seattle in early December, the Seahawks blew them out 34-7. The Saints didn't even compete. But they went on the road and beat the Eagles last Saturday night, which shows they can win on the road, to earn another shot. The Seahawks earned the top seed in the NFC, and lost only once at home. The Cardinals beat them in Week 16 in Seattle.

Interesting stat from first game: The Saints won with running back Marshawn Lynch rushing for only 45 yards and 2.8 per rush. They won because Russell Wilson threw for 310 yards and three touchdown passes.

Key matchup: Saints left tackle Terron Armstead vs. Seahawks pass rushers -- Armstead wasn't starting the last time they met, but he has the past three weeks. He did a heck of a job against Trent Cole last week. Seattle will come at him in waves on passing downs.

Saints player on the spot: Running back Mark Ingram. Yes, Ingram. Why? The Saints showed last week that he could help take the pressure off Drew Brees with the running game. They have to run it some to keep the Seattle pass rush from teeing off on Brees.

Seahawks player on the spot: Cornerback Richard Sherman. He talks a big game, but against a passing attack like the Saints he has to back it up. He did in the first game.

Saints assistant who should be concerned: It's offensive line coach Bret Ingalls. He has to keep Brees clean, which won't be easy because of all the different looks the Seahawks throw at an offense in pressure situations.

Seahawks assistant who should be concerned: Defensive coordinator Dan Quinn. This will be his first playoff game as a coordinator. And he gets Brees? That's tough.

AFC: Colts at Patriots, 8:15 p.m. Saturday, 8:15 p.m. (CBS)

The Skinny: The Colts come into this one off their impressive 45-44 come-from-behind victory against the Chiefs. They were down 28 points and rallied behind Andrew Luck. The Patriots are the No. 2 seed in the AFC and were resting last week. These two didn't play in the regular season.

Key Matchup: Patriots tackles Nate Solder and Marcus Cannon vs. Robert Mathis -- Mathis is the key to the Colts defense, especially against good passing teams. He has to be able to get pressure on Tom Brady.

Colts player on the spot: It has to be Luck. He lost his only road playoff game as a rookie last season, but now knows what playoff winning feels like. Is he on a roll with what he did against the Chiefs?

Patriots player on the spot: Defensive end Chandler Jones. He had 11 1/2 sacks during the regular season. He has to be able to pressure Luck.

Colts assistant who should be concerned: Offensive coordinator Pep Hamilton. His team is coming off a lot of points when they went up-tempo. Now what does he do against Bill Belichick and all his schemes?

Patriots assistant who should be concerned: Defensive coordinator Matt Patricia has a defense that was 26th in the league in third-down defense and now has to face a hot Luck.

NFC: 49ers at Panthers, 1:05 p.m. Sunday (Fox)

The Skinny: The 49ers earned their way here with a tough 23-20 victory at Green Bay on Sunday. The 49ers won behind the passing and running of Colin Kaepernick and tough defense. The Panthers earned the week off as the No. 2 seed. They went to San Francisco earlier this year and beat the 49ers 10-9 in a game dominated by their defense.

Interesting stat from first game: Kaepernick was limited to 107 total yards, 91 passing and 16 rushing.

Key Matchup: It's Panthers defensive ends Greg Hardy and Charles Johnson vs. 49ers tackles Joe Staley and Anthony Davis. Hardy and Johnson had 2 1/2 sacks the last time they played.

49ers player on the spot: Wide receiver Michael Crabtree. He didn't play in the first meeting and he's coming off a 100-yard receiving day against the Packers. He is key to the passing attack.

Panthers player on the spot: Quarterback Cam Newton. He's had a nice season, but this is playoff time. Can he take it to the next level in the postseason?

49ers assistant who should be concerned: 49ers O-line coach Mike Solari has one of the best units in the league. But his guys face a tough challenge this week in that Carolina front.

Panthers assistant who should be concerned: Panthers offensive coordinator Mike Shula has done some good things with Newton. But what does he have in store for his first playoff game?

AFC: Chargers at Broncos, 4:40 p.m. Sunday (CBS)

The Skinny: The Chargers earned their way to face the Broncos for the third time by going to Cincinnati and upsetting the Bengals. They did a great job on defense against the Bengals, getting four turnovers. They also ran the ball on offense. The last time these two teams met, the Chargers won 27-20 on Dec 12. The Broncos won at San Diego early in the season. The Broncos earned the bye by being the top seed in the AFC with Peyton Manning putting up record passing numbers.

Interesting stat from last meeting: The Broncos ran for 18 yards on 11 carries when San Diego beat them in early December. Knowshon Moreno averaged 2.4 yards per carry.

Key Matchup: I will go with the Chargers pass rushers vs. the Broncos tackles. It's up to Melvin Ingram and Co. to get pressure on Peyton Manning. Can Chris Clark and Orlando Franklin keep him clean?

Chargers player on the spot: Safety Eric Weddle. He is the guy who lines up the secondary and can blitz and cover. He will be key against Manning and his receivers.

Broncos player on the spot: Manning has had an unreal season throwing it, but we know he is defined by what happens in the playoffs.

Chargers assistant who should be concerned: Secondary coach Ron Milus has an inexperienced group for the most part, and now has to face that passing game again? He did work on the Broncos staff last season, so he knows what's coming.

Broncos assistant who should be concerned: Defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio. Where does he get the pass rush without Von Miller?

Billick: Don't look now, but the Broncos have a roadblock ahead

# Billick: Don't look now, but the Broncos have a roadblock ahead

By Brian Billick  
FOX Sports  
January 6, 2014

Observations from Wild Card Weekend ...

1. For the fourth time since 1990, both No. 6 seeds won. It's just another case for reseeding the playoffs once the field has been set. Despite their win, it just doesn't seem right that the 11-win Saints had to travel to the 10-win Eagles in the first place. With that said, seeding doesn't really matter anyway. In the past five Super Bowls, the Saints are the only No. 1 seed to win it all while the Steelers won as a No. 2 seed, the Ravens and Giants both won as No. 4 seeds and the Packers won as the aforementioned sixth seed.

2. I wouldn't have given Jay Cutler the \$100 million contract, so I surely wouldn't give it to Andy Dalton. The Bengals don't have to make that decision for another season, but they may want to start planning for the future starting right now. Just compare him to Andrew Luck. Player to player, that isn't a fair comparison, but who has the better defense? Dalton. The better wide receivers? Dalton. The better offensive line? Dalton. The better running backs? Dalton. Yet, Luck has a postseason win in just two tries while Dalton is 0-3.

3. As I watched all the games this weekend, there was plenty of commentary regarding the way that the officials were "letting them play" and allowing for a more physical game to be played. They were throwing fewer flags for holding along the offensive line. Less holding in the defensive secondary and allowing more contact with the ball in the air. I have a problem with this. The calls have to be consistent from the regular season to the postseason. I like the way the game was called this weekend, but it needs to be called that way in Weeks 1-17 as well.

4. If you are playing defensive back in the NFL postseason, please just GET BACK! If you have the deep third, and you think you are deep enough, take another two steps. You would think this lesson was taught loud and clear in Denver last season, but apparently the Chiefs weren't watching. You had a 28-point lead. All you had to do was stop T.Y. Hilton from blowing the top off your defense. BACK UP!

5. John and Jim Harbaugh are the first pair of brothers to serve as NFL head coaches in the same season. But they shouldn't be the only ones. You have all heard of the Ryan brothers, and with Rob's quick success in New Orleans as he turned around one of the worst defenses in NFL history in just one season, you may think they are the pair that I am talking about. Rob may get his shot, but for my money, I'd take a hard look at John Pagano. John is the defensive coordinator of the San Diego Chargers and the brother of Colts head coach Chuck Pagano. John is

a respected leader and a solid football coach. He deserves to be a head coach in the NFL.

6. The sexy thing heading into this season was the no-huddle, quick-paced approach that allowed for an offense to run as many plays as possible during the course of the game. But just ask the Saints and 49ers how important a pounding rushing game that can eat clock at the end of the game can be. The Saints, down by one, took possession with 4:54 remaining and ate up the entire clock before kicking the game-winning field goal with zeroes on the scoreboard. Then on Sunday, in a tie game, the 49ers took possession with 5:06 remaining and drained the clock before kicking a 33-yard, game-winning field goal with no time left. In both cases, the opposing teams used their final two timeouts during the drives, but still couldn't get a final possession.

7. Last year, the Seattle Seahawks were the only team to win on the road as home teams went 3-1 during the wild-card round. But this year, it was the exact opposite. Only the Colts were able to hold serve at home while the Packers, Eagles and Bengals all lost. I'm not sure if that says more about the winners or the losers, but it is an interesting statistic.

8. The Broncos went 13-3 this season, and the three teams they lost to are all still alive in the playoffs after the first round. The Colts beat the Broncos 39-33 in Week 7, the Patriots beat them by three in Week 12 and the Chargers won by a touchdown in Week 15. The Broncos may be the No. 1 seed in the AFC playoffs, but they have lost to every team remaining on their side of the bracket and that has to give them a little heartburn moving forward.

# Team Report - DENVER BRONCOS

The SportsXchange / Yahoo! Sports  
January 7, 2014

When the San Diego Chargers finished their 27-10 win at Cincinnati Sunday, it assured the Denver Broncos that they would open their postseason against the team that has given them more trouble at Sports Authority Field at Mile High than any other.

The Chargers have won six of eight games in Denver since Philip Rivers ascended to the starting quarterback role in 2006. They are the only AFC West team to defeat the Broncos since Peyton Manning arrived in 2012, and they have more wins at Denver's 13-year-old stadium than anyone else. And with ex-Broncos offensive coordinator Mike McCoy as their head coach, they have a mind more familiar with Denver than anyone not at Broncos headquarters -- which they exploited to pull off a 27-20 upset on Dec. 12 that looms massive now.

But the Broncos don't think that the Chargers' regular-season win in Denver means much in regards to Sunday's game. Circumstances and lineups have changed. New strengths have emerged for each team in the final two weeks of the season.

"I think it's a little different now," said wide receiver Demaryius Thomas. "It's the playoffs -- it's win or go home. I think everybody knows that. Our main focus is going out and playing Broncos football so we can play another week."

The bye week has not been the advantage it once was. From 1978 through 2004, teams that came off a first-round bye were 62-20 against those that advanced from the wild-card round, a .756 winning percentage. Since 2005, teams that had a bye for the wild-card round are 18-14 in the divisional playoffs, a percentage of .563.

But for the Broncos, the week helped them get healthier. Wide receiver Wes Welker returned from missing three weeks due to a second concussion in four games, and safety Duke Ihenacho and offensive lineman Steve Vallos returned to practice after suffering concussions of their own in the last two weeks of the regular season.

It also helped them understand that the couch isn't where they want to spend late December.

"It really helped a lot," said defensive lineman Malik Jackson. "Sitting there watching these teams play really makes you realize that you don't want to be there the next few weeks watching the teams play. It kind of let us rejuvenate our bodies and our minds and now we're ready to go out to get these one-week seasons going."

NOTES, QUOTES

--The Chargers controlled the pace of their 27-20 win over Denver on Dec. 12 because of Philip Rivers' accuracy and a steady ground game that exploited the Broncos' personnel shifts on defense and controlled the tempo, helping lead to some lengthy, drawn-out drives.

But Denver's offense was also culpable. It stumbled badly in the second and third quarters, leading to a series of short possessions that gave the defense little chance to rest and allowed the Chargers multiple opportunities to build their advantage to 14 points before the Broncos finally drew within seven in the fourth quarter.

On four consecutive first downs, the Broncos lost an average of one yard, and never gained more than three yards. That failure forced them into four third downs with an average of 8.75 yards to gain, including a pair from 11 and 16 yards. The Broncos failed to convert all of them, forcing them to settle for a field goal and three consecutive three-and-outs.

While the Broncos struggled, the Chargers ran four possessions, consumed 32 plays and 16 minutes, eight seconds of clock time, turning a 10-3 deficit into a 24-10 advantage.

If the Broncos are to reverse the result, first-down production will be at least as important as their third-down success rate. Their chances on third downs are enhanced by the expected return of wide receiver Wes Welker, but if they're in third-and-8 or more, the consistency they crave will prove elusive.

"You've always got to start with the positive play -- whether it's a two-, three-yard or maybe a 10-yard play," said wide receiver Eric Decker. "It always gets you rolling and that makes third downs easier, when you're in third-and-short."

--The Broncos have not ruled out a potential return for defensive lineman Derek Wolfe, but the signs do not look promising.

Wolfe has not practiced since taking part on a limited basis Dec. 25 and 27 in advance of the game with the Raiders. That work represents the entirety of his practice participation since suffering a seizure-like event on Nov. 29 before the Broncos left for a Week 13 game at Kansas City.

Broncos coach John Fox said Jan. 3 that he expected Wolfe to practice Monday, but when the Broncos took the field, he was one of only three players to not take part.

Without Wolfe, Malik Jackson has seen more time, working as a defensive end in base packages and defensive tackle in pass-rush formations. Jackson and Wolfe shared that role throughout the first 11 games of the season prior to Wolfe's absence.

QUOTE TO NOTE: "You try to learn from (the past). You try to get motivated by the future. But you want to keep your focus in the present, in the now, and that's what

we're trying to do with our football team." -- Broncos head coach John Fox, on whether his team will take lessons from the 27-20 loss to San Diego on Dec. 12.

## STRATEGY AND PERSONNEL

### PLAYER NOTES

--RB Knowshon Moreno heads into the divisional round hoping to atone for buckling under the strain in last year's divisional playoff loss to Baltimore. Moreno succumbed to a knee injury during the third quarter, leaving the Broncos' ground game to smaller Ronnie Hillman, fullback Jacob Hester and utility backup Lance Ball. Without Moreno, the Broncos couldn't gain the two first downs they needed in the final minutes of regulation, giving the Ravens one last chance that they turned into a 71-yard, game-tying touchdown pass.

--G Louis Vasquez became the first guard in Broncos history to be named a first-team All-Pro. Vasquez has not allowed a sack all season and was the only free agent who changed teams last year to make the first-team All-Pro squad.

--K Matt Prater collected his first All-Pro nod, earning second-team honors behind Baltimore's Justin Tucker. Prater will also go to his first Pro Bowl after a regular season in which he missed just one field-goal attempt and hit an NFL-record 64-yard field goal in Week 14.

--LB Wesley Woodyard was replaced in the base defense in Week 14 by Paris Lenon, and has been limited mostly to duty in the Broncos' nickel package ever since. Woodyard said that the neck sprain he suffered in Week 5 has not affected him and did not lead to his reduction in playing time.

--CB Champ Bailey could be a difference-maker Sunday. With Bailey sidelined in the Week 15 loss to San Diego, the Chargers opted to pick on rookie cornerback Kayvon Webster, who was working as the No. 3 cornerback behind Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie and Chris Harris. Bailey's return solidified the Broncos' nickel defense. In the three games Bailey has played from start to finish this year, the Broncos' defense has accounted for 13.3 points allowed per game.

### INJURY IMPACT

--WR Wes Welker has passed the league-mandated post-concussion protocol and has participated in all three practices since the end of the regular season. Welker is expected to play against the Chargers this week after missing the last three regular-season games, including the Dec. 12 loss to San Diego.

--DL Derek Wolfe has missed five consecutive games after suffering seizure-like symptoms on Nov. 29, two days before the Broncos' second win over the Chiefs this season. Wolfe practiced on Dec. 25 and 27, but has not practiced since then.

Broncos coach John Fox said Jan. 3 that he expected Wolfe to practice Monday, but that proved not to be the case.

--DE Shaun Phillips did not practice Monday, after being sent home because of a fever. Phillips is expected to return later this week and play against his former team.

--S Duke Ihenacho has practiced the last three sessions after suffering a concussion against Oakland. Ihenacho returned to the starting lineup in Week 16 after being benched, but his work is limited to the base defense.

--CB Kayvon Webster has not missed a practice since sitting out the last two games of the regular season because of a fractured thumb. Webster has practiced with a cast on his right hand since undergoing surgery Dec. 13, one day after suffering the fracture against San Diego.

--C Steve Vallos missed Week 17 because of a concussion incurred when he was hit by Houston's Jared Crick on a first-quarter kickoff return on Dec. 22, but has participated in the three practices the Broncos held around their bye weekend and is expected to play against the Chargers.

--S Rahim Moore is eligible to practice, but did not take part in the Broncos' on-field sessions Jan. 2, 3 and 6. Moore has been on injured reserve since Week 12 after suffering from compartment syndrome in his leg, which necessitated surgery hours after the Broncos' Nov. 17 win over the Chiefs. The Broncos used the recallable injured-reserve designation on him, and he is eligible to practice now, although he cannot play until the AFC Championship Game, if the Broncos advance that far.

# A Perfect Weekend (Except the Bengals)

By Peter King  
MMQB/SI.com  
January 6, 2014

Seven teams playing scintillating playoff football (some even dabbled with defense), and then Cincinnati. You know, the same old Bengals. Isn't that what the weekend felt like? Great, great football on a 139-point Saturday, and drama galore in the last game of the weekend Sunday evening, the modern-day Ice Bowl in Green Bay (where the Packers, suddenly, have a home-field playoff disadvantage). But what an Akili Smith-sized egg the Bengals laid, and the resurgent Chargers were only too happy to take the win they overwhelmingly deserved.

Which of these things doesn't belong:

- a. 45-44, with a team winning after trailing 38-10.
- b. 26-24, on a field goal at the gun by a kicker who was unemployed three weeks ago.
- c. 27-10. Drama-free.
- d. 23-20, in minus-14 wind chill, on a field goal at the gun by a 15-year NFL kicker who'd never won a playoff game.

Not to break any hearts in the Queen City, and not to set an NFL record for overreaction, but a snapshot of the 2011 and 2012 drafts show how sick Bengaldom must be today.

Overall Pick	Player, Pos., School	Status
2011		
35. Cincinnati	Andy Dalton, QB, TCU	0-3 in the playoffs. Not exactly a fan favorite today.
36. San Francisco	Colin Kaepernick, QB, Nevada	3-1 in the playoffs. Pretty darn good.
2012		
53. Cincinnati	Devon Still, DL, Penn State	289 mostly futile snaps in two years.

75. Seattle	Russell Wilson, QB, Wisconsin	The second coming of Drew Brees, perhaps.
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The Bengals have to be despondent this morning. They should be. They're not sure if their 4,000-yard quarterback is the future of the franchise.

So much to talk about after one of the great playoff weekends in memory, and let's not be all Debbie Downer about it.

\* \* \*

The divisional round schedule:

Saturday, 4:35 p.m. ET: New Orleans (No. 6, 12-5) at Seattle (No. 1, 13-3). They met five weeks ago tonight, at CenturyLink Field, and the Seahawks embarrassed the Saints 34-7. Seattle's shown signs of mortality since.

Saturday, 8:15 p.m. ET: Indianapolis (No. 4, 12-5) at New England (No. 2, 12-4). The only game that isn't a rematch of a regular-season game this year. They did meet last year, and the Pats put up 59 on the Colts. But T.Y. Hilton wasn't T.Y. Hilton then. Come to think of it, Julian Edelman wasn't Julian Edelman either.

Sunday, 1:05 p.m. ET: San Francisco (No. 5, 13-4) at Carolina (No. 2, 12-4). The Panthers won with stifling defense Nov. 10 at Candlestick, 10-9. Colin Kaepernick was smothered that day (107 total yards, six sacks). Left tackle Joe Staley will have his hands full with rising-star pass rusher Greg Hardy.

Sunday, 4:40 p.m. ET: San Diego (No. 6, 10-7) at Denver (No. 1, 13-3). Split during the regular season, including San Diego's win at Denver 25 days ago. If you're a Broncos fan, this should concern you: In eight 2013 quarters, the composite score was Broncos 48, Chargers 47.

First thoughts after a thrilling weekend of football (and don't take my word for it; 30.8 million people watched Saturday's twinbill, up 15 percent over last year):

- Every game's a revenge game now for the Niners. They've played four of the seven other teams in the playoffs and lost to all four—Seattle, Indy, Carolina and New Orleans. But they're playing better now, winners of seven straight, and Colin Kaepernick has two trustworthy things he didn't have in midseason: his own legs (he's running with more confidence now) and Michael Crabtree.
- The Chargers can't win a scoring contest against Peyton Manning, but they're uniquely equipped to challenge Denver. Defensive coordinator John Pagano has the chess pieces to frustrate Manning, and no opposing coach knows the refurbished Manning like Mike McCoy—his 2012 offensive coordinator—does.

- Cam Jordan's quick pressure could be the key for New Orleans in Seattle. Russell Wilson had tons of time the last time they played, and the emotion of the night will be hard to duplicate, even in a playoff game. Jordan was in Nick Foles' grill consistently Saturday night. Protection of Drew Brees will be vital. It killed the Saints a month ago.

- Andrew Luck is so rare, so precocious and so able to put the past behind. The distant past, the recent past. He did it in the middle of a 38-10 debacle Saturday that became a 45-44 win over Kansas City. And he did it a year ago, after a four-turnover game at New England. Last year, I remember his quarterbacks coach, Clyde Christensen, telling me, "He's a great forgetter. He came in that Monday [after losing 59-24 to New England], and I said to him, 'Look, I know you beat yourself up all night, but you're a rookie, on the road, playing Belichick, big game, and you drive us 80 for touchdowns in your first two drives. That's big-time. We'll work on the other stuff.' And he knows."

It's highly doubtful next weekend can match the one we just had, even with the stinker in Cincinnati. But for different reasons, I love every one of these games.

Emerging star of the weekend.

"T.Y., go win the game." Chuck Pagano had not said that to Hilton before, and Hilton loved what he heard.

T.Y. Hilton was so tired 90 minutes after the Colts' 45-44 win Saturday that he said he hoped he could find someone to drive him home from Lucas Oil Stadium—even though he'd brought his car to the game. "I left everything out there," he said. "I'm too tired to drive. I just want to go to sleep."

There are many amazing things to consider coming out of one of the craziest playoff games in history. Here are two: The Colts scored five touchdowns in 24 second-half minutes often using four-receiver sets of Hilton, Griff Whalen, LaVon Brazill and Da'Rick Rogers. And Hilton's 13-catch, 224-yard performance was the biggest receiving day in Colts' playoff history—bigger than any that Raymond Berry, Marvin Harrison or Reggie Wayne ever had.

We've learned one thing about the future of the Colts while the 35-year-old Wayne recuperates from midseason ACL surgery: When the day comes that Wayne can't play anymore—at least at a high level—Hilton could morph into Andrew Luck's No. 1 receiver long-term. Check out what Hilton's done over the past four weeks, all Colts wins, as Luck continues to get used to life without Wayne.

Opp.	Tgts.	Rec.	Yards	YPC	TDs
HOU	12	8	78	9.8	0

at KC	7	5	52	10.4	0
JAC	15	11	155	14.1	0
KC	18	13	224	17.2	2
Totals	52	37	509	13.8	2

"I've always been the No. 1 receiver on my team," he said. Well, until being drafted by the Colts. Hilton, at 5-9 and 183, doesn't have the size NFL teams today want in a franchise receiver, and he'll have to prove that a smaller guy can take the beating over time that top guys do. But the recent production—Hilton's averaging a nine-catch, 127-yard game over the last month—shows the chemistry between him and Andrew Luck is getting better as time goes on.

Take Saturday night. Indianapolis trailed 44-38 with just under six minutes to play. Just before the Colts took over at their 20 to try to complete the comeback from 28 points down, coach Chuck Pagano had seen enough of the battered Chiefs' secondary to say to Hilton: "T.Y., go win the game." He'd not said that to Hilton before, and Hilton loved what he heard. On the fourth play of the drive, from the Colts 36, Luck sent three receivers—Rogers, Hilton and tight end Coby Fleener—in a close bunch to the left, with Hilton in the middle, and before he got too far out of earshot, Hilton heard this from Luck: "Run. Just run." Rogers would take the corner on a short out, and Fleener a clear-out route across the middle. Hilton, Luck hoped, would beat his man off the line, and with the Chiefs curiously playing Pro Bowl safety Eric Berry close to the lane, Luck hoped the deep middle would be open for Hilton.

"I got to the line and saw 39 [safety Husain Abdullah] across from me, and I thought, 'We've got to take advantage of this,' " said Hilton. The speed matchup, he meant. "[Brandon] Flowers was out for them and so was [Dunta] Robinson, so I knew they were running out of corners." After Hilton got by Abdullah, he bisected safeties Kendrick Lewis and Quintin Demps. Watching the play a few times, it's clear the trust Luck has with Hilton. When he wound up to throw the ball, which traveled 45 yards in the air, Luck didn't see Hilton open; he hadn't cleared either of the two safeties running with him. But by the time the ball landed in Hilton's hands, he had three yards on his pursuers. The throw was perfect. The touchdown was easy.

A little Hilton history: His given name is Eugene T.Y. Hilton, but no one calls him Eugene. His dad's name is Tyrone, and the T.Y. is for "Little Ty." Raised in Miami, T.Y. became a dad in high school and had several schools competing for him to come play wide receiver. The night before he decided where to go, he put two caps—West Virginia's and the hometown Florida International's—in front of his infant son. He said he son put his hand on the FIU cap six straight times. And that's

why Hilton stayed home and became the best player the fledgling program has ever produced.

Now the Colts play the Patriots in Foxboro in the divisional round Saturday night. Luck and Hilton have been there once, for an embarrassing 59-24 loss last season. The Pats had better find someone to cover Hilton (Aqib Talib, physically, perhaps) because Luck's going to him a lot. For now, Hilton's his go-to guy. "I'm ready for the role," Hilton said. Apparently so.

\* \* \*

And it's another game of Manning versus the One-And-Done Guy.

When Peyton Manning was deciding on his next team in March of 2012, he had a meeting at the Broncos training facility that included the offensive coordinator, Mike McCoy, and the defensive coordinator, Jack Del Rio. "Tell me something," said Manning, who wanted badly to come to a stable environment without the threat of coaching change. "Are you guys one-and-done? If we have a good year and you get an offer, are you guys out of here?"

Del Rio was new to Denver and assured Manning that it'd take a tremendous job for him to leave after his Jacksonville experience.

"I was honest with him," McCoy said from Cincinnati Sunday afternoon. "He looked right at us and asked the question, and I understood where he was coming from. But I told him I couldn't promise him anything. If an opportunity came up, I was going to explore it."

Manning really liked McCoy. As did the Chargers. After the Broncos' divisional-round playoff loss to Baltimore last January, it took 48 hours for the Chargers to decide McCoy would be the best partner for new GM Tom Telesco, and McCoy got the head-coaching job.

"What Peyton did for my career—and what everyone in Denver did, John Fox and John Elway and Pat Bowlen and the players, I owe them everything. I'm here today because of those people," McCoy said.

"Here" is the NFL's Final Eight, hugging just-had-to-be-there Chargers fan Phil Mickelson and his family (and Telesco too) after beating Cincinnati 27-10. McCoy and the Chargers return to the site of their biggest win this year, the 27-20 Thursday-nighter in Denver a month ago, to challenge Manning for the third time this year.

I'm not saying McCoy has the institutional knowledge of a Bill Belichick (who has 17 games against Manning as a head coach). But since Manning returned from his neck problems, he's had two offensive coordinators and confidants: McCoy and Adam Gase, this year's coordinator. So McCoy clearly know the routes Manning

likes and the plays he wants to run. But this will be a classic spy versus spy scenario. Manning knows McCoy knows, and so Manning's going to take McCoy's knowledge and try to counter how he thinks McCoy will play him. And so forth.

"Hey, he's going to do what he wants," McCoy said. "They're the best offense in history. We could call out every play before the snap, and he's still going to make play after play. He dissects people. We just have to try to be efficient as we can."

Anything else?

"Score touchdowns," McCoy said, "not field goals."

McCoy's a great example of a guy who's been waiting for the day he got a chance to be a head coach, full of ideas he's packed away over the years. He always knew he'd want to take a head-coaching job with an established quarterback and might turn down opportunities with no quarterback in-house. He knew he'd empower a smart staff to be idea people. McCoy and his staff—credit offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt and quarterbacks coach Frank Reich too—have made Philip Rivers more efficient by giving him more alternatives. Danny Woodhead and Keenan Allen give Rivers two options in space he didn't have a year ago, and Ryan Mathews finally is playing like a first-round running back. There's a strong backup tight end, Ladarius Green, behind Antonio Gates now. And the defense in Cincinnati was superb. "John Pagano does a phenomenal job of studying tendencies and coming up with ways to disguise them. The interception by Melvin Ingram [off Andy Dalton] was a perfect example," said McCoy.

I think San Diego-Denver's the game of the weekend.

The Niners adjust, wisely.

I know exactly why Jim Harbaugh set a personal record for post-game giddiness Sunday in Green Bay. When he finished his post-game press conference, he hugged one veteran beat man, Matt Maiocco of CSN Bay Area and said, "I love you, Matt!" And he kissed another one, Matt Barrows of the Sacramento Bee, on the top of the head and said, "I love you too, Matt!"

So many reasons to be happy. He's got a kicker he can rely on, Phil Dawson—who booted Sunday's 33-yard game-winner at Green Bay—after losing faith in David Akers last year. He's got a pass rusher, Aldon Smith, who's playing his best at the most important time of the year. He's got fresh defensive linemen in Justin Smith and Ray McDonald, because the Niners purposely rested them a lot more this year. He's got a versatile defensive line, too, as Glenn Dorsey showed Sunday. Dorsey had to play nosetackle for nine snaps in the San Francisco nickel package Sunday, and he's not used to being a run-stuffer, but he filled in adequately against the Pack.

Harbaugh's got an offense with the ability, now, to play two different ways with Michael Crabtree back from Achilles surgery, and Frank Gore able to grind out the

tough yards even when the defense knows he's coming. But mostly, Harbaugh was giddy because his quarterback, on Sunday, was the electric Colin Kaepernick of 2012. He knew when to run so smartly, taking off on four scrambles and three designed runs for 98 rushing yards, including the most important of the day—an 11-yard scramble that set up the winning field goal.

But put that run in context. Fifty-five minutes into the game, the wind chill at Lambeau Field was minus-17. Kaepernick, sleeveless ("It's mind over matter," he said), took over at his 20 in a tie game. Now, as important as scoring here was scoring without letting Aaron Rodgers have the ball back. Play after play, Niners players stayed inbounds. The clock ran down, and with 1:13 to play and 3rd-and-8 from the Green Bay 38, the game was on the line: Convert or punt to pin Green Bay back—but also leave the Packers with a minute to drive for the winning field goal. Kaepernick wanted to hit Crabtree, but he was covered. So Kaepernick sprinted left, evaded a linebacker, and ducked out at the 27. First down. Gore for five. Gore for two. Gore for three. Gore for two. Dawson's 33-yard field goal won it. He kicked the ball through Green Bay corner Davon House's arms, but House was offside, and Dawson would have had a re-kick had it been blocked.

This is the offense San Francisco will need if it's to win at Carolina, with Kaepernick posing a dual threat and Gore pushing the pile. Funny thing: Carolina's convinced it has the same thing, a quarterback who can beat you running or passing, and a couple of physical backs.

\* \* \*

Diary of a mad fan ...

I asked Packers fan Kyle Cousineau, 33, to keep an account of his day at Lambeau Field Sunday. He lives a mile from the north end zone and has been to a ton of games over the years. None quite this cold though, with the temperatures in the single digits and wind-chills in the minus-teens at the wild-card game between the 49ers and Packers. He corresponded with our Emily Kaplan as the day went on.

Noon (CT): It's about three and a half hours before kickoff, and it's a very frigid three degrees—the kind of day where if you spit on the sidewalk it would freeze. I went outside a little while ago to gauge the weather, and decided on my attire: long underwear; jeans; a pair of sweat pants; a pair of thick, thermal coveralls; a thermal long sleeve t-shirt; a hooded sweatshirt; my big winter ski jacket; a scarf; a face mask; sunglasses to protect my eyes and lastly a pair of mittens with hand-warmers inside.

2:45 p.m.: Greetings from Lot 1 of Lambeau Field. The weather is about what I thought it would be. It's still ridiculously cold. The scene at the tailgate party is a little more subdued than normal. It's probably a perfect storm, if you will. First, there's the ticket policy change this year, with the Packers not refunding money for unused playoff tickets, which has been a big ordeal out here. Couple that with the weather, which has at least something to do with it. (Did I mention it was frigidly

cold?) But, of course we're having fun. Eating chili from a portable camp stove, drinking a few Miller Lites. We'll head inside to the stadium in about a half hour.

End of the first quarter: Before the game, everyone was fired up. I mean, it's a home playoff game after all. Then after the Packers went three-and-out and had three straight punts to open the half, the crowd became a little bit on edge and dejected. The cold is on everybody's mind. There have already been a few public service announcements: If you see somebody having trouble in the weather, don't be afraid to tell an usher or text this number. Luckily, everyone seems to be doing OK. And I can feel all of my extremities. When we walked in we thought we were warm. Right now we're comfortable. And by the end of the game, we'll probably be freezing.

Halftime: It is getting colder and colder as time ticks away on the game clock. Considerably colder than when we were at the tailgate party, and when we got to our seats. It's kind of a surreal scene. I've been to dozens of Packers games here over the years, and I've never seen a crowd not sit down for the whole game. Everyone is standing up. They only sit down when there's a break in the action or a timeout.

End of the third quarter: As the drama on the field intensifies, the temperature drops. Significantly. The guy in front of me is wearing a thermometer around his neck, and right now it reads minus-15 degrees. A few minutes ago I took off my hat to adjust my facemask and my buddy was like, 'Uh, your head is steaming right now.' You're going to sweat when you're as bundled up as we are, and cheering and jumping around as much as we are. Truthfully, you know it's cold but you don't really think about it. You're more focused on the game. And man, it's become a really good game.

End of the fourth quarter: In the back of my mind, I had tempered expectations. The Niners lined up for the winning field goal with three seconds left, a 33-yarder, so obviously makeable. But maybe he'll miss, maybe something magic will happen. So as Phil Dawson lined up for the field goal, I was hooting and hollering, going ballistic. I could see my breath in front of me, obviously, and that made me just cheer louder. Maybe, maybe ... And of course he made it. That was it. I didn't move for about 15 minutes. I just stood there, in our section, in silence. I watched all the players walk off the field, the fans file slowly out of the stadium. Everyone hung their heads; it was like a funeral procession. Afterward in the parking lot, win or lose, there's usually some kind of noise. Somebody plays music, or we cheer because the Vikings or Bears lost. But today there was none of that. There's just the cold.

8:45 p.m.: I've had some time to decompress, and I've warmed up, but that doesn't make the pain go away. As far as cold goes, this was the second-worst game I've ever been to. The first was the NFC Championship game in '08, Favre's last game. That was a devastating loss. After that game, my brother and I just stood there. We didn't say anything. Then we kind of just gave each other this look, then walked all the way home in silence. We didn't talk the whole way. Today's loss

was a notch below that. The Packers are a way of life out here. They're all we have. When they lose, it becomes winter. Three months of bitter cold and nothingness. Tomorrow they're predicting minus-50 to minus-60 degree wind chill. Schools in the Green Bay area are already cancelled. Grocery stores are closed. So that's what we have to look forward to ... until the draft in May.

Frozen in Time: Check out SI photographer Simon Bruty's best shots from Niners-Packers.

#### Fine Fifteen

1. Seattle (13-3). Didn't think I'd see Percy Harvin (who has played 20 snaps all season and caught one ball) play football again this season. But if he practices well this week, looks like he'll see the field Saturday in the divisional game versus New Orleans.
2. San Francisco (13-4). Colin Kaepernick has run for 279 yards in two playoff games against the Packers. I sense a trend.
3. Denver (13-3). The NFL didn't have enough drama this year. To reach the Super Bowl, Peyton Manning will have to beat his old offensive coordinator (Mike McCoy) and either Tom Brady or his successor in Indy, Andrew Luck.
4. Carolina (12-4). Two big, physical helpers to Cam Newton and the Carolina passing game this year—Greg Olsen and Mike Tolbert—combined to catch 100 balls for 1,000 yards. Exactly.
5. New England (12-4). On the playoff bye weekend, offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels got interviewed by the Browns. Not sure he'll get the gig (my friend and longtime Browns beatman Tony Grossi thinks Denver offensive coordinator Adam Gase has a very good shot), but the interview with McDaniels Saturday in New England went quite well.
6. New Orleans (12-5). Tremendous second half by Drew Brees. Now I'm thinking the long shot in Seattle isn't such a long shot after all, especially with the Seahawks looking pretty mortal on offense since wiping out the Saints in December.
7. Indianapolis (12-5). Andrew Luck laughs at big deficits.
8. Philadelphia (10-7). I expected Nick Foles to make more plays early Saturday night, but that was a pretty big stage, and he did lead Philly to 17 points in the final 20 minutes. Bright future for him, and the Eagles.
9. Kansas City (11-6). I realize a pair of key members of the secondary were gone down the stretch, but the lack of a rush on Andrew Luck and any defensive cohesion in the second half was galling.

10. Green Bay (8-8-1). The Packers need reinforcements; Bryan Bulaga, Casey Hayward and Clay Matthews to get healthy; to figure out who kidnapped B.J. Raji ... and basically Ted Thompson to have his best offseason. Is that too much to ask?

11. San Diego (10-7). As Philip Rivers told FOX, "We were left for dead five weeks ago, at 5-7." And now they're dangerous enough to be scary to Denver.

12. Arizona (10-6). I bet Carson Palmer, watching Sunday, truly felt sorry for Andy Dalton. He's been there. He's not the kind of guy to laugh at his successor falling so flat.

13. Cincinnati (11-6). It's one thing for fans to not trust Andy Dalton, and those from Lima to Lexington surely won't in 2014. But Dalton's biggest problem going forward is that his own locker room isn't going to trust him, regardless of what the players and coaches say publicly.

14. Pittsburgh (8-8). The Steelers would have given the Chargers a much better game than Cincinnati did.

15. Chicago (8-8). Well, Phil Emery got the quarterback signed, and kept the Bears out of the QB business this offseason. Didn't love the contract, but at least it's one spot Chicago doesn't have to worry about.

## The Award Section

### Offensive Players of the Week

Colin Kaepernick, quarterback, San Francisco. What must have been going through the head of Kaepernick Sunday, pulling into the parking lot at Lambeau Field, the same place this Packers-idolizer once posed in front of in a Brett Favre jersey? Whatever emotion he had about it, Kaepernick kept it bottled before, during and after the 23-20 playoff victory over the Packers Sunday evening in brutal cold. Kaepernick's legs (seven carries, 98 yards, including the crucial 11-yard run around left end that put the Niners in field-goal range to win) were better than his arm (16 of 30, one touchdown, one pick, 227 yards, a couple of big misses), but you throw a brick in 10-below wind chill and see how easy it is.

Terron Armstead, left tackle, New Orleans. The third start for the third-round rookie from Arkansas-Pine Bluff was his biggest by far, and Armstead repaid the faith Sean Payton had in him (or maybe desperation, not faith) by keeping the heat off Drew Brees from the right side of the Philly defense. The Eagles had two sacks (for one measly yard) and two more significant pressures in the Saints' Saturday night upset. Armstead, quick and combative, jostled effectively with Eagle pass rusher Trent Cole and won much more than he lost. Cole had five tackles and one sack, but watching the game, Armstead pushed Cole around pretty consistently.

Andrew Luck, quarterback, Indianapolis. He dug himself a very big hole in the biggest game of his pro career, and the day looked grim when Luck's second pick helped the Chiefs build a 38-10 lead early in the third quarter, while his third should have put the game out of reach for Kansas City late in the third. But somehow, Luck had enough presence to throw three second-half touchdowns, and even more presence to pick up a bouncing fumble near the goal line and stretch it over for a bizarre but vital score in the 45-44 Indy win. Let the unauthorized Luck biographies (plural) be contracted out.

#### Defensive Players of the Week

Donald Butler, linebacker, San Diego. Made the single biggest play of the game late in the second quarter, when Gio Bernard grabbed a pass from Andy Dalton and turned upfield inside the 10-yard line to try to score a touchdown to break open a 7-7 game. Butler stripped Bernard (the play was upheld on review) and prevented Cincinnati from taking the lead. And in the second half Butler was everywhere, finishing with a game-high 12 tackles, two for losses, the best San Diego defensive player on the field in a crushing victory over the Bengals.

Aldon Smith, outside linebacker, San Francisco. Smith must have made 10 disruptive plays Sunday—either causing a penalty, chasing Aaron Rodgers out of the pocket, pressuring him severely or sacking (1.5) him in the 23-20 Niners victory. Already can't wait to see the Aldon Smith versus Cam Newton duel Sunday in Charlotte.

#### Special Teams Players of the Week

Phil Dawson, kicker, San Francisco. Keyed the first playoff victory of his life—and Dawson turns 39 later this month—with the winning 33-yard field goal at the final gun at Green Bay. With the wind chill around minus-14, Dawson calmly ended the game that no one watching at home wanted to end. "Worth the wait," he tweeted afterward. Dawson scored the first six points of the game, too, when Niners drives stalled deep in Packers tundra.

Darrell Stuckey, safety, San Diego. What tremendous pursuit on the San Diego punt team by the fourth-year safety from Kansas. On the first Chargers punt of the day, he sprinted down to drop Bengals returner Brandon Tate for a one-yard loss, and later in the half smothered Tate for a five-yard loss. Strong and slithery, Stuckey was the best special-teamer in the field on wild-card weekend.

#### Coach of the Week

Sean Payton, head coach, New Orleans. Made all the right calls all week, including poking fun at the Saints' 3-5 road record this year. Payton was lively Saturday night in Philadelphia, airing out his special teams and showing confidence in both the running game (94 yards in the first half, 91 in the second) and recently interception-prone Drew Brees, which paid off in the second half. Payton will figure

out some way to mind-game his team into thinking the 34-7 loss in Seattle a month ago was a total fluke.

## Goats of the Week

A pair of Andies:

Andy Dalton, quarterback, Cincinnati. Needing a playoff win to get off the schneid after two bad postseason performances in 2011 and '12, Dalton took a 10-7 lead into the second half, with the ball. His first four series in the half ended thusly: taking a sack to force fourth down, fumbling on a boneheaded forward dive without being touched, throwing a pressured interception right into Chargers corner Shareece Wright's hands, and throwing another interception to Chargers linebacker Melvin Ingram. The Chargers responded thusly: touchdown, field goal, field goal and a punt wedging Cincinnati deep in its territory. Ballgame.

Andy Reid, head coach, Kansas City. After the year he's had, after the incredible Kansas City turnaround from moribund franchise to important contender, this almost seems unfair. But it's reality. Reid has to take a hit for the Chiefs' clock management and use of timeouts in the fourth quarter at Indianapolis. There are many things the Chiefs will look back on and say, "That killed us." This one is the biggest: KC took its first and second timeouts on successive plays on a mid-fourth-quarter drive, and the third timeout, inexplicably, immediately after the two-minute warning. A colossal, ridiculous waste of timeouts. That is just dumb football.

The Colts took over at their 43 to run out the clock with 1:55 left and a 45-44 lead. Kansas City had no timeouts left. Andrew Luck kneeled down three times to end it. Now, I'm not saying the Chiefs could have stopped a middle-school team by the time the Colts went to run the clock out. But let's say the Chiefs didn't waste their timeouts stupidly. The Colts likely would have run on the first two plays and made the Chiefs use them. Faced with a third down and, say, five, yards to go with 1:42 to play, my guess is Luck would have tried a pass to convert. An incomplection would have forced the Colts to punt, and the Chiefs would have gotten the ball back with a timeout left, 1:30 to play and perhaps 50 yards to travel to get into range for a winning field goal. Again, that scenario is unlikely because of how easily the Colts had driven through the Chiefs. But it sure as heck is more possible than letting the Colts take the ball over with 1:55 remaining and having no timeouts.

## Quotes of the Week

I

"They had their hearts ripped out. They should hurt. That'll make us better."

—Kansas City coach Andy Reid, a day after after he and his players blew a 38-10 third-quarter lead and lost to Indianapolis 45-44 in one of the strangest games in NFL history Saturday.

## II

"We owe 'em."

—San Francisco quarterback Colin Kaepernick, on the rematch with Carolina this week. The Panthers beat the Niners in the regular season at Candlestick Park.

## III

"Clutch. Tough. Great."

—San Francisco coach Jim Harbaugh, on the play of quarterback Colin Kaepernick in the win at Green Bay.

## IV

"In the end we were not able to agree on the direction of the franchise. We're looking for great things. If you look at where we are as a team, it was probably time to make a change."

—Tennessee GM Ruston Webster, announcing the firing of coach Mike Munchak after three seasons Saturday.

## V

"I can't fire someone when I don't believe they should be fired. Firing someone is awful."

—Fired Tennessee coach Mike Munchak, to Jim Wyatt of the the Tennessean. Part of the reasoning behind Munchak's firing reportedly was his reluctance to fire members of his staff.

## Stats of the Week

### I

Andy Dalton's 34 playoff drives over three games have ended thusly:

Punts	11
End half/downs	8
Interceptions	6
Field goals	4
Lost fumbles	2
Missed field goals	1

Touchdown runs	1
Touchdown passes	1

The Bengals have lost the three playoff games by a combined 77-33.

One touchdown pass in 34 drives.

I don't want to be too knee-jerk, but the Bengals are going to have to consider bringing competition to training camp for Andy Dalton. I don't mean he should be benched, and I don't mean Cincinnati should necessarily draft a quarterback in the first round, but the Bengals have too much defensive talent to watch the quarterback put up 33 points in 34 playoff drives.

II

Denver kicker Matt Prater attempted 101 PATs and field goals this year. He made 100.

He missed a 52-yard field goal in Week 11. Putting it another way, Prater was 94 of 94 on of 50 yards or less this season.

Factoids of the Week That May Only Interest Me

I

Dan Fouts gets an unwanted reminder of the coldest game in NFL history 32 years ago every year around this time: frostbite.

When it gets cold, Fouts feels pain in both feet and both hands from the middle of the hand to the fingertips—and has since Jan. 10, 1982, the day of the AFC Championship Game in Cincinnati between the Chargers and Bengals that was played in wind-chill that reached minus-59 degrees. The San Diego Union-Tribune wrote about this the other day, and Chris Mortensen reported on it Saturday morning. I spoke to Fouts Friday. "Nothing you can do about it," he said on the phone. "It's history. You just had to play in the game, and you had no idea this would come of it. The biggest problem, really, was there were no gloves for quarterbacks in those days. Kenny Anderson and I didn't have the luxury that day that the guys today have."

II

In 2012, predicting games each regular-season week for SI.com, I was 169-86-1.

In 2013, predicting games each regular-season week for SI.com, Don Banks was 169-86-1.

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

Forward, friendly, 40ish guy next to me on the train from Grand Central Terminal to Stamford Friday: "Who was that on the phone?"

Me: "Dan Fouts."

Forward guy: "THE Dan Fouts?"

Me: "I think so—the former football player."

Forward guy: "How'd you get him on the phone?"

Me: "Texted him. He called back. Good guy."

Forward guy: "I bet that's cool, talking to Dan Fouts."

Me: "Yeah, it's good."

Silence for the next 35 minutes. He texted, I wrote, I got off in Stamford, he got off, and that was it.

## Tweets of the Week

I

"Nature Boy Ric Flair flew into this s— hole to show us some love."

—@AnthonyDavis76, the San Francisco right tackle, on Saturday night, on the professional wrestler flying into Wisconsin (it is unclear if Davis meant the entire state, the region, the city, whatever) to give the Niners a pep talk before the wild-card game Sunday.

Such a nice sentiment.

II

"Many of those that have asked, I have and will always favor the crew concept as opposed to all-stars. League and officials don't agree."

—@MikePereira, the FOX officiating analyst and former NFL vice president of officiating. Officials are hand-picked in the postseason based on grades in the regular season.

For the first year, this wild-card weekend had all-star crews, meaning crews were assembled based on regular-season grades. I wrote about that in my officiating series in December. The crux of it: Position by position, officials are ranked in three tiers based on their regular-season accuracy rating. Only officials in Tier 1 are

eligible to work the Super Bowl; there is no minimum or maximum number of officials who can be in Tier 1, and usually there are between four and six officials in that tier for each of the seven field positions. But if there are, say, four officials who qualify for Tier 1, it is not necessarily the official with the best accuracy percentage who works the game. Other factors—positioning, mechanics, rules expertise and decisiveness—weigh into the NFL's decision about who gets the Super Bowl call. There isn't a set cut-off percentage separating the tiers, because every position could have different degrees of proficiency. If five referees are at 98.0 percent or better, and the sixth was at 97.25 percent, the logical line of demarcation would be between the fifth and sixth referee that season.

Tier 1 officials are eligible to work all postseason games. Tier 2 officials can work wild-card and divisional playoff games. Tier 3 officials are not playoff-eligible, and would be subject to a thorough offseason review and possible replacement by the league.

III

"Quarterback math: Jim Plunkett + Rich Gannon – George Blanda = Alex Smith."

—@MikeTanier, of Sports On Earth, as Kansas City quarterback Alex Smith was laying waste to the Colts Saturday.

IV

"I just saw Andrew Luck pulling a horse and buggy with his beard."

—@HeavyOnions, during the Colts' victory Saturday, referring to the Indy quarterback's thick facial hair.

V

"Don't even know what to say. That was devastating. It's going to take awhile to get over that. Thanks #ChiefsKingdom for believing in us."

—@GeoffSchwartz, Kansas City right guard, one hour after the incredible 45-44 loss to Indianapolis.

VI

"I'll predict right now if Bortles comes out and goes in 1st the HC and GM will b fired within 3 years"

—@greggabe, former Chicago director of college scouting Greg Gabriel, on Central Florida quarterback Blake Bortles, who will enter the NFL draft, according to the Orlando Sentinel. Evidently, Gabriel is quite down on Bortles.

Ten Things I Think I Think

1. I think this is what I liked about wild-card weekend:

- a. Alex Smith's mobility. A 15-yard scramble out of trouble in the backfield and then through traffic to keep the first drive of the game alive ... it's a totally underrated part of his game.
- b. Andy Reid and Doug Pederson, calling a wishbone/option run to Knile Davis on the first play of Davis' playoff life.
- c. John Dorsey, Chiefs GM, using the 95th pick in the draft on Knile Davis, a hugely important element despite the loss.
- d. T.Y. Hilton. Everything about him.
- e. The hustle of Antoine Bethea (I love this guy) in stopping Dwayne Bowe from getting to the end zone on the long first-half throw from Luck ... a play that paid off very large in a one-point victory.
- f. Andrew Luck's second half.
- g. Our Greg A. Bedard's story on the Bears-Packers Week 17, talking about how vital the block fullback John Kuhn threw was. Bedard makes a great case that the block of Kuhn's life won the division for Green Bay.
- h. The class and dripping disappointment of Mike Munchak, who played 12 Hall-of-Fame seasons as a guard for the Oilers from 1982 to '93 and was coach for the Oilers/Titans since 1994, in his statement upon leaving the Titans Saturday: "This is a day I hoped would never come, but there is a reason for everything. Words cannot express the sadness for leaving this organization that I have been a part of for over 30 years."
- i. The Cris Carter feature with Jordy Nelson on ESPN, with the secret to catching sideline balls and getting both feet inbounds. "Your body just has to go limp," Carter said. Really interesting inside football.
- j. Drew Brees finding Kenny Stills on the third-quarter snap when Cary Williams had to sit because of injury. Very smart by a vet quarterback, and he got a first down out of it.
- k. Chris Mortensen's information that Mike Munchak turned down an extension with Tennessee that would have paid him "almost double" his current \$3 million annual salary. Good information. And absolutely mind-boggling. Munchak was head coach for three playoff-less seasons, was 7-9 in a mediocre (at best) division, and spent massively to build a running game this year that was just average. Wow. That was a stunner to me. And to pay him that money while insisting he change half the coaches on his staff? Hey, right hand: Have any idea what the left hand is doing?
- l. Donald Butler's instinctive play at inside linebacker for San Diego. Much more effective Sunday than running mate Manti Te'o.

m. Cincinnati defensive coordinator Mike Zimmer sending seven rushers on the first big third-down snap for the Chargers. Philip Rivers got smothered. Punt.

n. John Pagano. Everything the Chargers defensive coordinator did seemed to work against Cincinnati.

o. Love smart players. Did you see Eric Weddle in the fourth quarter tackling the Bengals receiver near the sideline, not letting him get out of bounds so Cincinnati could stop the clock?

p. Kudos, GM Tom Telesco of the Chargers ... for many things. The biggest I can think of this morning is signing Danny Woodhead for two years and \$3.5 million. Woodhead is worth three times that.

q. Colin Kaepernick knowing when to run and when to wait, wait, wait and throw it. Only quibble I have is passing on a wide-open Vernon Davis to make his 42-yard first-half scramble.

r. Just give me Jordy Nelson, Anquan Boldin and a competent quarterback, and I'll give you any two receivers in football, and I'll take my chances against you.

s. John Kuhn on that lead fullback dive. Now that's a dangerous play. And an effective one.

t. Davon House with a huge pass-deflection on a bomb for Vernon Davis ... two plays before he was caught interfering.

u. CBS, for giving Dan Dierdorf a monster game for his finale: Indianapolis at New England, Saturday night, Foxboro.

2. I think this is what I didn't like about wild-card weekend:

a. Jamaal Charles going down in the first five minutes of the game. Love watching him play. Amazing this game produced 89 points without him.

b. Greg Toler being in the game at all. Awful in coverage, or non-coverage. Too hurt from his groin injury coming in.

c. Bad non-call on clear pass interference by Kansas City's Marcus Cooper in the second quarter—on a very big play.

d. Colts: 14 turnovers in the regular season; four Saturday.

e. Those who would say Alex Smith made a critical mistake by taking an intentional grounding call on the Chiefs' last possession, helping knock them out of field-goal range for a kick that could have won the game. Kansas City had the ball at the Colts' 39, 2nd-and-7 with 2:30 to play. Smith set up a screen to his left, ideally to

throw to Dexter McCluster. Before the play could even remotely develop, Smith was swarmed by the unblocked Erik Walden and Cory Redding and at the last millisecond threw the ball away to his right, far from any of his receivers. What were his options here? Throw it away, which he did. Or get sacked with the ball at the 47 and have it be 3rd-and-15. I watched the play three times on NFL Game Rewind, and there was nothing else Smith could do, except eat it. If he did, it would have been 3rd-and-15 instead of 3rd-and-17. Big deal.

f. As an inside linebacker Sunday, Manti Te'o too often made a good bystander.

g. CBS' Tracy Wolfson, late in the first half at Cincinnati, after a graphic showed a temperature of 41, with Wolfson wearing a knit hat and gloves: "It feels like San Diego weather." As she spoke, it was 73 and mostly sunny in San Diego.

h. Awful clock management near the end of the first half by the Packers. With one timeout left, they let the clock bleed down from 22 to eight seconds before snapping it and throwing an incompletion, causing them to go for a field goal one play before they had to. What a waste.

i. Call pass-interference somewhat close in the postseason to the way you do it in the regular season, zebras.

j. The clock management this weekend was amateurish. (See Goat of the Week, above.) The Niners spent two timeouts in the first half of the first quarter and two in the first half of the third quarter. That is just nonsensical.

k. James Jones has had better games.

l. If Micah Hyde makes that pick with four minutes to go, there's a very good chance the course of 2013 NFC playoff history would be a lot different.

m. Same old Bengals.

3. I think I don't care one bit who Aaron Rodgers—or any player, coach, fan or writer—has sex with. Nor should anyone. If a player chooses to discuss, it's his business. If not, leave it alone, world.

4. I think I saw enough evidence in three hours of one game at Indy Saturday, with four possibly concussed players and another with two possible major knee injuries, to know the NFL can never have an 18-game regular season. You're not serious about player safety and player health if you want 18 games ... unless you say each player's max games per regular season is 16. That, of course, would necessitate Brock Osweiler starting two games for Denver, for example, because Peyton Manning would have to sit twice. That's the only way I'd support an 18-game schedule.

5. I think if this doesn't illustrate the way the game is going today, nothing does: The Chiefs started eight defensive backs on the first snap at Indianapolis Saturday.

6. I think as redemptive as this season was for Riley Cooper, his third-quarter drop on a wide-open crossing route on third down was the biggest negative play of the game for Philadelphia. The Eagles trailed 13-7 when it happened—Cooper could have raced for at least 20 yards on the play—and the Saints, on the change of possession, drove for a touchdown to make it 20-7. Though the Eagles came back, that was one possession, in retrospect, where Philadelphia gave away points.

7. I think, as I said on NBC's Football Night in America pregame show Saturday, there is no momentum in league circles to re-seed the playoffs the way the league should, which is to base the seeds on the regular-season record. But too many owners think winning a division title should not only be a pass into the playoffs, but should also carry with it the right to host a playoff game. There is, however, momentum to add a seventh playoff team to each conference. My guess is the added playoff team happens by 2015 or '16. I hate it. But no one asked me. Had it happened this year, here are the two extra games we'd have seen over the weeks, or perhaps tonight: Arizona at Carolina and Pittsburgh at New England.

8. I think I'll have a mini-MMOB on Tuesday this week, because of the voluminous news week. Coming: a Saints item, interviews with Bill O'Brien and Lovie Smith, and your email.

9. I think the tough decision Dolphins owner Stephen Ross faces is this: What if he keeps Joe Philbin and Jeff Ireland, as he appears to be leaning toward doing, then finds out something ugly from the Ted Wells report? It'll be pretty awkward to fire your coach or GM on Feb. 10.

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

a. I never met Jerry Coleman, the legendary ex-Yankee and San Diego Padres broadcaster. I wish I had. Coleman died Sunday and leaves a tremendous void in the San Diego sports scene.

b. My old buddy Mark Purdy might be the only person alive who attended the Freezer Bowl in Cincinnati 32 years ago (he wrote for the Cincinnati Enquirer then) and the Niners-Packers game Sunday (he writes for the San Jose Mercury News now). We spoke Sunday. We were on the same staff in Cincinnati; I was in Indianapolis that day, preparing to cover the Xavier-Butler basketball game at Hinkle Fieldhouse, where Xavier coach Bob Staak would be so cold in the 45-degree fridge of a building that he wore his overcoat on the bench that day. Anyway, Mark said it was significantly colder in Cincinnati for the 1982 game. "You walked outside and took your first breath and everything inside your nostrils froze," he said. "This is really cold, but not like that."

c. One of the cool things about working at NBC over the last eight years has been the chance to work in and around the Saturday Night Live set at Rockefeller Center.

The first few years our set was the old Jeopardy studio, which was fun to me because that was my favorite game show as a kid (the Art Fleming version). Once, in my dressing room prepping for a Saturday Notre Dame halftime segment, I stepped on a Taylor Swift red dress and got a big footprint on it. I don't believe I was supposed to do that. I was aghast. Guess that's why they have quickie dry cleaners. This year, that studio was under construction, and so we moved over to the SNL studio for a year, a crack carpentry crew transitioning the set many weekends from Justin Timberlake to Dan Patrick in a matter of hours. Wild-card Saturday was Football Night in America's last day on the SNL set, and—I don't get this way too often—I had to take a few photos to commemorate the occasion. I often wrote a few chunks of this column on an applebox under a Miley Cyrus photo.

d. My sincere thanks to Dave Goren of the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Association, and all the NSSA voters, who voted me sportswriter of the year for 2013. I'm humbled and so appreciative. Thank you.

#### Talk Back

Have a question or comment for Peter? Email him at [talkback@themmqb.com](mailto:talkback@themmqb.com) and it might be included in Tuesday's mailbag.

e. Baseball writers have a tough job with this Hall of Fame voting, tougher than we have it in football. Do not envy them one bit, trying to decide if Bonds and Clemens belong.

f. Coffeenerdness: No Tom Curran/coconut coffee tales for you this week, unfortunately, but I am looking for help in this regard for coffeephiles: I need a recommendation on how to clean a veteran Krups coffeemaker that hasn't been cleaned in over a year. Baking powder and hot water, run through a normal cycle?

g. Beernerdness: Lucky enough to try Alaskan Brewing Company's ESB—Extra Special Bitter—on New Year's Eve, and it was terrific. I like a hoppy, bitter beer, and this was a perfect one. Will be on the lookout for it on future Seattle trips.

h. Found out how to make Rodney Harrison and Mike Florio laugh uproariously Saturday.

#### The Adieu Haiku

Harbaugh kissed writers.  
Gadzooks. I doubt Tom Coughlin  
ever kissed Vito.

# Football the Way It Ought To Be: Flag-free

By Greg A. Bedard  
MMQB/SI.com  
January 6, 2014

Now that's more like it.

On the opening weekend of the playoffs, NFL officials put away their penalty flags, swallowed their whistles and even Ed Hochuli kept his verbiage to a bare minimum. (Though that may be because he couldn't speak through his Hannibal Lecter mask in the Green Bay cold.)

The best teams and players got to determine games, without the referees butting into the outcomes as they had all season. It wasn't an illusion, it really happened: After an average of 12.3 penalties for 105.6 yards during the regular season, officials called an average of 7.8 penalties for 63.3 yards per game on Wild-Card weekend. That's a significant drop, and it's down from the playoffs in the recent past as well. The previous two postseasons averaged 9.8 penalties per game (for 74.5 yards in '13, 93.3 in '12) on wild-card weekend. In 2010 we had 8.5 penalties for 57.0 yards.

Yes, there were a few blatantly missed calls—notably 49ers receiver Michael Crabtree getting assaulted in the end zone by Davon House with 2:25 left in the first quarter, and Packers center Evan Dietrich-Smith tackling Ray McDonald on Aaron Rodgers' miraculous 4th-and-2 conversion, and a few more offensive holding penalties could have been mixed in—but the relatively zebra-free football was glorious. While there were a few defensive holding penalties, there was just one pass interference penalty, with its ludicrous spot foul punishment. This was real football again, like when most of us were kids. You know, when the teams that could play defense (not the Chiefs and Colts) actually had a chance to do so. What a novel concept.

(Let's all take a moment to be thankful that Bill Polian is at ESPN instead of in charge of the Colts. We could have been facing an emergency meeting of the competition committee before their game against the Patriots. Thanks to his whining after New England roughed up his Colts in the '03 AFC Championship Game, Polian used his influence to get pass interference and defensive holding called more strictly. That led to penalties increasing on wild-card weekend from 8.3 per game in '03 to 13.5 in '04. Thanks for that.)

But here's my question after a weekend in which I kept most of my hair instead of pulling it out over inconsistent officiating: Why can't it always be like this? Why can't the regular season be officiated the same way as the postseason?

I want to see a world in which downfield contact is permitted against receivers unless the receiver is in the act of actually catching the ball. Why is it that receivers are the only players on the field who can't be touched while performing their duty? The NFL even permits quarterbacks to be whacked while they're throwing the ball—albeit apparently in a 3-inch-by-3-inch zone. Actually, forget I mentioned that. I don't want to give the owners any more ideas about making quarterbacks into bubble boys.

We all know why the regular season-to-postseason disparity will likely continue: fantasy football and TV ratings. NFL owners think fans love points and gaudy yardage numbers because it makes their fantasy scores light up like a pinball machine. While it's true that most of us are big, dumb animals easily distracted by bright lights and flashy numbers, fantasy football and the NFL in general would be just as popular if the playing field were evened up between the offense and defense. We come to worship at the altar of football, and all that comes with it: the camaraderie, the beer drinking, the trash talking. We've always been here. People will watch whether there are 89 points on the scoreboard or 29.

Peyton Manning and his Broncos are probably a little uptight right now about how their precision passing game will function in a postseason in which the defense can bump them off their routes with impunity. Patriots coach Bill Belichick, who won his three Super Bowl titles on the back of a tough, physical defense and not on Tom Brady averaging 300 yards per game, was probably watching this weekend saying, "Come to Papa," and texting cornerback Aqib Talib to prepare to use the bear hug technique for the rest of the playoffs.

Guess what? That's football, the way it has always been played. It was nice to see it back. Let's hope it wasn't just a fleeting glance.

# NFL says no decision made on playoff expansion

By Marc Sessler  
NFL.com  
January 6, 2014

With the NFL already examining the possibility of reseeding the playoffs, will the postseason of tomorrow also include more teams?

Responding to Dan Patrick's suggestion that the league plans to expand from 12 to 14 squads, a league spokesman told NFL Media Insider Ian Rapoport on Monday that "no such decision" has been made about adding a wild-card team to each conference.

"It would require a vote of the clubs and it has not yet been taken up with them," the spokesman said.

Rapoport noted that a vote on the matter might take place at the next owners meeting in March.

NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said last week that "multiple" adjustments to the playoff system are in play.

"Every scenario has been discussed, ranging from reseeding to one extra game, expanding from 12 to 14 teams," McCarthy said. "Think of a scenario, it's been discussed and remains in play."

The NFL has leaned on the current 12-team format since the 1990 season. Had 14 clubs made the cut this year, the 10-6 Arizona Cardinals would have been added to the NFC mix, while the 8-8 Pittsburgh Steelers would have crashed the party on the AFC side.

While reseeding makes plenty of sense, I'd argue that playoff expansion is a dodgy proposition. For every frisky Cardinals outfit, you risk a 7-9 ghostship being dipped into January.

Coming off one of the greatest wild-card weekends in memory, why change anything?

# 2013 Comeback Player of the Year candidates

By Gregg Rosenthal  
NFL.com  
January 6, 2014

Editor's Note: The NFL Comeback Player of the Year Award sponsored by Castrol Edge will be presented at The NFL Honors Award Show on February 1 in New York.

One season ago, the top candidates for NFL Comeback Player of the Year doubled as two of the greatest players of all time.

Adrian Peterson returned from a torn ACL to break 2,097 rushing yards. Peyton Manning returned from multiple neck surgeries to help the Denver Broncos earn the No. 1 seed in the AFC. Peterson wound up winning the MVP, while Manning won Comeback Player of the Year at the NFL Honors Awards Show at the Super Bowl.

The Comeback Player of the Year field is less clear and star-studded this time around. There are a lot of great candidates, but no consensus pick. Here are my favorites:

1. Fred Jackson, Buffalo Bills running back: Jackson was ignored coming out of Coe College and wound up playing for the Rhein Fire in NFL Europe before earning his first NFL snap in 2007 in Buffalo. He was 26 at the time. He's been one of the league's most underrated players ever since.

Jackson was ignored again coming into 2013. He missed six games last season because of two knee injuries that limited his effectiveness. 32-year-old running backs coming off injury-plagued seasons are usually put out to pasture. Jackson wound up passing a top-ten pick on the depth chart.

C.J. Spiller was expected to carry the load for the Bills, with Jackson described as a "step slow" in the preseason. One prominent fantasy football website said Jackson wouldn't have "any fantasy impact" this year.

1,277 yards from scrimmage and ten touchdowns later, Jackson authored his most surprising season yet. He wound up playing 663 snaps to Spiller's 389 despite a seven-year age difference. The AP Comeback Player of the Year Award would be a fitting reward for a career spent out of the spotlight.

2. Brent Grimes, Miami Dolphins cornerback: No one wanted to sign Grimes to a big contract coming off a torn Achilles tendon. The hard-nosed 5-foot-10 cornerback took a cheap one-year deal from Miami, and turned it into a Pro Bowl season. He can cover and tackle well despite his size and is headed toward a huge payday.

3. Knowshon Moreno, Denver Broncos running back: Considered a first-round bust, Moreno began the last two training camps on the roster bubble. He wound up passing second-round pick Montee Ball and Ronnie Hillman on the depth chart and finished in the the top-five NFL players in yards from scrimmage and total touchdowns. Plus he is the most patriotic person of all time.

4. Terrell Thomas, New York Giants cornerback: After three ACL surgeries in as many seasons, it looked like Thomas' career was over. He wound up being a key part of the team's secondary, playing all 16 games. (With seven starts.)

5. Philip Rivers, San Diego Chargers quarterback: I've spoken to a few AP voters. Rivers appears to be the consensus pick for the award. While Rivers made a lot of bad throws last year, he quietly played well the second half of the season. Rivers was incredible in 2013, arguably the second best quarterback in football. But I'm not not sure what Rivers is coming back from other than a terrible offensive line and stale system. He's been here for years.

6. Alex Smith, Kansas City Chiefs quarterback: The 49ers benched Smith last season, and then went to the Super Bowl on the arm and legs of Colin Kaepernick. Smith was traded in the offseason, and he went on to set personal bests in yards and touchdowns. He improved dramatically in the second half of the season, and showed that he's a rare starting quarterback that can excel for multiple teams.

7. Darrelle Revis, Tampa Bay Buccaneers cornerback: How great is Revis? He was clearly not his best after returning from a torn ACL, yet he was still one of the best cornerbacks in football.

8. Ryan Mathews, San Diego Chargers running back: Mathews broke his collarbone twice in 2012, which led to a lot of nonsense about Mathews' lack of "toughness." No player ran harder between the tackles in 2013, with Mathews racking up 1,255 rushing yards. He's one of the best early-down runners in the league.

# Ryan Mathews: 'My mindset is I'm playing' Sunday

By Marc Sessler  
NFL.com  
January 6, 2014

San Diego's 27-10 wild-card win over the Cincinnati Bengals on Sunday featured another heavy dose of the Chargers' ground game.

After averaging 39 carries over their final four regular-season outings, the Bolts dialed up 40 attempts for 196 yards and two scores against a Bengals defense that struggled to control the point of attack.

We argued on the latest "Around The League Podcast" that San Diego is bound to attempt the same on Sunday against the Denver Broncos, but it won't be easy if Ryan Mathews can't suit up. After averaging 26.7 carries per tilt since Week 14, the Chargers' workhorse was limited to 13 totes for 52 yards against Cincy, barely playing in the second half because of the nagging ankle injury that's bothered him for weeks.

Asked if he'll be ready for Denver, Mathews told reporters Sunday, per U-T San Diego: "My mindset is I'm playing."

San Diego has capable help in Danny Woodhead, while the 32-year-old Ronnie Brown filled in well Sunday (he broke off a 58-yard TD run), but the Chargers struggled in short-yardage situations with Mathews out of the mix.

"We're doing what's best for the football team," coach Mike McCoy said. "We rested him a little bit during the week like we have the past couple of weeks. Like we said, we're still playing, so we have to do what's best for the team moving forward."

Converting third downs and chewing up the clock is the only way to keep Peyton Manning off the field in Denver. Look for Mathews to rest that ankle all week heading into the biggest game of his young career.

# Denver Broncos playoff tickets being sold online could be real today, but fake by game day

By Marshall Zelinger  
7News The Denver Channel  
January 6, 2014

DENVER - Denver Broncos playoff tickets being sold online could be real today, but fake by the time you show up at the stadium.

The divisional playoff game between the Denver Broncos and San Diego Chargers is sold out, but the secondary market is filled with tickets for sale.

Craigslist has dozens of postings for tickets to the divisional playoff game on Sunday afternoon. Some of the postings even have pictures of the tickets to prove they're real. 7NEWS found out that even though the tickets are real, they may end up fake by Sunday.

"You just don't know by looking at a ticket, whether or not it's a legitimate ticket," said Kirk Dyer, Denver Broncos Executive Director of Ticket Operations. "There are only three sources out there that you know you are purchasing a legitimate ticket; either through the Broncos, through Ticketmaster or through the NFL Ticket Exchange."

Tickets bought through Ticketmaster and the NFL Ticket Exchange have barcodes on the ticket that are verified and active to get you through the gate into the stadium.

Tickets bought elsewhere, such as Craigslist, may be real tickets that have canceled barcodes.

"At some point it was valid, but it may not be anymore," said Dyer.

When someone with a hard copy ticket sells that ticket through Ticketmaster or the NFL Ticket Exchange, the seller keeps their ticket, but the barcode gets deactivated. Those tickets were real at one point, but may not be on game day.

The Broncos do not verify ticket barcodes over the phone.

"The only recourse they have is to go back to who they bought that ticket from, because they didn't buy it from one of those three sources," said Dyer, referring to the Broncos ticket office, Ticketmaster and the NFL Ticket Exchange.

# John Fox: Chargers showed running, defense win in the playoffs

By Michael David Smith  
ProFootballTalk.com  
January 6, 2014

Broncos coach John Fox was impressed with the way the Chargers handled the Bengals on Sunday in Cincinnati, and Fox thinks his own team is going to have its hands full when the Chargers come to town this weekend.

Fox told reporters today that the Chargers employed a time-honored formula for winning football in January when they beat the Bengals.

"They did it rushing the ball effectively and taking it away on defense, and that formula works. I think it's been proven over time, and they did a tremendous job," Fox said.

Fox is right to be impressed with the way the Chargers attacked the Bengals: San Diego's offense ran 40 times for 196 yards and two touchdowns, and its defense forced four turnovers. That's winning football.

The problem, of course, is that if Fox thinks that's the way to win in the playoffs, that's not what Fox's own team does best. Fox has to hope that in addition to winning with a running game and a good defense, you can also win with Peyton Manning throwing the ball.

# Derek Wolfe remains out of practice for Broncos

By Josh Alper  
ProFootballTalk.com  
January 6, 2014

The Broncos held defensive end Derek Wolfe out of practice last week with hopes that he'd return to work after the time off that came with being the top seed in the AFC.

Those hopes were not realized on Monday, however. Jeff Legwold of ESPN.com reports Wolfe did not participate in the session, leaving it unclear whether he'll be able to return this weekend or at any other point this season. Wolfe has not played since suffering seizure-like symptoms on the team bus to the airport ahead of the team's December 1 game in Kansas City, although he did practice in a limited basis before the end of the regular season.

Broncos coach John Fox also said that linebacker Shaun Phillips was sent home with a fever. There was no word on the expectation for later this week, but we'll likely see Phillips on the field unless his illness turns out to be more serious.

Safety Rahim Moore, who is eligible to come off injured reserve/return and play this week, also did not practice for the Broncos.

# First Look at the Chargers

By Andrew Mason  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 6, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- If you tuned into the Chargers' 27-10 dismantling of the Cincinnati Bengals Sunday, you saw San Diego win in a way it had not all season: without holding the advantage in total yardage.

But the fact that the Chargers won when they were outgained by 121 yards was largely irrelevant. That's because the Chargers didn't have far to march, particularly in the second half, when their average drive-start position was 12 inches into Bengals territory, just past the 50-yard-line.

That's what takeaways can do. A fumble recovery and an interception led directly to the field goals that put the Bengals behind two scores and forced them into desperation mode, which led to them going for it on two fourth downs from the San Diego 41- and 40-yard-lines, respectively. This had typically been absent from the Chargers' play this year; they lugged a minus-4 turnover margin into the playoffs. Until Sunday, they had forced at least two takeaways just four times, including one three-takeaway game (against the Giants, whose minus-15 margin is the second-worst in the league).

That was enough to allow San Diego's offense to overcome the fits and starts that plagued it Sunday, which belied San Diego's season-long performance.

Throughout 2013, the Chargers' offense was steady. Although they ranked fifth in the league with an average of 5.94 yards per play, they were remarkably consistent, gaining at least 5.0 yards per play in 15 of 16 games. Of the four teams ahead of the Chargers in yardage per play, only the Broncos matched that consistency.

But the revelation in recent weeks has been their defense, particularly the front seven.

Up front, the Chargers have mustered plenty of pressure with their front three in recent weeks. Much of the credit goes to the blossoming Corey Liuget and Kendall Reyes, who in recent weeks have shown why they were first- and second-round picks in 2011 and 2012, respectively.

Liuget showed flashes of brilliance in 2012; he broke up nine passes, had 15 tackles for losses and notched seven sacks. His sack total declined in 2013, but his sack of Bengals quarterback Andy Dalton on Sunday gave him 3.5 since Nov. 24, when the Chargers began their current 6-1 run. (Liuget had three sacks in the season's first 10 games.)

Reyes was credited by ProFootballFocus.com with five quarterback hurries Sunday, giving him 13 in the last five games -- three more than he had in the Chargers' first 12 games combined.

San Diego's investment is paying off. Their ability to get pressure from inside enhances the opportunities available for outside linebackers Jarret Johnson and Melvin Ingram, each of whom delivered explosive plays Sunday. (Johnson had a sack; Ingram hit Dalton once and later intercepted a pass after he dropped into coverage and easily read Dalton's intentions.)

Ingram, a first-round pick in 2012, represents the main difference in the Chargers defense from Week 15 to today. He returned to the field in December after suffering a torn ACL during OTAs and has seen his playing time increase every week since he returned against the Giants on Dec. 8. Since being shut out in the pass rush against the Broncos on Dec. 12, he has hit the opposing quarterback at least once each game.

San Diego is a slightly different team from the one the Broncos saw on Dec. 12, but those tweaks will give the Broncos plenty to ponder as they prepare to break the deadlock in the season series.

#### NOT-NECESSARILY-RELEVANT-BUT-KIND-OF-INTERESTING HISTORICAL TRENDS:

... This will mark the fourth time in Broncos history that they have faced a division foe in the postseason (Raiders 1977 and 1993, Seahawks 1983 and Chiefs 1997). Denver is 2-2 in these games, and 2-1 when they split the regular-season series ...

... The Jan. 4, 1998 duel between the Broncos and Chiefs -- won 14-10 by the Broncos -- marks the last time that two AFC West teams met in any round of the postseason. As with the Broncos and Chargers this week, Denver and the Chiefs grappled in the Divisional Round. You know what happened in the weeks after the Broncos won that game ...

... Philip Rivers is 6-2 in his starts at Denver, and was on the winning side of both previous playoff games when Peyton Manning was the opposing quarterback, one in Indianapolis and the other in San Diego. But the Broncos are 3-1 with Manning starting against Rivers' Chargers, and have won four of the last five games between the clubs dating back to Thanksgiving weekend 2011. Manning holds the regular-season edge 4-3; with playoffs included, Rivers leads, 5-4. In other words, what can you glean from those numbers? Nothing. They're relatively irrelevant to the upcoming game, which is why I won't mention them again ...

... This weekend, Indianapolis and San Diego became the seventh and eighth teams to win in the wild-card round by outscoring their opponents by more than 14 points in the second half after trailing at halftime. Just one of the previous six teams managed to win their next game: the 1992 Bills, who followed the greatest comeback in NFL history by winning at Pittsburgh the next week. The other three teams -- the 1992 Eagles, 1996 Steelers, 1997 Vikings, 2002 49ers and 2011

Saints -- all fell after making surges like the Colts and Chargers did. San Diego outscored Cincinnati 20-0 in the second half Sunday after trailing 10-7 at the midway point.

# Chargers-Broncos, Take Three

By Gray Caldwell  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 6, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- For the Broncos, the wait is over.

After a week of waiting and a weekend of watching, Denver found out Sunday afternoon that the San Diego Chargers will be Sunday's Divisional Round opponent.

"It really didn't matter who we played. I'm excited just to be in the playoffs and play again," wide receiver Demaryius Thomas said. "So that was the main thing. But it's a great opponent and I'm excited about playing them since it's our next opponent."

But more than just finding out who was up next on the schedule, the weekend of watching football reminded defensive end Malik Jackson that it's not a hobby he wants to take up any time soon.

"Sitting there watching these teams play really makes you realize that you don't want to be there the next few weeks watching the teams play," Jackson said, acknowledging that the rest was still helpful. "It kind of let us rejuvenate our bodies and our minds and now we're ready to go out to get these one-week seasons going."

The first one-week season started today, as the Broncos hit the practice field for the first time knowing their opponent.

And they know this opponent plenty well. The division rivals last matched up in Week 15, when San Diego gave Denver its third and final regular-season loss.

"They've been playing hungry," wide receiver Eric Decker said of the Chargers. "I think from our game on, it's been playoff football for them. They've been playing well as a team. For us, our biggest thing is we've got to match them physically. We've got to bring some energy. I think that is something we didn't do last time around. But again, that is in the past. We're focused on the present and really our matchup this weekend at home."

Head Coach John Fox said the Chargers "did a tremendous job" of going into a hostile environment in Cincinnati on Sunday and winning by running the ball effectively on offense and taking away the ball on defense.

Since both teams are familiar with one another, there's no real advantage on one side or the other for this Sunday.

And Fox didn't buy into the argument that the game will be even tougher with it being the third time the teams have played this season.

"You get into the playoffs and they're all difficult," he said. "That is why they have the playoffs. Regardless of whether it's in your division, how many times you've played them, it's a single-elimination tournament and whoever plays the best wins."

The work continued Monday to make sure the Broncos avenge their Week 15 loss and move on to the AFC Championship Game.

"It's kind of that rubber match, so to speak. Third-time around, it's winner-go-home," Decker said. "So, for us, this is a good challenge and we're excited about it."

# Learning from Past, Motivated by Future

By Brandon Moree  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 6, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – On Sunday, when the Broncos line up across from the Chargers in the Divisional Round of the 2013 playoffs, it will be exactly one month removed from the last matchup between the two teams.

On Dec. 12, the Chargers came to Sports Authority Field at Mile High and came away with a 27-20 victory in a Thursday night tilt.

Now that the two teams' paths are crossing again on Jan. 12, that Thursday-night game has some lessons to offer.

"Get off the field on third down," linebacker Wesley Woodyard said. "They had 175 yards on the ground but we didn't get off the field on third down. They were like 50 percent and that was the key. Anytime you play a good running team if you're not off the field on third down then they can just continue to keep running the ball and control the clock. That was the big thing -- getting off the field on third down."

The Chargers finished the Week 15 matchup having converted on six of their 12 third-down attempts and as a result controlled the time of possession. San Diego had the ball for more than 38 minutes, leaving the Broncos with the ball for a little more than 21.

This week, the Broncos' attention has turned to making sure that the Chargers don't have the same successes they had in the last matchup.

"Can't blame (the loss) on anybody but ourselves," defensive end Malik Jackson said. "We went out there and we didn't get the job done. They're a good team and they deserved it. Now we have to go out there and do what we know we need to do this week in practice and go out there on Sunday and do what we know how to do – which is play good defense."

Wide receiver Demaryius Thomas said that he didn't think that the game in December was all that relevant to this Sunday's game, saying that "it's the playoffs now, it's win or go home."

But he did go on to say that they'll be looking back at that game to see what things can be improved.

"You can't blame (the loss) on anything because we both had short weeks it's just that they outplayed us that week and (we will) just go back and look at the game to see what stuff we left out that we can do better," Thomas said.

"Hopefully come Sunday, we're capable of putting it on the field and getting the 'W.'"

Head Coach John Fox said after practice Monday that they would gain knowledge from the last matchup but they would gain their motivation from the next one.

"I think you always look back," Fox said. "I mean, that is what the past – you try to learn from that. You try to get motivated by future. But you want to keep your focus in the present, in the now, and that's what we're trying to do with our football team."

# Manning Nominated for Yearly FedEx Award

By Brandon Moree  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 6, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – After racking up nine FedEx Air Player of the week nominations and winning the award four times, quarterback Peyton Manning has been nominated for the FedEx Air Player of the Year Award.

Manning is a finalist for the award alongside New Orleans quarterback Drew Brees and fellow AFC West quarterback Philip Rivers. Brees was the only player to win the weekly award more than Manning this season as he won five times and also garnered nine nominations. Rivers won the weekly award once with three nominations.

Though Manning did not pick up the most weekly FedEx honors, he did pick up the most passing yards (5,477) and passing touchdowns (55) in NFL history – becoming the first quarterback since Dan Marino in 1984 to break both records in the same season.

But for Manning, the statistical records were not as important as the win-loss record.

“Passing yards, touchdowns, to me means it’s helping your team win games,” Manning said after setting the touchdown record in Houston. “To me, if we would have had a losing record and you break an individual record and you’re just throwing a lot of yards and you don’t have a chance to make the postseason that doesn’t mean a whole lot. Touchdowns to me means that you’re scoring points and helping your team win games. That’s something I think means a little more.”

FedEx will make a \$25,000 donation in the name of the winner of both the Air and Ground Awards to the Junior Achievement chapters in their cities. FedEx has made weekly donations of \$2,000 per winner and the end of season total for donations will reach \$130,000.

Fans will have the final say in who wins the FedEx Air and Ground NFL Players of the Year honors and have until Jan. 24 to cast their ballot at [www.NFL.com/fedex](http://www.NFL.com/fedex).

The winners will be announced at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual NFL Honors awards show in New York City on Feb. 1. The awards show will air on FOX the night before the Super Bowl.