

# Kiszla: Pressure is on Broncos coach John Fox even if he can't feel it

By Mark Kiszla  
The Denver Post  
January 9, 2014

When the Broncos play San Diego in the NFL playoffs, it's really a win-or-go-home game for only one man: Denver coach John Fox.

Win, and Fox drives the Broncos Bandwagon rolling down the road to the Super Bowl.

Lose, and all credibility Fox had in Denver would be rubble in the ditch. He might as well crawl from the wreckage, go home and not come back to work.

It's Super Bowl or bust for the Broncos. Lose in the first round, and Fox's back will be busted from angry critics jumping on it.

"All this expectations stuff? It's kinda just poppycock," Fox told me.

Poppycock? The pressure on Fox is poppycock?

"It doesn't mean anything," Fox insisted.

Hey, Fox doesn't need to be told the window of opportunity to win a championship with 37-year-old quarterback Peyton Manning is closing. I reminded Fox of the emotional scars that remain raw in this city, because the fear of what went wrong in playoffs against Baltimore on Jan. 12, 2013, could be repeated against San Diego 365 days later.

"Look, you position yourself for great opportunities, and we've done that two years in a row," Fox said. "Obviously, last year was very disappointing, especially the way we lost the game to Baltimore. You can put all the spin on it you want, but that might be one of the flukier plays in NFL history. That was a sting. But that's in the past. You can't change it. You just learn from it. And deal with what's now."

Win against the Chargers, and Fox positions himself to become one of the feel-good stories in the NFL playoffs: On Nov. 2, Fox was knocked to his knees by chest pain on a golf course, afraid for his life, praying to God to "get me out of this." Three months to the day after that serious health scare, Fox could be hoisting the Lombardi Trophy as coach of the Super Bowl winner.

Get beat by San Diego, though, and Fox would be the guy who wasted the best statistical season of Manning's brilliant career. He would be the coach who got outfoxed by former Denver assistant Mike McCoy, who now works the Chargers'

sideline. For the no mas finish of the fourth quarter in the playoff loss against the Ravens, Fox would forevermore be known as Mr. Take a Knee.

It all sounds like a plot of a scary movie. Ravens and Chargers and losses. Oh, my. Fox, however, refuses to buy the narrative. He hasn't been frightened by any movie since he was a kid.

"The Wizard of Oz," Fox said. "Now that was a scary movie. I was so young that when I saw it, the whole movie was in black and white. It scared the (expletive) out of me. That witch? And those flying apes? And playing that music: 'Dun ta dun ta dun dun. Dun ta dun ta dun dun.' Now that was scary."

Fox has done a marvelous job with the Broncos. He mopped up the wet spill left by former coach Josh McDaniels at Dove Valley headquarters. He won a playoff game with Tim Tebow and an offensive style as outdated as a polka by Lawrence Welk. His record in Denver: three seasons, three AFC West division titles, 34 regular-season victories.

But lose to the Chargers, and Fox would become the new Marty Schottenheimer.

A great football coach, until it really counts in the playoffs.

"This game is only fun if you win it," Fox said. "And there's only one happy camper at the end of this tournament."

Drop the ball as a 9½-point favorite against San Diego, and no matter how big a vote of confidence Broncos executive John Elway gave Fox, disgruntled fans of the team would rescind it.

Fox took the Carolina Panthers to the Super Bowl, for crying out loud. His .708 winning percentage in Denver ranks ahead of Red Miller, Dan Reeves and Mike Shanahan. But lose to San Diego, and it wouldn't matter. As an effective leader capable of inspiring trust in Broncomaniacs, Fox would be effectively done.

On Sunday, it's OK if the Broncos win in a rout with five touchdown passes from Manning, or squeak by on a 55-yard field goal in overtime by Matt Prater.

But this is a must-win for Fox.

"I don't know if it's scary or daunting," Fox said. "It's actually fun."

Lose in your first playoff game with the most decorated quarterback in league history for the second consecutive season? If that happens, in this town, Fox might as well change his name from John to dirt.

No matter how good an NFL coach might be, he can never be better than those final numbers on the scoreboard.

"You do this job because of that pressure," Fox said. "Otherwise, life can be kind of boring."

As somebody who likes Fox and respects how the coach treats his players, here's one piece of friendly advice:

Don't get Schottenheimered.

# Philip Rivers is the emotional heart and soul of the Chargers

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
January 9, 2014

As a 12-year NFL cornerback, Quentin Jammer has played alongside his share of trash-talking pass rushers, rip-snorting linebackers, adrenaline-filled safeties and large, cruel defensive tackles.

Mix together all those game-day bellies, though, and they couldn't match the fire that roars inside quarterback Philip Rivers.

"He's one of the most emotional players you'll ever see on a football field," Jammer said. "Some people don't like that he shows so much emotion, but he is the heart and soul of that Chargers team. He talks. It's fun. It's a game. And he plays it the way you should play."

Jammer was a Charger for 11 years and a teammate of Rivers' for nine. Now a backup cornerback with the Broncos, Jammer is getting ready to play against his former teammate for the third time this season. The Peyton Manning-guided Broncos will meet the Rivers-inspired Chargers on Sunday afternoon in a second-round AFC divisional playoff game at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

The quarterbacks have met twice before in the playoffs — in the 2007 and 2008 seasons when Manning was quarterback of the Indianapolis Colts. Rivers and the Chargers were large underdogs both times, and won both games. This time the No. 6-seeded Chargers are 9½-point underdogs against the No. 1-seeded Broncos.

"I think there's probably a slim-to-zero percent chance that Peyton and I will be on the field at the same time," Rivers said, laughing during his conference call with the Denver media Wednesday. "I know that quarterbacks get tied to playing one another, but myself and our offense have got our work cut out for (us), and I know Peyton is focused on our defense. It's not me vs. him by any means, and this is a new team and he's in a new place, new deal."

Manning plays with calculated precision. He'll show annoyance when the calculation goes awry, but when all goes well, the TV cameras will be lucky if they get a fist bump.

Rivers is all heart and facial expressions. He led all NFL quarterbacks this season in smirks, scolds, chuckles and a 49.4 percent third-down conversion rate.

And isn't it better for friend and foe to have Public Enemy No. 1 back on his game? Rivers has been Broncos fans' most hated quarterback since a final-game, trash-talking episode involving then-Denver quarterback Jay Cutler in 2007.

But getting all riled up at Rivers the previous two seasons was wasted energy as he threw 35 interceptions and lost to Tim Tebow and twice to Manning. The word was Rivers was lost, maybe injured, broken to the point he needed to be fixed.

"I understood what everybody was trying to put out there," said Phil Simms, the former NFL quarterback and NFL analyst in a CBS conference call this week. "I did have some questions myself. I did.

"But his charisma, his leadership, his energy are second to none. He and Peyton Manning are almost the same guy. And this offense (that the Chargers) do now, it fits him perfectly.

"He just knows how to play his part in the game. And what greater example do you need than last week? Sixteen throws, he's one of the few guys who cannot throw it a lot, still stay in rhythm, still do his job when he's called upon. That's pretty rare for quarterbacks nowadays. Because most quarterbacks need 40 throws to get their thing going. Philip Rivers can do it with 16 or he can do it with 40."

Simms was referring to Rivers' performance in the Chargers' first-round playoff victory Sunday at Cincinnati. Rivers completed 12-of-16 for 128 yards in a throwback stat line to the 1970s. Yet, Rivers also guided his team to a convincing 27-10 victory against the heavily favored Bengals.

That game showed how far Rivers, and the Chargers, have come under first-year coach Mike McCoy, who in the four previous seasons served as the Broncos' offensive coordinator.

In two previous seasons, when he threw all those interceptions, Rivers was forcing throws in an attempt to carry his otherwise limited team. The 12-of-16 performance shows that with a formidable running game, an adjusted offensive line and an improved defense, Rivers can let the game come to him. And it often doesn't call on him until third down.

"We've been very high percentage passing all year long," Rivers said. "I've tried to continue to remind myself throw completions, throw completions. Let our guys catch it and run with it and just keep getting first downs.

"So to answer your question, sometimes in the past few years, yes, I did try to do a little too much. Yes, sometimes in the last nine years of my career, there are times when all of us quarterbacks try to do too much. You do it with the right intention, but it's not what's best for your team. You're doing it with the will to want to help the team win, but in some situations it's not what's best."

# Terrell Davis, Steve Atwater, John Lynch, Karl Mecklenburg await Hall of Fame cutdown

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
January 8, 2014

Could be a tough night's sleep for four former Broncos who have a chance at the Hall of Fame.

The Pro Football Hall of Fame will narrow its list of 25 modern-era semifinalists to 15 finalists at 7 p.m. Thursday.

The four Broncos who are among the top 25 hoping to make the cut to 15: Running back Terrell Davis, safeties Steve Atwater and John Lynch and defensive end/linebacker Karl Mecklenburg.

There seems to finally be some momentum for Davis, who has been a top 25 semifinalist seven consecutive years but has never "made the room." The 15 finalists are presented to the 46-voting member committee on the eve of the Super Bowl. I'd be shocked if he doesn't make the final 15 this year. The question is whether Lynch, Atwater or Mecklenburg will keep him company.

After the presentations, the 15 modern-era finalists are then cut to 10 and then 5. The final five must receive 80 percent of the final vote for election. There are also two senior candidates — punter Ray Guy and defensive end Claude Humphrey. They go right to the final vote where they also must receive 80 percent approval.

All of this happens on Feb. 1, the day before Super Bowl XLVIII in New Jersey.

# Ex-Broncos coordinator Mike McCoy has NFL's hottest team in Chargers

By Joan Niesen  
The Denver Post  
January 9, 2014

Every time an assistant coach takes a head coaching job, it's a leap of faith. New hires are hot. Open jobs are lukewarm, if not cold. They're open for a reason.

Just look at Broncos offensive coordinator Adam Gase. He has been contacted by Cleveland and Minnesota to interview for their openings, though he won't interview until after the Broncos lose, and even then, the Browns and Vikings are hardly the Broncos. They need quarterbacks, culture changes, turnarounds.

Who knows whether Gase will go, but a year ago, the Broncos were in the same position. Their offensive coordinator did more than agree to interview, though; he bolted — from a team favored to win the Super Bowl in 2013, from Peyton Manning, from the greatest offense of a generation.

Now, Mike McCoy is back, a year after watching his team upset by the Baltimore Ravens in the divisional round of the playoffs. A month removed from beating the Broncos in Denver, he hopes this time their Super Bowl dreams will be broken to his benefit.

"I take my hat off to him, because when he was here he did a great job with the guys that he did have around him," Broncos receiver Demaryius Thomas said Wednesday. "He's been doing great. I expected it, I just didn't know it was going to be this fast, but he's been doing a good job."

Some jobs are a multiyear project. Others are just a piece or two away. Looking at the 2012 Chargers, with their 7-9 record and quarterback Philip Rivers' good reputation, but lagging stats, it was hard to tell where they fell.

"There were a lot of good players here," McCoy said. "We've got a great coaching staff, so it was a matter of everyone buying in. The parity in this league is so good, you're in every game you play. It's a matter of the players buying in to what you're doing and going out and executing."

McCoy's players appear to have done so. After losing in Week 13 to fall to 5-7 in a division with two sure-bet playoff teams, the Chargers should have been demoralized. They could have counted themselves out.

They didn't.

"I think he's done a tremendous job," Broncos coach John Fox said of McCoy. "They've played well when you need to — that's late in the season. They did a tremendous job, especially down the homestretch of the season."

Coming into Denver, McCoy's team has won five straight, including its first playoff game against No. 3 seed Cincinnati. It's the hottest team in the NFL, similar to those Broncos of a year ago, who were riding an 11-game streak into January. But McCoy is on the other side of the looking glass now, and the Broncos hope more than anything that for the second consecutive Jan. 12, he'll leave the field with the sting of a loss.

# Broncos linebacker Von Miller to have ACL surgery Thursday

By Joan Niesen  
The Denver Post  
January 9, 2014

Broncos linebacker Von Miller is scheduled to have surgery to repair the torn anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee Thursday in Florida. Miller suffered the injury Dec. 22 in Houston.

Although it might seem like forever since the injury occurred, waiting a few days or even weeks for surgery isn't uncommon among athletes. Swelling in the joint must go down, and some people opt to do presurgery physical therapy as well.

Miller came through the Broncos locker room Friday wearing a large brace on his right knee.

There were 61 reported ACL tears during training camps, the preseason and regular season of 2013 in the NFL.

Injury report. Of the players on the 53-man roster, only defensive end Derek Wolfe was missing from the Broncos' Wednesday practice. Wolfe still is dealing with the aftermath of his seizure-like episode Nov. 29, and though he returned briefly Christmas Day and two days later, he hasn't taken the field since.

Safety Rahim Moore, who's on injured reserve designated to return, but became eligible to practice last week, still has not done so.

Hillman clears up traffic issues. Running back Ronnie Hillman, who was scheduled for an arraignment over traffic infractions Wednesday, cleared up his issues and did not have to appear. Hillman did not miss the Broncos' Wednesday practice.

"He fixed it right away," 18th Judicial District spokeswoman Lisa Pinto said Wednesday. "It was a license issue."

"Mr. Hillman was proactive in resolving his outstanding traffic matter," she added. "He arrived at the court house yesterday (Tuesday) with his attorney and resolved the issue. Consequently, in the interest of justice this case was dismissed."

Hillman was pulled over because he had expired tags and was driving under restraint.

A healthy receiving corps. It's hard to say exactly how big a difference receiver Wes Welker will be for the Broncos on Sunday, but he'll certainly help. The receiver has been out since halftime of the team's Dec. 8 game against Tennessee, and what

many people have forgotten is how banged up the Broncos receiving corps has been of late. Before Welker's injury, tight end Julius Thomas missed two games and change with an ankle injury, meaning that since Nov. 17, the Broncos have had the four main receiving weapons — Julius Thomas, Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker and Welker — all healthy at the same time for one half of one football game.

Notorious ref to work game. Referee Clete Blakeman might not be well-known among Broncos fans — he hasn't worked a Denver game this season. But he is well-known in New England and Carolina.

The NFL has assigned Blakeman to work Sunday's Broncos-Chargers game. Blakeman was in charge of the November game between the Patriots and Panthers that ended in controversial fashion. A back judge's flag for interference after Tom Brady threw toward Rob Gronkowski in the end zone was picked up after discussion. And the Panthers won.

And, further infuriating Pats fans, Blakeman didn't give an explanation, saying only: "There is no foul on the play. The game is over."

With six years in the NFL — four as a referee and two as a field judge — Blakeman is the least-experienced referee in the NFL this season.

Chargers injury report. Nick Hardwick suffered a concussion as well as a stinger in Sunday's victory over the Cincinnati Bengals, and it's not known whether the center will be able to play Sunday against the Broncos.

He must pass certain tests in order to be cleared to play.

Rookie right tackle D.J. Fluker also sat out practice with an ankle injury, as did running back Ryan Mathews. Wide receiver Eddie Royal (toe) also did not practice.

Rich Ohrnberger replaced Hardwick on Sunday and played well.

Mathews, plagued by an injured left ankle for several weeks, came out of the victory at Cincinnati in the third quarter after gaining 52 yards on 13 carries. He continues to wear a walking boot to protect the ankle.

"My mind-set's on playing. I've got to stay as mentally ready as I can because I'm not going to get snaps in practice," said Mathews, who ran for 127 yards and a touchdown in San Diego's 27-20 upset victory in Denver on Dec. 12.

# Broncos continue to brace for Chargers minus Derek Wolfe, Rahim Moore

By Joan Niesen  
The Denver Post  
January 8, 2014

Defensive end Derek Wolfe was the only player on the 53-man roster missing from the Broncos' Wednesday practice. Safety Rahim Moore, who's currently on injured reserve designated to return but is eligible to practice, was also missing.

For the first time in nearly two weeks, coach John Fox will be required to give an injury report later Wednesday, so updates on both Wolfe and Moore — however brief — should be available.

Wednesday's was the Broncos' second practice in preparation for the Chargers after they got a bonus practice in on Monday by virtue of the fact that they were off over the weekend.

# Broncos Stat of the Day: Slower quarterback releases in the playoffs

By Joan Niesen  
The Denver Post  
January 8, 2014

Bear with me on this one. For some reason, I find this interesting, and I hope you will, too.

When I was digging through some numbers earlier this week on Pro Football Focus, I noticed that all of the quarterback release times from last weekend's games seemed, well, slow. Like, really slow.

I decided to take a closer look, and sure enough, only two quarterbacks got rid of the ball faster than their regular-season average marks during the Wild Card round of the playoffs: Philadelphia's Nick Foles and Indianapolis' Andrew Luck.

At face value, maybe, this makes sense. Release times are all about decision-making, and playoff games provide tougher decisions, which cause quarterbacks to hang onto the ball longer. Add in the cold, which you'd think would increase release times, too — Luck was playing in a dome — and this makes even more sense.

Except, of course, that these aren't exactly all-star defenses. Cincinnati's Andy Dalton, whose release time went from a season average of 2.43 seconds to 2.99 last weekend, was facing a Chargers' defense that hasn't exactly been lauded for anything this year. Drew Brees' release time was positively slow, too, 3.13 seconds compared to a season average of 2.72, and he played against a pretty terrible Eagles unit.

Conversely, Foles, one of the two to improve upon his mark, was playing against a Saints defense that's been somewhat competent this year.

Anyways, I'm not positive of what to make of this, other than that slower release times mean more opportunities to be sacked, as was the case for Dalton Sunday, and so the Broncos should take note.

Peyton Manning this season averaged a 2.36-second release, best in the NFL and 0.14 seconds better than his 2012 average. In 2012, his 2.74-second release in the Broncos' playoff game was worse than his season average, though he was playing in the cold. This season, his two coldest games have yielded release times of 2.70 seconds (New England) and 2.49 seconds (Tennessee).

So I guess the takeaway here is that Manning's offensive line better be on their guard — and the Broncos' pass rushers should take advantage of any possible milliseconds that work in their favor if this trend continues Sunday.

# Broncos' Nate Irving proves himself in place of injured Von Miller

By Irv Moss  
The Denver Post  
January 9, 2014

Linebacker Nate Irving doesn't think he's on the hot seat because he's playing for injured linebacker Von Miller. He's not going to compare his play with the all-pro Miller, who was lost for the season to a knee injury Dec. 22 at Houston.

"We both play hard," Irving said. "I know the defensive players and coaches have confidence in me. It's unfortunate Von had to go down, but this is an opportunity for me."

Irving established himself as a player waiting in the wings in the first six games this season when Miller was serving an NFL suspension. Irving stepped in again when Miller went down against the Texans. In the season finale at Oakland, he had a sack and two tackles for losses.

"He (Irving) has done a nice job," coach John Fox said. "We've had a number of players who have stepped up."

Fellow linebacker Paris Lenon voiced confidence in Irving.

"It's not like you're throwing an unproven guy out there or somebody you have questions about," Lenon said. "When he (Irving) has gotten an opportunity to play, he's done a great job."

Irving is all business.

"We can't focus on that," Irving said when asked if the players feel the pressure of being a No. 1 seed. "We just have to execute our game plan. If we could win the Super Bowl, it would be big at this stage of my career."

# Ronnie Hillman, Denver Broncos running back, clears up traffic issues

By Carlos Illescas  
The Denver Post  
January 8, 2014

CENTENNIAL — Denver Broncos running back Ronnie Hillman has cleared up his traffic infractions and the matter has been dismissed, a court spokesperson said Wednesday.

Hillman, 22, was pulled over Nov. 23 in Arapahoe County for expired license plate tags and for driving while under restraint, which is a misdemeanor. He had been scheduled for arraignment Jan. 8.

"He fixed it right away," 18th Judicial District spokeswoman Lisa Pinto said Wednesday. "It was a license issue."

She called the case a "routine matter" and said it had been dismissed, negating the need for Hillman to appear in court.

A third-round draft pick by the Broncos in 2012, Hillman is the team's third running back, behind Knowshon Moreno and Montee Ball.

# NFL assigns controversial referee Clete Blakeman to Broncos-Chargers playoff game

By Nick Groke  
The Denver Post  
January 8, 2014

Referee Clete Blakeman might not be well-known among Broncos fans — he hasn't worked a Denver game this season. But he is well-known in New England and Carolina.

Blakeman — a four-year NFL ref who wears No. 34 — was in charge of the November game between the Patriots and Panthers that ended in controversial fashion. He overruled a back judge's call of interference after Tom Brady threw toward Rob Gronkowski in the end zone. And the Panthers won.

And, further infuriating Pats fans, Blakeman didn't give an explanation, saying only: "There is no foul on the play. The game is over."

It's Blakeman who will work Sunday's Broncos-Chargers game in Denver. The NFL has assigned him to the game.

With six years in the NFL — four as a referee and two as a field judge — Blakeman is the least experienced ref in the NFL this season.

A quick glance at Blakeman's stats shows that he called 5 percent more penalties against the home team this season than the league average. He and his crew also flagged the most offensive pass interference calls this season. But he calls slightly fewer penalties overall than the NFL ref average.

This weekend's games are also a kind of audition. The NFL will choose (some say already chose) one of the four remaining referees from this divisional playoff round to work the Super Bowl.

# Paris Lenon, Broncos starting linebacker, is last XFLer in NFL

By Benjamin Hochman  
The Denver Post  
January 8, 2014

It was forgettable, yet just so unforgettable, the dirty absurdity that was the XFL.

Remember this thing? Run by pro wrestling kingpin Vince McMahon, who wanted to provide an alternative to the NFL, the XFL was over-the-top, from the personas to the nicknames to the uniforms to the rule changes. For one glorious (notorious?) year, this wild pro football league was in full, furious function. That was 2001, and now, here in the 2013 NFL season, only one player from the XFL is still kickin' in the NFL. And that player is Broncos starting linebacker Paris Lenon.

"It was entirely different than the National Football League," said Lenon, 36, who has taken over as the middle linebacker for Wesley Woodyard. "I'm pretty sure people have a lot of jokes about the league, but at the time for me, it was a situation where I had the opportunity to play in NFL Europe or stay in the states and make more money. And that's what it boiled down to."

He was a member of the Memphis Maniax (I'm still trying to figure out how to spell the singular version of that nickname). Lenon had played at the University of Richmond, and after being cut by the Carolina Panthers, he revived his career with the Maniax, which led to jobs in the NFL for more than the next decade.

"Playing in that league, all it did was it gave me more playing experience," he said. "Anytime you get more experience, get more comfortable, the better you are from it."

For the Broncos this season, he's tallied 22 tackles, most late in the season, since he took over as the starter. He's essentially split the snaps with Woodyard — who primarily plays in nickel packages.

"He understands the game, he understands the schemes of offense, and he's gotten more comfortable in our defensive scheme as we've moved along," Broncos coach John Fox said Wednesday. "And as I mentioned a while back, when we started plugging him in there, he earned that opportunity. And he's done a good job when that opportunity happened."

ESPN.com once ran a list of the 25 biggest flops in the past 25 years. The XFL finished second — behind Ryan Leaf.

Asked for one of his XFL memories, Lenon laughed.

"It was crazy. I had a coach who'd smoke cigars in the meetings," he said. "I ain't lying. He'd smoke the cigars in the meeting, he was old school. He was a great guy, but he enjoyed his cigars."

Nuggets broadcaster Chris Marlowe still proudly keeps his XFL gear — Marlowe was an XFL announcer, paired with another aspect of football infamy, Brian Bosworth.

"It was sure fun while it lasted," Marlowe said. "There were (innovations). Some of the things that didn't work out as planned were some of the rules they implemented. They started the game off with a sprint, one guy from each team running to the ball on the 40, and whoever ran the fastest and got the ball would have the choice. It was great — until one of the better players in the league dislocated his shoulder on that play.

"They had the bright idea that they wanted announcers to interact with the fans, so they actually put us in the stands with the fans. That was great when we were in Las Vegas, but we were in Giants Stadium once in the winter. One game we're out there, no covering, 8 below, snows coming down, the ink on the charts are running, the monitor starts to go on the fritz, there's a little fire — it was just classic XFL."

# Broncos figure to be better this time around

By Arnie Stapleton  
Associated Press  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — The last top seed to open its playoff run against a team it had just lost to at home in December was the 2008 New York Giants, who were beaten again by Philadelphia in the rematch.

Six years later, the Denver Broncos and another Manning brother open against the San Diego Chargers, who held the highest-scoring team of the Super Bowl era to its lowest point total of the season in a 27-20 upset in Denver last month.

The Broncos figure to be a different team than the one that took the field on the final Thursday night game of the season, however.

This time, they'll have Wes Welker, Champ Bailey and Jeremy Mincey, but they'll also be without Von Miller, who's set to undergo surgery to repair his torn right ACL on Thursday.

The Chargers (10-7) and Broncos (13-3) have played 108 times but never in the postseason.

"This is why you have the offseason work, this is why you meet as often as you do in April, May and June," Peyton Manning said. "It's for opportunities like this."

Manning wasn't in the mood Wednesday to reflect on his record-setting regular season, focused as he is on trying to win another Super Bowl ring that would match brother Eli's pair.

Manning will have his stellar slot receiver back from a concussion that forced him to miss that last game against the Chargers, when the Broncos had three straight three-and-outs that helped San Diego turn an early touchdown deficit into a 24-10 lead.

The Broncos were 2 of 9 on third downs that night, when they sorely missed Welker.

"Big time," wide receiver Eric Decker said. "He's a guy that has done very well on third down and just on any down. When you lose a weapon like that, you have to fill the shoes and I don't think we as a team did a good enough job of having a successful first down, minimizing the third-and-longs and taking advantage of some opportunities we had."

Bailey was out with a nagging foot injury that night, too, and Philip Rivers picked on rookie cornerback Kayvon Webster, who played the final three quarters with a broken right thumb, no less.

Bailey's return at nickel back gives the Broncos three solid cornerbacks along with Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie and Chris Harris Jr. to cover the likes of Vincent Brown, Eddie Royal and Keenan Allen.

San Diego coach Mike McCoy said running back Ryan Mathews (ankle) won't practice until Friday. But McCoy declared, "He's going to be healthy on Sunday."

Mathews gained 127 yards on 29 carries against Denver last month, the only back to top 100 yards on the Broncos all season.

After San Diego gained 103 yards on the ground on first down, the Broncos shored up their run defense by signing Mincey, who was released by Jacksonville, and first-round draft pick Sylvester Williams picked up his play as Denver allowed just 3.28 yards per carry and 75 yards rushing over the last two games.

That gives the Broncos confidence they can turn things around against the Chargers, the only team to hold them under 65 snaps this season — and they did it twice.

The Chargers controlled the clock for more than 38 minutes both times the teams played.

"We have to do a better job of staying on the field," Denver tight end Julius Thomas said. "If we don't want the Chargers to run the ball and run the ball, then we have to make sure we're running the ball well and we're executing at a high level on offense."

"If they're out there controlling the clock that means that we didn't do what we needed to do on offense."

Last month, Manning got hot over the criticism he was taking over his record in cold-weather games and he responded with a 397-yard, four-TD performance against Tennessee on an 18-degree afternoon in Denver.

Now, the buzz is all about his middling record in the playoffs (9-11), which pales in comparison to his stellar regular season record of 167-73.

"It's a team sport," Decker said. "The past in the past. Stats, they don't matter anymore. Records, they don't matter anymore. It's a tournament. It's a one-game, win-or-go-home type of mentality. We feel like we have an opportunity to be successful this weekend and hopefully we have goals to be successful in the next couple of weeks."

# Von Miller to have surgery on right knee

By Arnie Stapleton  
Associated Press  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — Von Miller is set to have surgery to repair his torn right ACL in Florida on Thursday.

Miller's rehab is expected to take six to nine months, meaning he could miss the start of the Denver Broncos' training camp next summer.

Miller's right knee buckled when he was blocked cleanly by Texans tight end Ryan Griffin in Denver's 37-13 win at Houston on Dec. 22.

That ended a rough season for the 2011 NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year, one that began with him serving a six-game drug suspension. He finished with five sacks in nine games.

Nate Irving has filled in at strongside linebacker in the base defense and defensive end Robert Ayers has subbed for Miller on passing downs.

# Looking for that road winner this week?

By Barry Wilner  
Associated Press  
January 8, 2014

The oddsmakers weren't fazed by three road teams winning in the wild-card round. They've made two of those winners, the Saints and Chargers, big underdogs on Saturday in the divisional round.

Recent history has shown that home field usually is meaningful in these four games, with only one visitor winning in each of the past two seasons. Only twice since 2002, when the current setup began, has there been a sweep by the four hosts, though; never have all visiting clubs won in the divisional round.

Such numbers should make everyone search for that one or two road squads who might pull off another win. We think we've found the right one: the thawed-out 49ers (13-4).

"I haven't found anything that makes you feel more like a man than to go, not only beat your opponent, but you're beating their crowd, and then, the elements, in a playoff game," says coach Jim Harbaugh, whose 49ers (No. 3, AP Pro32) won on the final play at frigid Green Bay in the opening round and are 2-point choices Sunday at Carolina (No. 4, AP Pro32).

The Panthers (12-4) had one of their most impressive victories in a turnaround season when they won at San Francisco 10-9 on Nov. 10. Neither side has forgotten that defensive battle in which the 49ers lost tight end Vernon Davis and rookie safety Eric Reid to concussions.

Plus, wide receiver Michael Crabtree was still recovering from a torn Achilles tendon. He's back, as are Davis and Reid.

"More dangerous," Harbaugh said of his team. "Michael was not there for that game and Vernon was out of the game early with a concussion."

Dangerous — and headed for the NFC title game.

BEST BET: 49ers, 23-16

No. 7 New Orleans (plus 8) at No. 1 Seattle, Saturday

Now that they have the first road playoff win in franchise history, can the Saints (12-5) start a winning streak away from New Orleans. That's not exactly a Big Easy for them in Seattle, where the Seahawks routed the Saints 34-7 on Dec. 2.

Yes, the Seahawks lost their invincibility at CenturyLink Field by losing to Arizona three weeks ago. Contrary to the widespread opinion that it was an especially damaging defeat, we think it helped the Seahawks (13-3) recognize their vulnerability. They won't slip up again, although this won't be anything close to that previous romp.

SEAHAWKS, 24-20

No. 8 Indianapolis (plus 7 1-2) at No. 5 New England, Saturday

The stats might not show it, the reality does: This has been one terrific year for Tom Brady.

Despite almost an entirely new crew of receivers, few of them proven, and with his favorite targets, Wes Welker (free agent signed by Denver) and Rob Gronkowski (injuries) not around, Brady guided the Patriots to a 12-4 record and yet another AFC East crown.

The new guy in town will be Andrew Luck, who has that same look of stardom and indefatigability that Brady always has worn. Luck engineered that stunning comeback from a 28-point deficit against Kansas City last weekend. He's in his second pro season. All Brady did was win a Super Bowl as an NFL sophomore.

For Luck and the Colts (12-5) to replicate that feat, they can't afford another slow start. Even if they start fast, though, Brady has shown this season that he is still the master of the rally to victory.

PATRIOTS, 33-28

No. 3 San Diego (plus 10) at No. 2 Denver

San Diego's last road game during the season was a Thursday night win at Denver (13-3). That was a key to the run the Chargers (10-7) have staged to not only sneak off with the final wild-card spot in the AFC, but go into Cincinnati and win.

A repeat performance will likely require controlling the ball to keep Peyton Manning and the record-setting Denver offense on the sideline. It will require another huge defensive performance by a team that has stepped up on that side of the ball in the last month.

It also might require another meltdown (or freeze out) late in the match by the Broncos, similar to what happened against Baltimore a year ago.

Won't happen.

BRONCOS, 38-30

---

2013 RECORD: Against spread: 2-2 (115-124-7). Straight up: 3-1 (159-98-1).

Best Bet: 9-9 against spread, 15-3 straight up.

Upset special: 8-10 against spread, 5-13 straight up.

# Broncos still feel they are 'hot' team

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- They are the hottest team reaming in the AFC's postseason field. They are confident, they say they have been in "playoff mode" for over a month, they have momentum and they are ... not the Denver Broncos.

No, when the Broncos and the San Diego Chargers face off Sunday in Sports Authority Field at Mile High, Denver will carry the league's highest scoring offense into the game as the AFC's top seed, fresh off a playoff bye.

But the Chargers will arrive having won their last four games of the regular season -- five of the last six -- to make the postseason field. They then upset the Cincinnati Bengals in Paul Brown Stadium on Sunday. The only longer winning streak underway in the league is San Francisco's seven-game span that includes last weekend's road victory against the Green Bay Packers.

As momentum has repeatedly trumped rest in the NFL's tournament recently, the Broncos find themselves trying to buck the trend on the AFC side of the Super Bowl bracket. Since 1990 -- the first year of the current 12-team format -- the No. 1 seeds in the NFC are 19-4 in divisional round games while the AFC's top seeds are just 13-10.

The last three Super Bowl winners -- Green Bay, the New York Giants and the Baltimore Ravens -- played during the wild-card weekend.

It's all why over the last two weeks the Broncos have spent a lot of time pushing the idea, from the top down, that the postseason is a new start, that as wide receiver Eric Decker put it Wednesday, "The past is the past. Stats, they don't matter anymore. Records, they don't matter anymore. It's a tournament. It's a one-game, win-or-go-home type of mentality."

The Broncos used their bye week -- head coach John Fox called it a "get better week" -- in large part to rest the team. They had plenty of meeting time, but kept the on-field work to two practices. And at the moment the Broncos, who have repeated as the AFC's top seed with their second consecutive 13-3 record, see themselves as the team with the momentum that comes with a season like that.

"We won 13 games this year, so I don't know what you consider us if you consider them a hot team," said Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton. "We went on our streaks here and there, we had our bumps in the road, and I think that's made us a better team. We faced a lot of adversity this year and now it's time to put up or shut up. All of the injuries and guys not playing or things like that -- no more excuses."

Also working in the Broncos favor, at least many of the players say, is San Diego's Dec. 12 win in Denver. The 27-20 Chargers victory, after the Broncos did not handle a short week very well leading up to the Thursday night affair, has wrung out every last possibility the Broncos would get too comfortable this week.

"They kind of put it on us last time," Decker said.

There is also that not-so-small matter of last January's double overtime loss to the Ravens that ended the Broncos' postseason run. That game has been a reminder for almost every Broncos' team activity since.

"I would say that there's a lot more confidence in the locker room this year than last year," Decker said. "Last year we went on a little run there and I don't know if we got comfortable, but we didn't finish. We were hungry this year as far as coming into the offseason, coming into training camp making sure that when we go out and play we make sure we finish everything we do."

"We just need to have a good week of preparation," said tight end Jacob Tamme.  
" ... And go out there Sunday and, like I said, let it loose, play aggressive."

# Manning relishes playoff opportunities

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- For a guy who has run the highest-scoring offense in the league's history, with a pile of NFL records in tow, Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning has spent his share of time this season getting asked about what some folks think he can't do.

Make a list, he's probably had the question buzz the tower.

## Manning

The ones about why some think he can't throw deep like he used to. Or can't play in cold weather. And Wednesday, Manning was confronted with a 9-11 postseason record with eight playoff exits after just one game, a total that includes the Broncos' double-overtime loss to the Baltimore Ravens last Jan. 12.

This Sunday -- also Jan. 12, much to the chagrin of many among the Broncos' faithful -- Denver will face the San Diego Chargers in an AFC divisional round game in Sports Authority Field at Mile High. And there is a theory that Manning, with his next-level preparation, may simply grind too hard in the postseason and that's why a quarterback who will waltz into Canton in his first year of eligibility for the Pro Football Hall of Fame has faced so much playoff disappointment.

Manning, however, escaped the rush there, too.

"I don't really believe so," Manning said after Wednesday's practice. "I know people -- It's easy to summarize, to take a whole bunch of football seasons and lump them together. I personally don't see how that, I don't believe in that theory [of] how it works. Each season takes on its own identity and different things occurred at different parts of my career ... [This season is] its own chapter ... And looking forward to writing it for a number of more weeks."

Asked if he believed he put too much pressure on himself in postseason situations, Manning said he didn't think so.

"That's not how I feel," Manning said. "I guess everybody has a different theory or analysis ... I look forward to every opportunity."

Manning's 11 postseason losses are tied with Brett Favre for the most in league history, but Manning's postseason yardage total (5,679) and postseason touchdowns (32) are fourth and tied for fourth all-time.

And Wednesday, as he has on several occasions during the season, Manning did talk about how he looks at things as a 37-year-old player who returned from four neck surgeries.

He was asked if he still enjoys preparing for the single-elimination format of the postseason.

"I think it depends what attitude you want to approach it with," Manning said. "I mean, if it's just miserable the whole time, then why are you really doing it? I mean, there are other things you can do that you can do that might make you feel less miserable than it's just an absolute grind ... And maybe, as you get older, you think more in those lines, that hey this is a pretty unique opportunity to be in this position, to be one of just a few teams playing. It's going to be a great atmosphere on Sunday, playing a good football team, and there is nothing else I would rather be doing than be in that opportunity."

Manning continued: "That is certainly my goal, to enjoy the preparation, it's not just the games, but to enjoy the preparation part of it, being around the guys. Certainly the light is at the end of the tunnel for me, no question. I think you enjoy these things even more."

# Denver Broncos remain in good health

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Defensive end Derek Wolfe continues to be the only player on the Broncos' 53-man roster to be held out of practice, and even with several players receiving treatment, the Broncos remain a healthy group overall as they work toward Sunday's divisional-round playoff game against the San Diego Chargers.

Wolfe

Wolfe has practiced just twice since Nov. 29 when he suffered "seizure-like symptoms" 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.

He has not practiced since.

The Broncos issued their first injury report of the week Wednesday and the only slight surprise was cornerback Champ Bailey's appearance with a shoulder injury. Bailey was a full participant in Wednesday's practice and expected to play Sunday against the Chargers, but he has been getting treatment this week for a left shoulder injury.

Safety Duke Ihenacho and center Steve Vallos, who suffered concussions in the final weeks of the regular season, were cleared to fully take part in Wednesday's practice and both should be available for Sunday's game.

Defensive end Shaun Phillips, who was sent home Monday because he had arrived to work feeling ill and with a fever, practiced fully on Wednesday as well.

# Variety the spice of Broncos' 'Five-10 Club'

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- They don't have T-shirts yet, but if the Denver Broncos get three more wins over the next four weeks, the team's touchdown makers will really be the stuff dreams are made of.

Broncos wide receivers coach Tyke Tolbert calls them "the five-10 club." It's exclusive to be sure, and beyond having a future Hall of Famer at quarterback, it makes the Broncos' offense tough to decode. It has also made the battle on the Broncos' practice field just to get involved in some way one that has helped everyone.

"The hardest thing to do here is get on the field," Tolbert said of the Broncos' game day choices.

That's because the Broncos have, count 'em, five players who finished the regular season with at least 10 touchdowns. Five. No other team in league history has had more than three.

Wide receiver Demaryius Thomas had 14, running back Knowshon Moreno had 13 (10 of those rushing), tight end Julius Thomas had 12, wide receiver Eric Decker had 11 and wide receiver Wes Welker had 10 despite missing the last three games of the season. All with quarterback Peyton Manning dealing for a league-record 55 touchdown passes in Adam Gase's high-speed attack that set a league record with 606 points.

And just to frame things properly there were 23 players league-wide this season who finished with at least 10 touchdowns. The Broncos had 21.7 percent of the total and were the only team on the list with more than two players.

"It can be anybody at any time," Demaryius Thomas said. "It can be anywhere on the field to any of our guys. ... That's why everybody's always ready, so when the ball comes your way you can make a play, or if the ball doesn't come your way you can help somebody else make a play."

Case in point is Andre Caldwell, who had five catches in the Broncos' first 13 games. Then, in the first of three games Welker missed because of a concussion down the stretch, Manning had six completions to Caldwell, including two touchdowns.

"With Peyton Manning at quarterback, anybody can score at any given time," Tolbert said. "Our guys know that. ... All of a sudden Welker goes down, the next

game 'Bubba' comes in and he has two touchdowns."

Defending Manning has always been about choices for opposing coaches. Like when Manning led the Indianapolis Colts, they had to deal with likes of Marvin Harrison, Reggie Wayne, Dallas Clark, Edgerrin James and Joseph Addai through the years. And in 2004 the Colts featured an offense with three 1,000-yard receivers in Harrison, Wayne and Brandon Stokley to go with a 1,548-yard rusher in James.

Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey was on the field for Denver when that Colts team defeated the Broncos, 49-24, in an AFC wild-card game as Manning finished 27-of-33 passing for 458 yards and four touchdowns. Wayne, often in man coverage on then-rookie Roc Alexander, finished with 221 yards receiving and Clark finished with 112 yards.

"That team could come at you a lot of different ways," Bailey said. "This one, and time will tell, can spread it out even a little more, especially down in the red zone where offenses are always looking for those matchups to win. Defense is about tendencies sometimes, percentages and what teams have done in the past in similar situations, and this offense is tough that way. And Peyton has 10 more years' experience in the league, 10 more years of doing what he does, and that's a lot of time."

The Broncos had two 1,000-yard receivers this season in Demaryius Thomas (1,430) and Eric Decker (1,288) to go with 1,000-yard rusher Moreno (1,038). But what many defensive coaches say has made the Broncos' offense so difficult to decipher, is Manning's willingness to move the ball to the best matchup, rather than having "go-to" players in given situations.

Also many defensive coaches say they can find a way to offer at least some double coverage on three players in the pass pattern, but that things get dicey with the fourth. And if the offense's running back can contribute as a receiver as the fifth, then there are almost always choices for a quarterback savvy enough who has enough time to find them.

That has taken some potential predictability out of the equation as defenses prepare. The Broncos had five different players with at least 60 receptions. Gase has also used the running game more than most might think.

The Broncos finished the regular season with 461 rushing attempts – 11<sup>th</sup> in the league – and the team's 16 rushing touchdowns were tied for seventh in the league. Of the remaining teams in the playoffs the Broncos, the New England Patriots (second, with 19) and the San Francisco 49ers (fourth, 18) finished among the league's top seven in rushing scores.

"I think our guys just feel like anything can happen at any time with the guy we have at quarterback ... so they prepare like it, every rep is a championship rep in practice, and those opportunities come," Tolbert said. "I don't think we have the

kind of players who worry about the numbers. They just prepare and go play.”

The Broncos also enter the playoffs at full strength. The last time the Broncos faced the Chargers – a 27-20 San Diego win on Dec. 12 – was a game Welker did not play and was Caldwell’s two touchdown game. The Chargers were effective at getting to Manning at times with a variety of coverage looks that included safety Eric Weddle lining up all over the formation.

And while the Chargers did surrender the scores to Caldwell, they held Julius Thomas, Demaryius Thomas and Decker to just three receptions combined in the second half, forcing Manning to throw to running backs Moreno and Montee Ball. The Broncos did not have a pass play longer than 22 yards in the game.

Welker’s presence will likely change how the Chargers go about allocating their defensive resources.

“We all know he’s a dynamic player and he’s a guy that has been a big part of our offense this year. To have him back, San Diego is going to have to key on him,” Decker said. “They’re going to have to make sure they have a plan for him. It just opens everybody else up and it gives us more options, more opportunities.”

“I think everybody -- Wes and everybody that has come back from injury -- is going to be a big factor in this game,” Demaryius Thomas said. “They didn’t account for Wes last game because he didn’t play, but they will this game. It’s good for us because you don’t know what they’re going to throw at us, but it’s another weapon on the field to help us out.”

# Freeneey says ignore Manning's theatrics

By Eric D. Williams

ESPN.com

January 8, 2014

SAN DIEGO – A teammate of Peyton Manning's for 10 seasons in Indianapolis, including a Super Bowl win, San Diego Chargers outside linebacker Dwight Freeneey said he told his teammates not to pay attention to the quarterback's constant hand signals and gestures.

"The big thing is all the theatrics, all that stuff, try not to focus on it," Freeneey said. "He's going to be calling different things so that guys on defense pay attention to it.

"So when he calls this it's going to be an out route. The next time he does that again, it's going to be an out and up. He really feeds off of that stuff. So for us, we have to put the ear muffs on, put the blinders on and pay attention to your keys."

Freeneey said the main thing the San Diego defense has to understand with Manning is the tempo and speed he likes to run his offense.

"Every week he has to change up signals, change up calls and things he does," Freeneey said. "I can give them a little advice based on tempo, and from a theory standpoint offensively what they're trying to do. Other than that, the signals and all of that I can't go into. I still haven't figured that out."

Freeneey's also aware of Manning's struggles against San Diego. The Chargers are 2-0 against Manning-led teams in the postseason, with wins over the Indianapolis Colts in 2007 and 2008.

Including the two playoff losses, Manning is 7-6 overall against the Chargers in his 16-year NFL career.

"I always knew that Peyton historically has had trouble with the Chargers," Freeneey said. "I've known that over the years. But I think every year is different.

"I'm sure in the back of his head, he's maybe thinking a little about that -- how could you not? But I believe he's going to do a good job of preparing. We just have to do a good job of what we're doing."

Freeneey had been away from the Chargers for the most part since suffering a torn quad tendon against the Dallas Cowboys in a Sept. 29 contest, an injury that required surgery.

However, now that he's at the point in his rehab where he's mobile and can walk

around, Freeney has returned to the locker room.

He traveled to the Cincinnati game with the team last week, and intends on making the trip to Denver with the Chargers this weekend.

"It's a balance because you have to take care of yourself," Freeney said. "When you have a major injury like I have, you have to make sure you're right first. And I did that.

"But then when I'm able to be around, I try to be around. So now that I can walk, the doctors took the shackles off, so now I can come around guys and high-five, and don't be afraid if a guy runs into on the sideline, I'll still be okay."

Freeney said he's been working with longtime rehab partner, exercise physiologist Denis Thompson, who's located in Minnesota. Freeney says Thompson flies and meets him in different places to help him with his rehab.

"He's done a great job of just rehabbing and working with me over the years -- 12 years now," Freeney said. "He knows me, I know him. He can scream at me, and I won't get mad at him."

Freeney signed a two-year, \$8.75 million deal with the Chargers during the offseason. Freeney is due to make \$3.5 million in non-guaranteed base salary in 2014. And he intends to honor that agreement, which means he plans on returning to play for the Chargers next season.

"The team has already said they'd love to have me around next year, and I'd love to be around next year," Freeney said. "So there's no reason to question that."

# Chargers wary of Wes Welker's return

By Eric D. Williams

ESPN.com

January 8, 2014

SAN DIEGO -- Wes Welker won't be sneaking under the radar when the San Diego Chargers travel to Denver to face the Broncos in the AFC divisional round of the playoffs.

"He's one of the best slot receivers of all time," San Diego coach Mike McCoy said. "So his production, wherever he's been, speaks for itself. So you've got to know where he is every play."

Welker did not play in San Diego's 27-20 win at Denver on Dec. 12 last year because of lingering concussion symptoms. As a precaution, the Broncos also held out Welker for the last two games of the regular season.

However, Welker practiced for the Broncos the past two weeks and is expected to play on Sunday.

Even though he missed three games this year, Welker has put up good numbers in his first season with the Broncos. Welker finished the regular season with 73 catches for 778 yards and 10 touchdowns.

In the first contest against the Chargers in San Diego, Welker finished with three receptions for 21 yards in a 28-20 Denver victory on Nov. 10.

"Wes has been a major contributor for us all season long," Denver quarterback Peyton Manning said. "I thought our guys did a good job of stepping up by committee while he was out. You never know whose number is going to be called in a playoff game. You never know what happens, everybody's got to be alert. I know Wes is excited to get back out there and start playing."

The Chargers will use their own version of Wes Welker in practice to simulate the cat-quick receiver's skill set in practice squad player Dan DePalma.

The 5-foot-11, 192-pound Verona, N.J., native returned to the Chargers six weeks ago. DePalma was placed on injured reserve during training camp with a shoulder issue and received an injury settlement, allowing him to return this season.

DePalma also played the role of Welker for the New York Giants' scout squad during

the team's Super Bowl title run two years ago.

"It's just film study, knowing his movements and the way he runs his routes, depths and getting all that stuff right," DePalma said. "Every little thing counts for a defense, especially when it comes down to technique and every play."

Safety Eric Weddle said the Chargers will use a couple of different guys on Welker this weekend.

"That's going to be a challenge for us," Weddle said. "He didn't play the second game there, and a lot of people forget about that. So that's another element that we have to deal with. But we're excited about it. We want to go now."

# Biggest coaching fears for Denver

By Herm Edwards  
ESPN.com  
January 8, 2014

In my 30-plus years as a player and coach, I was fortunate enough to have made the NFL playoffs many times. There is simply a different energy in the postseason, because of the finality of it: If you lose, you're going home. There is no tomorrow.

If you've been to the postseason before as a team, you recognize that. And a team like the Denver Broncos that was a Super Bowl favorite and fell short last season understands it even more. They know what to expect when they take the field against the San Diego Chargers on Sunday. There is certainly increased pressure on Denver to reach the Super Bowl, and against a Chargers team that has now won five straight games, there is much for John Fox and his staff to be concerned about.

One thing Fox won't be concerned about is pressure. Pressure is an overrated concept, because there's only pressure when you're not prepared. Fox is a veteran coach, with a veteran playoff team, so they know how big this game is. And Fox's staff knows that they are unlikely to be fired if they don't win the game, so it's not like they're coaching for their jobs.

Although Denver shouldn't be nervous or lacking energy to start the game, one issue will be starting fast. You can't replicate the tempo of a playoff game in practice, and there has to be legitimate concern at falling behind early. The Chargers have been playing in playoff-type games for five weeks now. Denver's first drive is critical, even if they just get a couple of first downs, to get back into the rhythm of the game.

But the bigger concern is what happens if the Broncos aren't leading in the fourth quarter or, worse, if they're behind by more than one score. That is when Denver's players may start to feel pressure. And the reason for that is twofold: expectations and past history.

The expectations part is simple: This team is supposed to reach the Super Bowl, so losing at home in the divisional round would be a huge disappointment. And the past history refers both to what happened last season and to Peyton Manning's playoff record. Don't think those players have forgotten what happened against the Baltimore Ravens in the 2013 divisional round. That will be in the back of Manning's head, and if he thinks that he has to win the game on his own, that's when he will press and make mistakes.

Here's what Fox and Denver's coaches need to be most worried about to make sure that an upset doesn't happen:

---

Can they control San Diego's pass rush?

San Diego's defense has really come on the past six weeks, allowing less than 24 points in each game, and the pass rush took over the second half of the game against the Cincinnati Bengals on wild-card weekend. Defensive coordinator Joe Pagano did a fantastic job shifting fronts (3-4, 4-3, 4-2-5 nickel and others) and utilizing blitzes, especially fire zone schemes to confuse Andy Dalton.

The Chargers have the pass-rushers and athletes in Melvin Ingram, Donald Butler, Jarret Johnson and others to win one-on-one matchups and get pressure on Manning. More importantly, Manning struggles when you can get him off his spot, and Corey Liuget and Kendall Reyes have the ability to get a strong push inside. Denver can't allow San Diego to make Manning uncomfortable in the pocket.

---

Can they disrupt the Chargers' offensive game plan?

San Diego led the NFL in time of possession during the regular season, and successfully kept the ball away from Manning in the two regular-season meetings between the two teams, limiting his possessions. That will be the Chargers' game plan again this weekend, and Keenan Allen and Danny Woodhead are two of the big third-down targets.

With Von Miller injured, Denver should move Shaun Phillips around to get him one-on-one matchups, and should also blitz to get pressure on Philip Rivers. However, when Denver blitzes, it must be sure that Woodhead is forced to pick up one or more of the blitzers. If he slips out, that will be trouble for the Broncos. Denver must also trust that Champ Bailey or Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie can run with Allen in man coverage, which they'll have to play if they want to bring those big blitzes. If they can't keep up with him in crossing routes, it could be a long day for Denver's defense.

In the first two meetings between these teams, the Chargers had 308 total rushing yards. San Diego likes to get the running game going with Ryan Mathews and Woodhead to keep the clock moving and time of possession in its favor, so disrupting that rhythm is vital for Denver's defensive line. The Broncos need to play some form of man coverage on the back end to get eight men in the box and stop the Chargers' rushing attack.

---

Will Manning force the issue?

Denver wants this game to be in the 30s or higher, because its offense is more explosive than San Diego's. Manning loves lining up in "11" personnel (1 RB, 1 TE, 3 WRs), with Wes Welker in the slot, or "12" personnel (with an extra TE), shifting

Julius Thomas out wide. Either way, he will survey what the defense is doing and look to attack inside-out.

He will keep attacking inside the numbers until the Chargers prove they can stop it. And if they stack the box to stop the run, he'll beat them deep. But he must be patient and take what the defense gives him. San Diego will mix coverages and try to limit Manning to underneath throws. If Manning gets greedy or impatient, or if San Diego builds a lead, he may try to make throws that aren't there. That's when he has made mistakes in past playoff games.

The Broncos know they have a shrinking window to win a title with Manning. While he's an unbelievable quarterback, and the playoff losses aren't all his fault (see: Rahim Moore last season), he is only 9-11 in the postseason, and eight of those losses came in the first postseason game his team played (his favorite third-down target, Welker, has had his own trouble with drops in big spots in big games).

If Denver can jump out early and hold a lead going into the fourth quarter, they should move on to the next round. But if San Diego can hang around, the ghosts of Manning's and Denver's playoff past could come out, and anything could happen. That's exactly what Fox & Co. want to avoid.

# Peyton Manning seeks to sustain record success in playoffs

By Lindsay H. Jones  
USA TODAY Sports  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – It's always been easy to link Peyton Manning's career to statistics, this year, especially.

For all the touchdown passes (56) and passing yards (5,477) he collected, and for all the points the Denver Broncos scored (606) – each of those numbers NFL records – there's another mark that overshadows all others.

Manning's postseason record over 14 seasons is 9-11. That includes eight losses in which his team failed to advance beyond their first playoff game.

As Manning prepares to lead the Broncos into their AFC divisional playoff game against the San Diego Chargers, his winning-time failures can't be ignored.

Despite Manning's cognizance of his NFL history, he was adamant that his past means little now.

"I know it's easy to summarize – to take a whole bunch of football seasons and lump them together. I don't personally believe in that theory," Manning said Wednesday. "I think each season takes on its own identity and different things occurred along the way at different points in my career. In anybody's career. This is the 2013 season, and it's its own chapter. We're looking forward to writing it for a number of more weeks."

This is the week the Broncos have been waiting for since their 38-35 double overtime loss to Baltimore in the divisional round a year ago. His success over 16 regular-season games in 2013 was exciting, Manning said. But the Broncos have not hid the way that they have used last season's playoff disappointment as motivation.

It came up during weightlifting and conditioning sessions in April, and in training camp practices in August, and in countless practices throughout the regular season. If there was ever a question of doing an extra set of sprints, or an extra set of squats, players did them. It meant that now, a team that could be anxious is confident, even with the hottest team in the AFC heading to Denver.

"Last year we went on a little run there, and I don't know if we got comfortable, but we didn't finish," receiver Eric Decker said. "We were hungry this year as far as coming into the offseason, coming into training camp, making sure that when we go out and play we finish everything."

As Manning stood in front of a large group of reporters Wednesday, still wearing his shoulder pads and orange practice jersey, there was no sign of a player who has tightened up when the calendar flipped to January. Manning cracked a few jokes and said he is determined to enjoy everything about this trip.

"If it's just miserable this whole time, then why are you doing it?" Manning said. "Maybe as you get older you think more along the lines of, this is a very unique opportunity, to be in this position, to be one of just a few teams playing. It'll be a great atmosphere on Sunday, playing a good football team – there's nothing else I'd rather be doing than being in that opportunity."

Yet given Manning's historic regular season, which will surely result in his fifth MVP award, and his teams' playoff history, this could be the most pressure-filled postseason of his career. Another one-and-done, and Manning's critics will pounce.

"That's something – when you're great, they're going to find something to nitpick at you," defensive end Shaun Phillips said. "He can't be perfect. If he was perfect, he would win every single game."

# The mystery of Knowshon Moreno's tears has finally been solved

By Nina Mandell  
USA TODAY Sports  
January 8, 2014

Earlier this season, Knowshon Moreno drew a bit of attention when he shed large tears before Denver's game against the Kansas City Chiefs. At the time, he explained that he was just "excited" to play the game.

In the latest issue of Sports Illustrated, he explains a little further in a way that may solve the mystery of his tears in full:

"It's always been that way for me, all the way back to high school and college," Moreno said of the emotional moment. "During the anthem it's always quiet and still, so I take in the moment and say a little prayer. Usually there's no camera on me. I thank the Lord for letting me play the game. I thank Him for everything. I run through my whole life right there at that moment. Even the bad stuff."

# Russell Wilson among young QBs taking on old guard

By Tom Pelissero  
USA TODAY Sports  
January 8, 2014

RENTON, Wash. — Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson has been part of a regular-season victory against a team led by Drew Brees. He has been on the winning end against Tom Brady, too.

But there's a reason Wilson kept saying the word "clutch" Wednesday. He knows well his status among the elite quarterbacks is largely determined by what happens in the postseason, and opportunities such as Saturday's home matchup with Brees and the New Orleans Saints can't be taken for granted.

"In terms of evaluating a quarterback, obviously winning a lot of games and winning games in playoffs and hopefully winning Super Bowls is a great thing," Wilson told a packed media auditorium at the Virginia Mason Athletic Center on Wednesday.

"You think about the Tom Bradys of the world — that's what makes him one of the best quarterbacks of all time, is because he's been clutch in the playoffs and because he's been clutch in the past, and same with so many other guys like Peyton Manning and Drew Brees."

That title-winning trio is back for more in this weekend's divisional playoffs. They are joined by the San Diego Chargers' Philip Rivers, another accomplished veteran who isn't mentioned in the same breath in part because he has advanced further than this just once in 10 NFL seasons.

Then there are the four young guns — the Carolina Panthers' Cam Newton, the San Francisco 49ers' Colin Kaepernick, the Indianapolis Colts' Andrew Luck and Wilson — who have a chance to build their legacies in the coming weeks by besting players they grew up watching.

"It was Peyton. It was Brady. (Ben) Roethlisberger. Philip Rivers," said Luck, who faces off with Brady and the New England Patriots on Saturday in Foxborough, Mass.

"I think there's so many quarterbacks that do so many great things that you'd like to watch all of them and say, 'Oh, they do this so well,' and you see if you can do that."

Kaepernick and Newton meet Sunday in Charlotte, meaning there will be at least one next-generation player at the most important position represented on conference championship weekend.

Newton qualifies as the most experienced of the group with 48 NFL starts, but this will be his first playoff game. Kaepernick, who became the 49ers' starter midway through last season, has a Super Bowl appearance.

"I feel as if I haven't achieved anything worth mentioning yet," Newton said.

"I think those things that I really want, that everybody has set forth before this season, is all in reach."

Tom Brady, left, and Peyton Manning have combined for six NFL MVP awards, and one of them will likely add to that number once the league's 2013 hardware is doled out. For now, both are among the 33 team MVPs (yes, we had a tie) selected by USA TODAY Sports' Nate Davis. (Photo: Stew Milne, USA TODAY Sports)

Going all the way in Year 3 would put Newton or Kaepernick ahead of the curve. Same with Luck or Wilson, who are in their sophomore seasons.

There are exceptions such as Roethlisberger, who won two Super Bowls in his first five seasons with the Pittsburgh Steelers, and Brady, who won three titles in his first five. But Manning, who will lead the Denver Broncos against Rivers and the Chargers on Sunday, and Brees didn't take home a championship until Year 9.

"These are the moments you dream about," Brady said. "To be in the NFL playoffs and you have a chance with eight other teams to be the last team standing."

A third-round draft pick in 2012, Wilson is 2-for-2 on making it this far, with plenty of help from one of the NFL's best defenses and an excellent running game.

He turned in one of his best performances in a 34-7 rout of Brees and the Saints on Dec. 2.

"I'm sure he watches film on Drew and Peyton and kind of takes things from it to help him get better," Seahawks wide receiver Golden Tate said. "But you never hear him compare, 'This is going to be big for me, a big matchup to see where I am.'"

Wilson doesn't shy away from the importance of knowing who's standing on the other sideline, though.

He led the Seahawks back from a 20-point deficit on the road to take the lead with 31 seconds left in the divisional playoffs last season — only to watch Matt Ryan lead the Atlanta Falcons back down the field for the winning field goal.

"The postseason's critical," Wilson said. "I think that you want to do great. You want to play at a high level, and I think that to be a big-time player, you have to play big-time in big games, and every big opportunity is a great opportunity to step up.

"At the same time, too, there's going to be adversity in the game. You have to know that Drew Brees is the other quarterback. He's going to make some plays."

# Playoff expansion under "serious consideration"

By Maggie Hendricks  
USA TODAY Sports  
January 8, 2014

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell spoke in New York on Tuesday night, and he said expanding the playoffs to seven teams per conference is seriously under consideration.

"That is under serious consideration," he said. "We think it's one of the great things about the NFL, besides the fact that it's unscripted. Every team and their fans start the season with hope. You mentioned the fact that for 11 straight years we've had a team go from last to first, that's unique to professional football and the NFL, that doesn't happen in other sports. And that's because we have such a competitive league and we want to keep that."

In the AFC, adding a seventh team this season would have put the Pittsburgh Steelers, playing the Patriots. In the NFC, the 10-6 Arizona Cardinals would have played the Panthers. Do we really need these games?

Would you watch it? Of course. It's football. We watch college linemen run sprints in late February under the guise of it being football-related. It doesn't mean it's good for the game.

It's about making a major change to get to the postseason. It's about increasing the likelihood of any team making the playoffs from 37.5 percent to 43.75 percent. Will including those extra games make the game more competitive or wild card weekend any more exciting?

It will be tough to top what happened last weekend. Instead, it will force a team who has fought to earn a playoff bye to face a team who earn the berth by the skin of its teeth. It's taking away the opportunity for a team who has won plenty of games to get healthy for the grind of the playoffs.

# Klee: Even after season of records, playoff questions shadow Peyton Manning

By Paul Klee  
Colorado Springs Gazette  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD - Staring directly into a low January sun, Peyton Manning squinted his eyes until they almost closed. From the podium, he tolerated the first question.

Do you put too much pressure on yourself in the playoffs?

"I don't believe that to be true," he replied, calmly, Wednesday at Dove Valley.

Was it the sun? Or is Manning simply squinting to figure out if we're serious?

"I guess everybody has a different theory or analysis," he said.

So what of these questions? At this annual segue in the football calendar, they nag like a scratchy sore throat in the high country: what about the 9-11 playoff record?

Here's what I've seen. I've seen a quarterback on a mission. I've seen a guy who knows he can't change playoff history but can change perception with a season unlike any we've seen from a quarterback. There's been something else at work with Manning, something other than winning his requisite 13 games, the AFC's No. 1 seed, a probable fifth MVP award and a possible second Super Bowl ring.

I think Manning wanted all of it. I think he saw this season, with this offense, as the opportunity, once and for all, to muzzle doubts he's the greatest to play the position.

I think he is driven to build an unimpeachable legacy more than he lets on.

"If he wins a Super Bowl with two teams, that's more impressive to me than what (Tom) Brady's done winning three," Broncos great Terrell Davis told me Tuesday.

Early in training camp back in August, Manning saw a teammate climb into a Port-A-Potty and shut the door. Manning fired a football at top speed, rattling the outhouse.

Since then, mostly, he's approached this season with the focus of a businessman closing the deal of a lifetime. He didn't throw four touchdowns in the Thursday night opener against Baltimore; he threw seven. He didn't slip past Brady's record of 50 touchdown passes in a single season; he crushed it with 55.

Go back to the regular-season finale at Oakland. Say Manning doesn't eclipse Drew Brees for the single-season passing record at the end of the first half.

Do we really think he spends the second half wearing a visor on the sideline?

For as often as Manning downplays the significance of individual records, he's too versed in football history to shrug them off. He knew Milt Plum, for goodness sakes.

"Maybe, as you get older, you think more along the lines of, 'Hey, this is a pretty unique opportunity to be in this position, to be one of the few teams playing,'" he said.

Manning recites football history like he's on "Stump the Schwab." Just on Wednesday, he cited counterpart Philip Rivers as a member of "the quarterback class of 2004."

He knows the count. He knows Rivers' teams are 2-0 against his teams in the playoffs. He knows the singular knock on his career is that nagging playoff record.

He knew there were questions about his ability to win in cold weather. In the coldest game of this season, 18 degrees at kickoff against the Titans, Manning unloaded for 397 yards and four touchdowns.

Afterward, he suggested he wasn't trying to answer the cold-weather critics.

Nevermind that he launched 59 pass attempts, the most of his 240-game career.

"I think you always want to have something that drives you, fuels you," Manning said, referring to the Ravens loss that arrived with a thud one year ago Sunday.

Veterans of the boxing ring suggest the first punch can hurt the worst. At that point they know the next shots are coming. If the Ravens loss was a punch to the gut, the Chargers are on a roll capable of delivering a roundhouse to the heart. It says here San Diego is the most dangerous matchup in the AFC playoffs for the Broncos.

Fair or not, these playoffs are a significant ingredient in the football legacy Manning leaves behind.

"The light's at the end of the tunnel for me," he said. "There's no question."

If Manning can hold all of these passing records, and guide the most prolific offense in history to a Super Bowl parade, the questions are answered, at least by smart people.

Maybe then the question isn't where Manning ranks all time, but who ranks second.

He knows that.

He knew Milt Plum, for goodness sakes.

# Broncos: NFL homefield advantage a myth

By Paul Klee  
Colorado Springs Gazette  
January 8, 2014

Homecourt advantage matters in basketball. It matters in the NBA; it matters at the college level. The biggest part of that equation is how officials can be influenced by home crowds. I've seen it for years. They're human. It happens.

In the NFL playoffs? Not so much. History, both recent and long ago, suggests homefield advantage is a myth.

There have been 47 Super Bowl winners. Guess how many were No. 1 seeds from the AFC? Six. That includes John Elway's '98 Broncos. The last No. 1 seed from the AFC to win it all was the 2003 Patriots, who skated by with game-winning field goals by Adam Vinatieri in two of three postseason games.

Peyton Manning (above left), Eric Decker (right) and the Broncos earned the No. 1 seed and the right to host a pair of playoff games.

"There's no place like home," Broncos coach John Fox said today at Dove Valley.

Is that true, though? I tend to think there's a reason why lower-seeded teams often swing upsets, on the road, in the playoffs. The lower-seeded teams have a game under their belt and enter the divisional round with playoff momentum.

The Chargers have taken it a step further. They've been in a playoff mindset for the past five weeks. For San Diego, it's been win-or-go-home since early December.

"This is like the sixth round of the playoffs for us," quarterback Philip Rivers said on a conference call today.

Given the choice, of course you want to play at home. But history, both in Denver and elsewhere, suggests that playoff momentum is a greater advantage than playing on your homefield.

# After Further Review: Focus on Broncos' Knighton, Panthers' Mitchell

By Pete Prisco  
CBSSports.com  
January 8, 2014

With the NFL Playoffs in the Divisional Round, we all know the stars expected to shine this weekend.

But to help prepare you for the games, I always like to take a look at some of the lesser-known players who could have big roles in the outcomes. Last week in After Further Review, I looked at eight players from the eight teams playing on Wildcard Weekend, guys that you might not have known, but should.

This week, it's one from each of the four teams that had the bye. In the first installment I broke down Seattle corner Byron Maxwell and New England defensive end Rob Ninkovich.

In this one, I will take a look at Denver Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton and Carolina Panthers safety Mike Mitchell.

Terrance Knighton, DT, Denver Broncos

Take one look at the guy they call "Pot Roast" and you will see why he's so key to what the Broncos do on defense.

His listed weight is 330, which he weighed earlier this season. That seems to be low now looking at him, but despite his body, Knighton moves well for a big man and had a Pro Bowl-type of season.

If you want to run on the Broncos inside, you better handle Knighton. He is good at taking on double teams in the run game, which his power and size allow him to do. He's also athletic enough to get push inside in the passing game. Ask Robert Griffin III or Andrew Luck, two quarterbacks he sacked this season.

When the Jacksonville Jaguars drafted Knighton in the third round in 2009, he had a ton of potential. And at times, he flashed it. But he had a tendency to get heavy and slow down late in the season.

Then he had an off-field incident in the spring of 2012 where he was hit in the eye with a bottle during a bar fight -- that he was allegedly trying to break up. He nearly lost his eye, and his vision was badly affected.

Since he couldn't work out, he came to camp heavy in 2012. That didn't sit well with overbearing head coach Mike Mularkey.

Eventually, Knighton got his weight down but still had to be weighed every week and meet his number. He told me he made weight every week, but once after making weight on a Friday, the team said he had to be weighed again on a Saturday at the team hotel. He said he was two pounds over after going out for a nice dinner the night before.

They put him on a treadmill at the team hotel until he got down to the weight of 330. Knighton said the two pounds were gone in minutes on the machine, but they kept him on it for a lot longer to prove a point.

"On the night before a game," he told me this summer. "How did they think my legs would feel the next day?"

When a new coaching staff came in, Knighton was a free agent and they opted to go in a different direction, which, I think, was a mistake. Former Jaguars coach Jack Del Rio, who was the coach when the Jaguars drafted Knighton, was the defensive coordinator in Denver, so Knighton signed there.

The Broncos have to be thrilled he did. Knighton has been one of their better defenders this season. He shows up week in and week out on tape.

Quite frankly, he is a bargain at two years, \$4 million. Denver is 19th in total defense, but seventh against the run and 10th in yards per carry, the most important rush stat. Teams are averaging 3.9 per rush.

Here's a look at a play he made against the Texans that shows how athletic and strong he is as a run player.

On the play, a run at him, the Texans tried to block down on him with Duane Brown, one of the better tackles in the league. But as you can see, Knighton swatted him away, and when tight end Ryan Griffin tried to block him, he slipped him and was able to keep Dennis Johnson to no gain. The movement on that play was so impressive for a man his size.

Here's a look at one of Knighton's three sacks this season.

On the play, Knighton (yellow circle) was lined up outside the left shoulder of the left guard. The play was a designed roll to the right. The Colts pulled left guard Hugh Thornton and they tried to block Knighton with center Mike McGlynn. But Knighton used his hands to throw McGlynn aside and then chased down Luck from behind, showing off his athletic ability.

The last time the Chargers faced the Broncos, they ran for 177 yards against the Denver defense. But a lot of that yardage came on the edge, and Knighton actually played a solid game inside.

If the Chargers want to run this week, they'd be wise to try and handle Knighton inside -- even if it takes two blockers to do so.

Mike Mitchell, S, Panthers

When the Carolina Panthers signed Mitchell to a one-year deal for \$1 million last spring, they did so with the idea he would come in and maybe compete for a job.

He's done a lot more than that.

Mitchell tied linebacker Luke Kuechly for the team-lead in interceptions with four and also had four sacks.

More importantly, he became the signal caller for secondary that was viewed as a major question mark before the season. When Charles Godfrey went down in the second week, Mitchell moved from strong safety to free safety and has done a nice job in the deep middle.

Mitchell was a second-round draft pick by the Raiders in 2009 even though he didn't get invited to the combine. Some said he was an Al Davis special, a speed, size player with little true ability.

Mitchell had nine starts in four seasons in Oakland, two last season, and had just two interceptions in his time there.

In Carolina, he looks like a different player. He reacts better. He reads things better. He's just much more confident in what he's doing.

Here's a look at Mitchell on a blitz against the 49ers. He timed it just right.

Mitchell (yellow X) was lined up in what looked like a two-deep look. But just before the snap, he started to creep up. When the ball was snapped, he took a fast run toward Colin Kaepernick. Charles Johnson went wide and blitzing linebacker Thomas Davis went inside. That left an alley for Mitchell, and he flew up and helped drop Kaepernick for the sack.

The Panthers ran the same exact blitz against the Bucs in Week 13 and Mitchell didn't quite get there, but the back had to pick him up and Davis was able to hit Mike Glennon to force an incomplete pass. Mitchell also got a sack off the same type of look in the season finale against the Falcons.

As a cover guy, Mitchell often plays a deep single-high safety. The Panthers love to bring Quintin Mikell down in the box as an extra run defender and use Cover-3 looks with the two corners and Mitchell deep. The fact Carolina is so good getting pressure with four guys most of the time allows them to play this way.

The Panthers got 33 of their 60 sacks this season in a four-man front. That's huge.

Against Atlanta, Mitchell showed what he could do from the deep middle on one sure completion to Roddy White that he broke up. Here's a look:

White (yellow circle) ran a deep in against the Cover-3. He was clearly open in the middle of the field and Matt Ryan came back to him and thought he had a completion. But Mitchell read the play and came down hard on White to jar the ball loose.

Mitchell isn't a great cover guy, and his aggressiveness coming down in the run game can be used against him at times, but he has the speed and range to make up for some of his mistakes.

Mitchell signed a one-year deal, so he will be a free agent after the season. If he can show up big in the playoffs, he just might be on his way to a big deal.

# Roger Goodell doesn't rule out medical marijuana use by players

By John Breech  
CBSSports.com  
January 8, 2014

Since Jan. 1, it's been legal to purchase and use marijuana in the state of Colorado. However, that doesn't mean NFL players in Colorado can start lighting up. Despite marijuana being legal in the state, it's still illegal under the NFL's collective bargaining agreement.

Under the CBA, a player who tests positive for marijuana can be suspended, but that could change sometime down the road. NFL commissioner Roger Goodell left the door open for medical marijuana use when he was asked about the subject on Tuesday.

Specifically, Goodell was asked if there would ever be a time where players would be permitted to use medical marijuana in states where it's legal. Instead of saying no, Goodell offered the following, "I don't know what's going to develop as far as the next opportunity for medicine to evolve and to help either deal with pain or help deal with injuries, but we will continue to support the evolution of medicine," the commissioner said, via ESPN.com.

That's the NFL's first comments about marijuana since November 2012 when Colorado and Washington voted to legalize pot. Back then, NFL spokesman Greg Aiello told USA Today that the legalization of pot wouldn't change anything.

"The NFL's policy is collectively bargained and will continue to apply in the same manner it has for decades," Aiello said in November 2012. "Marijuana remains prohibited under the NFL substance abuse program."

However, as Pro Football Talk has pointed out, the CBA only outlaws the 'illegal use' of marijuana. And beginning later this year, marijuana will be legal in not only Colorado, but the state of Washington as well.

If the use of marijuana has to be worked into the CBA, the players will have to wait awhile. The players and owners are only three seasons into the 10-year CBA that was agreed upon in 2011.

# NFL playoffs: Divisional round Xs and Os to watch

By Pat Kirwan

CBSsports.com

January 8, 2014 4:47 pm ET

This is the NFL fans' best weekend -- the divisional round. Four games featuring the league's eight best teams, so there are plenty of Xs and Os to go around. Right now, 16 coordinators are burning the midnight oil, trying to refine successful game plans. Let's take a look at some of the football issues in the divisional round.

## Saturday's games

### Saints' 2-back attack

NFC: Saints at Seahawks, 4:35 ET Saturday (FOX): The Saints are the league's best when it comes to rushing for at least 4 yards on first down. Forty-nine percent of their first-down runs are for 4-plus yards, setting up their quick-strike passing game. The problem is they really like their 21 personnel (RB, FB, TE 2 WRs) package on first down, and the Seahawks love seeing it. The last time these two met, a 34-7 Seattle rout, the Saints' two-back running attack was minimized. In the first half, New Orleans ran seven times for 13 yards -- and finished the game averaging only 2.6 yards per carry. The Seahawks are the No. 2 rush defense on first down, yielding only 3.4 ypc, and it's a big reason the Saints had only seven series of three plays or less the first time around. Look for more shotgun spread sets and throwing from the Saints. Drew Brees already has nine games this season with 40 or more pass attempts, and this game will make 10.

### Seahawks' 4-man pressure schemes, swarming secondary

NFC: Saints at Seahawks, 4:35 ET Saturday (FOX): The Seahawks can get to a QB from all angles -- 13 players have recorded sacks -- and create pressure with a 4-man rush, meaning they don't blitz a lot. When first facing Brees, they lived off the 4-man rush, but mixed up combinations -- leaving the Saints' offensive line guessing which four were rushing. That adds up to a potential recognition issue for rookie left tackle Terron Armstead because of the noise levels at notoriously loud CenturyLink Field. In the first meeting, Brees was sacked only once, but I counted eight hits that disrupted timing on his throws. Add in strong coverage from the aggressive Seattle secondary, and it's difficult to locate open receivers who need extra time to shake free. Seattle has only yielded 22 first-quarter points all season, so New Orleans must weather the early storm or risk the turnovers incurred last time. And no team has created more turnovers than Seattle: 39, with 21 of those forced at home.

## Containing Russell Wilson

NFC: Saints at Seahawks, 4:35 ET Saturday (FOX) : The Saints have their hands full with Russell Wilson, a skilled runner who throws well on the move. The last time these teams met Wilson threw for 310 yards with three TD passes. He added eight rushes for 47 yards. In re-watching the game tape, the Saints face some issues in dealing with Wilson. The Seahawks are a run-left offense and they will pound Marshawn Lynch on that side repeatedly, forcing the defense to overplay the left side or Lynch tears it apart. The Saints did a good job against Lynch but it opened up Wilson three ways: 1) The "ride keeper," out of the shotgun, when Wilson rides Lynch into the left side, then pulls the ball and takes off around the right side; 2) From under center, Wilson presents the power lead to the left with a fullback leading Lynch and keeps the ball on a bootleg to the right off of it; 3) The bubble screen to the right play-action left -- giving Wilson an easy throw, and the yardage can add up quickly (Percy Harvin is scheduled to return, which could make this an even more pronounced conflict for the Saints' D).

## Taking away T.Y. Hilton

AFC: Colts at Patriots, 8:15 ET Saturday (CBS & CBSSports.com): Patriots coach Bill Belichick is famous for taking away the opposition's No. 1 threat. Since Reggie Wayne went down with a season-ending ACL tear, Hilton has become the Colts' No. 1 threat. Last week, Hilton was targeted 18 times, coming up with 13 receptions for 224 yards and two touchdowns. Since Wayne got hurt 10 games ago, Hilton has been targeted 96 times, compiling 68 receptions and five TDs. Look for the Patriots to put Aquib Talib on Hilton, just as they did when Saints star tight end Jimmy Graham visited Foxborough. When I broke down the Colts' win over the Chiefs last week, it was impressive how many first-and-10 targets Hilton had (he caught eight of the 10 balls thrown to him on first down for 153 yards). If Andrew Luck sees single coverage by Talib, he will go to his favorite receiver. Look for Belichick to have some interesting double-coverage schemes to bait Luck into those first-down throws, looking for the interception.

## Contending with Colts DE Robert Mathis

AFC: Colts at Patriots, 8:15 ET Saturday (CBS & CBSSports.com): Mathis comes into this playoff game with 20½ sacks in 17 games -- none bigger than the strip sack on Alex Smith last week that ignited the Colts' come-from-behind win over the Chiefs. Now Tom Brady has to deal with Mathis. First to remember: Mathis only has 6½ sacks on the road, and Brady has dealt with Mathis before -- he has one sack on Brady in 231 pass attempts over seven games. Look for Brady to use his screen game toward Mathis, execute a lot of quick passes from the shotgun and run the ball at Mathis to slow down the rush. I would be very surprised if Mathis has more than one sack. Brady is only sacked once every 24 attempts over 14 postseason home games. And over his past four home playoff games, he's only been sacked once in every 83 pass plays.

## When to spy Andrew Luck

AFC: Colts at Patriots, 8:15 ET Saturday (CBS & CBSsports.com): Andrew Luck is on the verge of becoming an elite quarterback, as his 11 winning drives in only two seasons attest. His ability to run must be addressed by New England. The scouting report shows that he has 24 attempts for 140 yards and no touchdowns in the first half of games this season, but 46 attempts for 282 yards and four TDs in the second half of games. Look for Belichick to put a spy on him as a halftime adjustment.

## Sunday's games

### Scoring on the Panthers

NFC: 49ers at Panthers, 1:05 ET Sunday (FOX): Carolina yields only 12 points per game, and has surrendered only two rushing TDs at home all season. The Jets had the most success running the ball on the Panthers (157 yards), and the 49ers will study that game very closely. Jets QB Geno Smith broke out for 44 yards in that game, and while 49ers QB Colin Kaepernick will like what he sees on that film, he can't like what he remembers about his first game against the Panthers, a 10-9 loss on Nov. 10. Kaepernick managed only 16 rushing yards and suffered six sacks. There were five Panthers -- none of them Greg Hardy, the league's hottest pass rusher (eight sacks over his past three games). Ron Rivera says he is very much aware of Kaepernick keeping drives alive with his feet, so the emphasis in Panthers practice is discipline in the rush lanes. I watched tape of Rivera's defense against Russell Wilson, EJ Manuel and Kaepernick and they were very disciplined in every case -- limiting the three mobile QBs to 36 yards on 13 carries.

### Dealing with the Broncos' no-huddle

AFC: Chargers at Broncos, 4:40 ET Sunday (CBS): No team employs the no-huddle offense like Peyton Manning and the Broncos, especially at home. In 767 no-huddle snaps, Denver has amassed 4,900 yards and 52 touchdowns. With WR Wes Welker (concussion) returning and TE Julius Thomas able to line up tight or wide, this no-huddle is tough to stop. The Chargers need a few "joker" types on defense who can match wits with Manning or he will have a field day. The two San Diego players to keep an eye on during the no huddle attack are safety Eric Weddle and linebacker Melvin Ingram. Weddle will come to the line of scrimmage and blitz or fake a blitz before dropping into coverage. After watching the past two Broncos-Chargers games, it is clear Manning is always looking for Weddle and making no-huddle run/pass decisions based on the safety. But Manning has a new problem because Ingram is back from injured reserve. The Chargers have won seven straight games when Ingram is in the lineup over the past two seasons -- mainly because he can rush or cover. And combined with Weddle, they make it tough on quarterbacks to decipher the defense.

## Slowing down the Chargers' run game

AFC: Chargers at Broncos, 4:40 ET Sunday (CBS): That's right, the San Diego rushing attack, and the Philip Rivers passing game. Sooner or later Rivers will make big plays in the air, but long before that the Chargers ground game will be a problem. Winners of five straight, the Chargers have done it on the ground, compiling 851 yards and five TDs in 197 attempts (averages of 39 attempts, 170 yards and a TD during the streak). San Diego boasts a 59 percent run ratio. Denver coach John Fox says well aware of these numbers for San Diego in this season's two meetings: 79 carries for 308 yards and two touchdowns. Scouting tip: Rivers has called 30 running plays from the shotgun in the two previous meetings, and he really likes to check to that run in second-down situations.

# Manning, Brees in rarefied air as free-agent signings

By Kevin Lincoln  
FOX Sports  
January 8, 2014

Drew Brees and Peyton Manning have paid remarkable dividends as free-agent signings.

There's still work to be done. But if Peyton Manning manages to bring the Lombardi Trophy back to Denver for the first time since John Elway's repeat performance a decade-and-a-half ago, it'll raise the question: where does Elway's signing of Manning rank in the greatest free-agency moves of all time?

I'm not particularly interested in the precise hierarchy, because that's grabbing at straws, but it seems uncontroversial to say that it would be a top-echelon move, the kind of thing that shows Elway to be as savvy and able a front-office exec as he was effective a quarterback.

What might be more interesting, though, than considering the exact historical significance of Manning going to Denver after being released by the Colts is to compare it to its closest recent historical precedent.

In 2005, Drew Brees was coming off the best season of his career, which up until that point had been undistinguished. In his first three seasons as an NFL quarterback, Brees threw 29 touchdowns vs. 31 interceptions, with a sub-60-percent completion rating and a 10-17 record. It's easy to forget about this now that he's a Super Bowl-winning, former-record-holding quarterback, but Brees was bad enough that the Chargers opted to trade Eli Manning's rights for the rights to Philip Rivers in the 2004 draft.

Then, in 2004, Brees — who might not have even started the season if Rivers hadn't held out — turned the corner, leading the Chargers to an 11-4 record, completing 65.5 percent of his passes, throwing 27 touchdowns to only seven interceptions, and winning Comeback Player of the Year.

The dilemma the Chargers were presented with at this point — two young, talented quarterbacks who both deserved to start — was solved when Brees tore his labrum in the last game of the season.

His contract was up, and he wasn't interested in the heavily incentive-laden deal he was offered, so the Chargers, who neglected to trade him at the beginning of the season, took the route that most teams and front offices would take in this situation: they let Brees walk.

Another nice little nugget from that free agency: the Brees sweepstakes had been down to the Saints and the Dolphins. The Dolphins opted to trade for Daunte Culpepper instead.

Brees signed with New Orleans for six years and \$60 million, spent the next three years tearing the league apart statistically, then reached the stratosphere with a Super Bowl win in 2009 that did as much as any sports accomplishment can to buoy a city devastated by tragedy.

The Saints are as good in 2013-14 as they've been since that Super Bowl win, but they might still not be good enough to top the Seattle Seahawks — particularly in Seattle — when they meet in the divisional round this weekend. Regardless, signing Brees is the rare example of a free-agent move completely changing the fortunes and future of a franchise.

Manning joining the Broncos has plenty of differences:

Manning was already a Hall of Fame lock when he went to Denver; Brees had only played two seasons of impressive football. The Broncos went to the playoffs the year before Manning came on board; the Saints went 3-13.

At the same time, there's an elemental similarity between the situations: teams took a risk on quarterbacks who were dealing with significant, career-impacting injuries. In both cases, that risk has paid off; although the Broncos still need to win a Super Bowl to say that the Manning experiment was the success that they would like it to be.

However, in a league as unpredictable as the NFL, a two- or three-year window — which is what Manning should be giving the Broncos, barring unprecedented durability — can only give you so much guarantee.

Look at last season: you can't blame Peyton Manning for the Broncos' loss to the Ravens. Football is a team sport. If Manning doesn't get another ring, it'll be disappointing, and it'll affect his resume — Greatest Of All Time vs. One Of The Greatest Of All Time — but he still gave the Broncos two years of some of the best play at his position that's happened.

Meanwhile, Brees will retire as the greatest New Orleans Saints player of all time regardless of whether he wins another ring or not. Comparing Manning and Brees as quarterbacks, I'd take Manning. But as far as the significance of these signings are concerned, right now, Brees has the edge.

# It's Super Bowl-or-Bust for These Denver Broncos

By Ken Pomponio  
Yahoo! Sports  
January 8, 2014

COMMENTARY | It's been quite an eventful past 365 days in Broncos Country -- and that's putting it mildly.

But all the playoff failures, fax-machine faux pas, offseason acquisitions, off-field incidents, suspensions for All-Pro linebackers, injuries to All-Pro left tackles, mid-season heart surgeries, injuries to All-Pro linebackers, NFL offensive records, NFL defensive-ranking woes, All-Pro team selections and tough playoff draws simply don't matter for the Denver Broncos right now.

Being in East Rutherford, N.J. on Groundhog Day does.

In other words, it's Super Bowl-or-Bust for these Broncos, and another home playoff loss will constitute a failure on many levels -- from John Elway and the top of the organization on down through John Fox, Peyton Manning and the young pieces of the patchwork defense themselves.

One of those patchwork pieces, defensive lineman Malik Jackson, put it right in an interview with The Denver Post this week:

"(The regular season) was pretty much just preseason," Jackson said. "Now we need to get ready for the real season."

So true.

After all, despite all the wins (26), records (highest-scoring team in NFL history, most passing TDs in a season) and postseason honors (waiting for the official announcement of Manning's fifth MVP is a mere formality), what does this bunch really have to show for the last two years?

The Orange and Blue already have earned some credit, though. They've weathered a couple seasons' worth of distractions and potential road blocks (see paragraph 2 above), and are back exactly where they were a year ago at this time: Owning a 13-3 record and preparing to host a Jan. 12 divisional-round playoff game as the AFC's No.1 seed and a Vegas favorite of more than a touchdown.

But this is where the 2013 Broncos hope the path sharply diverges from their 2012 course.

They desperately need it to, or they'll just be another team on the surprisingly long list of No. 1-seeded failures -- eight since 2005 -- whose postseason runs have been one-and-done.

Moreover, since the NFL expanded to a 12-team postseason in 1990, 14 No. 1 conference seeds have lost their first playoff game. Six of those 14 didn't even make it back to the playoffs the following season, and of those eight who did, only three -- the 1997 Broncos, the '06 Colts and '10 New England Patriots -- fulfilled the promise and made it to the Roman Numeral Game itself.

There are only so many opportunities, and the Broncos have a golden one this season with homefield, a future Hall-of-Fame quarterback at the top of his game in a quarterback-driven league and an AFC playoff field -- that while featuring the three teams who have accounted for all of the Broncos' losses -- that on the surface is hardly historically daunting considering the Patriots' depleted state, the Colts' one-man (Andrew Luck) operation and the upstart Chargers' improbable run of fortune just to get to this juncture.

But -- as we've just covered -- it doesn't always play out that way.

Still, even the most nervous Broncos backers have to believe that last season's excruciating double-OT loss to the Baltimore Ravens, or their struggles -- their only home loss and two lowest total-yardage totals -- versus the Chargers, has their team's undivided focus and attention.

It seemingly has Fox's.

"I think you always look back," Fox told the Post earlier this week. "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."

The Broncos started the year by playing in the first game of the season; now they're two home wins away from playing in the season's final game.

It's Super Bowl.

Or Bust.

# NFL Playoff Preview: Past failures fueling the Denver Broncos for this postseason

By Frank Schwab  
Yahoo! Sports  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – Maybe the Denver Broncos needed last year's playoff failure. Perhaps someday they can look back on it as the day they started this season's championship run.

The way the Broncos stormed the AFC West in 2012 was surprising, perhaps even to them. The Ravens came into Denver and pulled off the shocking double-overtime upset in last year's playoffs, and that disappointment is still lingering as the Broncos get ready to face San Diego in the playoffs on Sunday.

"Last year we went on a little run there and I don't know if we got comfortable but we didn't finish," receiver Eric Decker said. "We were hungry this year as far as coming into the offseason, coming into training camp making sure that when we go out and play we make sure we finish everything we do."

The Broncos could have decided to completely forget about that Ravens loss, but they went the other way.

"We talked about that going into the month of April, with our weightlifting and our offseason training, about using that to fuel you, to make you do an extra set of sprints or an extra set of squads, whatever it may be," quarterback Peyton Manning said. "We've used it on the practice field. I don't think that you just get to this week and you start thinking about it. I think you always want to have something to try to drive you, fuel you and make you better than the year before."

The Broncos have as good of a chance as anyone to win the Super Bowl this season. The offense became the first in NFL history to score 600 points in a season. They're the AFC's No. 1 seed and 10-point favorites over the Chargers this week. They're obviously focused, too.

Yet there's a lot of nerves in Colorado. Broncos fans have been burned before. The franchise hasn't had a lot of playoff success this century. Denver has just two playoff wins since Super Bowl XXXIII in January of 1999, and one was a Tim Tebow-fueled victory over the Steelers that still doesn't seem real. That's a lot of time to pass without much playoff success, and last year's Ravens upset was a real kick to the gut.

And there's no getting around the past playoff failures by Manning.

Fair or not, his 9-11 playoff record follows everything he does. Eight times he has been one-and-done in the playoffs, including last year. Just imagine the dread in Denver and the criticism of Manning if the Broncos lose this week.

There's a ton of pressure on Manning to play well, although he said he doesn't feel it and has never played with extra pressure on himself in other playoff games either.

"That's not how I feel," Manning said. "I guess everybody has a different theory or analysis. A lot of you people (in the media) weren't even probably working since I've been playing in the playoffs.

"I don't believe that to be true. I've always enjoyed it and I felt fortunate to be in every opportunity when you get a chance to play in the postseason."

The other Broncos are too focused on their own jobs to worry much about Manning's legacy and how this game will fit into it, but they're aware. It's hard to get away from it considering it's a constant addendum to any conversation about Manning's career, or even his record 2013 season.

The Broncos realize that they can help turn that narrative around.

"That's something – when you're great, they're going to find something to nitpick at you," linebacker Shaun Phillips said. "He can't be perfect. If he was perfect, he would win every single game and win every single Super Bowl. But no one is perfect. All he can do is go out there and do his job. And we're going to do our part to try to help the way we can on our side of the ball."

Perhaps it's fitting the Broncos, who are motivated by failures of the past, play the Chargers this week. San Diego was the only team to win at Denver all season, a 27-20 victory on Dec. 12. San Diego did a masterful job of controlling the clock with its running game (it ran the ball very well in last week's playoff win at Cincinnati too) and shortened the game against the Broncos' offense.

That's not the type of game the fast-break Broncos really want to play, but like the Ravens' playoff loss from a year ago, maybe they have learned from it.

"It's win or go home for us and last time we played these guys we didn't have the result we wanted," Decker said. "I thought that was a good wake-up game for us."

There's a lot of pressure on these Broncos, and it has been noticeable ever since the Ravens won at Denver last season. But the failures, whether it's Denver's shocking playoff loss last season or all of the disappointments in Manning's postseason career, can be forgotten about with three more wins.

"This is the 2013 season, 2014 postseason, and it's its own chapter," Manning said. "We're looking forward to hopefully writing it for a number of more weeks."

# Team Report - DENVER BRONCOS

The SportsXchange/Yahoo! Sports  
January 9, 2014

There are more than enough numbers to illustrate that the difference between the Denver Broncos and San Diego Chargers is far less than the four games that separate them in the standings: Philip Rivers' 6-2 record at Sports Authority Field at Mile High, a cumulative score of 48-47 for the two regular-season games that the teams split, a series history that has seen six of the last seven games decided by a touchdown or less.

But as is the case with many aspects of the aerial circus that has been the 2013 season, it's all about the quarterbacks.

Both the Broncos and Chargers are blessed with elite quarterbacks that had career seasons this year. Rivers and Peyton Manning are well into their thirties, and have narrow windows left to complete their legacy. But while Rivers' season could be the start of a renaissance for the 33-year-old passer, the 37-year-old Manning's campaign was equal parts testimony and success.

Manning's football mortality has been at the forefront of his two seasons with the Broncos; he glimpsed into the abyss of the end of his career after multiple neck surgeries in 2011, and had to rebuild his mechanics from the ground up. He has referenced the likelihood that he wouldn't be around to play against younger brother Eli one more time, meaning that he wouldn't linger until 2017, but his career span could be much shorter than that, depending on injuries and other circumstances.

As Manning's 13th playoff appearance nears, it would seem he has everything. He set league single-season touchdown pass and yardage marks this season. He was Sports Illustrated's Sportsman of the Year. He's been a Super Bowl winner, a Super Bowl Most Valuable Player, and is a virtual certainty to become the league's first five-time MVP, giving him two more than anyone else.

But the failures of the postseason are the blight on his otherwise flawless resume. There's the 9-11 playoff record. There's his struggles in extreme cold or blustery conditions in the postseason; he's 0-4 in the playoffs when the temperature was under 40 degrees, 1-7 when it's 60 degrees or cooler and 3-7 in postseason games played outdoors. There's his head-to-head playoff record against other star quarterbacks of his era: 1-2 against Tom Brady, 0-1 against Ben Roethlisberger and Drew Brees, and 0-2 against Rivers. There's also the hex of the divisional round; he's 3-5 in this round of the postseason, including 1-4 at home.

None of those losses appeared to affect Manning and his team more than last year's 38-35, double-overtime defeat to Baltimore in temperatures that plunged through the single digits -- none, that is, except the 21-18 loss to Pittsburgh in the 2005

playoffs, which was the first of three previous instances in which a Manning-led team was the top seed in the AFC postseason.

The Colts used that defeat as fuel, and won their only world championship since moving to Indianapolis the following season. That loss motivated them, just as the defeat to Baltimore last Jan. 12 powered the Broncos.

"We talked about that going into the month of April, with our weightlifting and our offseason training, about using that to fuel you, to make you do an extra set of sprints or an extra set of squats, whatever it may be," Manning said.

"I don't think that you just get to this week and you start thinking about it. I think you always want to have something to try to drive you, fuel you and make you better than the year before. I feel like we've done that and, like I said, we're excited to be at this place right now."

Excited, but not satisfied.

"I would say that there's a lot more confidence in the locker room this year than last year," said wide receiver Eric Decker. "We've had some bumps in the road but I think that adversity has helped us as a team and grow together as a team."

**SERIES HISTORY:** 109th meeting. Broncos lead series, 58-49-1, and this is the first playoff meeting ever. Denver has won five of the last six games in the series. The most notable meeting between the two teams was on Dec. 17, 1979, when the Chargers defeated the Broncos 17-7 in the regular-season finale to clinch their first division title in 14 years and consign the Broncos to the wild-card round, which saw them lose at Houston 13-7 six days later.

## NOTES, QUOTES

--It's doubtful that the Broncos' battered defense would even be a shell of its expected self without the contributions of offseason pickups like defensive tackle Terrance Knighton and defensive end Shaun Phillips, neither of whom were considered in the elite class at their position when they were on the market.

The motivation is different for each Sunday. Knighton, an ex-Jacksonville Jaguar, is dealing with the emotions of making his playoff debut after four seasons in which Jacksonville failed to break .500.

"I'm trying to hold them back (and) save them for Sunday," Knighton said.

Phillips' motivation revolves around being cast off by the only team he had known since being drafted in 2004. San Diego opted not to bring him back, expecting that 2012 first-round pick Melvin Ingram could shoulder the pass-rush load. But their plans were waylaid by Ingram's torn ACL, which he suffered during OTAs in May. By

that time, Phillips had already signed with the Broncos, and finished the season as the team's leader with 10 sacks.

"Yeah, it's definitely a chip on my shoulder," Phillips said. "I think I've had good games both times we played them. I always want to play well every game.

"It's no hard feelings because they're a great organization. They brought me in, they drafted me and they treated me well. So I'm not saying anything negative at all. But of course, anytime you play against your old team, you always have a little chip on your shoulder, a little extra edge to get after them."

--The Chargers' 10-7 record heading into this game belies their recent success: a five-game winning streak that has pushed them from the brink of postseason elimination to being separated from the AFC Championship Game by just 60 minutes.

Their win streak is the longest of anyone in the postseason, thus leading to the notion that they are the "hot" team, and thus, a more problematic foe than others. That's a notion the Broncos dismissed.

"I'm not sure I understand what that really means. What does 'hot' mean?" quarterback Peyton Manning said on a conference call with San Diego media Wednesday.

Does "hot" mean a long winning streak? Or does it imply playing well for a long stretch? Teams like the Broncos and Seahawks lost games at home late in the regular season, but neither has endured a losing streak longer than a solitary game this season.

"We won 13 games this year so I don't know what you consider us if you consider them a hot team," said Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton. "We went on our streaks here and there, we had our bumps in the road and I think that's made us a better team. We faced a lot of adversity this year and now it's time to put up or shut up.

"All of the injuries and guys not playing or things like that -- no more excuses."

BY THE NUMBERS: 15-1 -- Record of teams since 1978 that lost to a wild-card winner at home in the divisional round the previous year, then opened the postseason at home a year later.

QUOTE TO NOTE: "I'm not really worried about them winning (five) games in a row or anything like that. We won 13 games, so I consider us a pretty damn good team, too. You can call it what you want." -- Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton.

STRATEGY AND PERSONNEL

## PLAYER NOTES

--DT Sylvester Williams has found his footing since being forced into the starting lineup after Kevin Vickerson's season-ending hip injury. The Broncos' first-round pick has three tackles for losses and two sacks in his last three games.

--QB Peyton Manning is 9-11 in the postseason for his career, and is just 1-4 at home in the divisional playoffs. But his only world championship came a year after a divisional-round loss at home as the No. 1 seed -- the same scenario the Broncos have now.

--G Louis Vasquez was not the highest-paid free agent at his position last season, but he has been the most effective one, finishing the season with no sacks allowed. That allowed him to become the first Broncos guard ever named a first-team All-Pro.

--RB Knowshon Moreno will be looking for redemption Sunday. In his last game against the Chargers, he was held to just 19 yards on eight carries, as the Broncos' running game endured its worst performance of the season.

--WR Andre Caldwell led the Broncos with six receptions for 59 yards and two touchdowns in their Week 15 loss to San Diego, but is unlikely to play much unless one of the Broncos' top three receivers is injured. Caldwell was forced into extensive duty that night because of Wes Welker's second concussion in four games.

--KR/PR Trindon Holliday could be an X-factor in Sunday's game -- assuming he can overcome his proclivity for bobbles. Holliday returned a punt and a kickoff for a touchdown in last year's divisional playoff loss to Baltimore and has two touchdowns this season, but has fumbled five times this year -- once every 12 returns.

## INJURY IMPACT

--WR Wes Welker has passed the league-mandated post-concussion protocol and has participated in all four practices since the end of the regular season, including Wednesday's work. Welker is expected to play against the Chargers this week after missing the last three regular-season games following a concussion suffered Dec. 8, his second in four games.

--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, and remained sidelined Wednesday.

--CB Champ Bailey is expected to continue in his role as the Broncos' slot cornerback, continuing work that he has handled since returning from his foot

injury in Week 16. Bailey fully participated in Wednesday's practice, even though he was listed with a shoulder injury.

--DE Shaun Phillips returned to practice Wednesday after sitting out Monday's work. Phillips was sent home that day because of a fever. He is expected to play Sunday.

--S Duke Ihenacho has participated in the last four practices 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 four practices the Broncos have held since Jan. 2 and is expected to play Sunday.

--S Rahim Moore is eligible to practice, but did not take part in the Broncos' on-field sessions Jan. 2, 3, 6 and 7. 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.

## GAME PLAN

In no other playoff game will pace be so important. The Chargers want to cobble together long drives and play keep-away, as they did in Denver on Dec. 12, when they pieced together five drives of at least seven plays -- including three of 11 or more snaps -- while the Broncos were plagued by three-and-outs, allowing them to dictate the game's tempo. But injuries could make that task difficult. The Chargers practiced Wednesday without center Nick Hardwick and right tackle D.J. Fluker. If they can't play, San Diego could have difficulty keeping Broncos defensive tackles Terrance Knighton and Sylvester Williams from defusing the change-of-pace runs that worked so well Dec. 12. The two have become more effective working together since Kevin Vickerson's season-ending hip injury, and Williams has been effective enough to take advantage of the double-teams Knighton has drawn, with three tackles for losses in Weeks 16 and 17. If the Chargers can't mount long drives to shorten the game, the Broncos' passing game, which is back at full strength, should wear out the Chargers' No. 29 pass defense.

## MATCHUPS TO WATCH

--Broncos CBs Chris Harris, Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie and Champ Bailey vs. Chargers WRs Keenan Allen, Vincent Brown and Eddie Royal -- In Week 15, Philip

Rivers targeted Kayvon Webster, a rookie working as the nickel cornerback, throwing at him eight times -- seven of which were completed for 91 yards and a touchdown. Rivers found little success throwing at Harris and Rodgers-Cromartie, who have become one of the AFC's best coverage duos at cornerback. But instead of picking on the rookie, Rivers may have to throw at Champ Bailey, who missed 11 games in the regular season because of a sprained foot, but is healthy enough to play just over half of the snaps, leading to his move to nickel cornerback. Bailey was beaten for a pair of touchdowns in last year's divisional playoff, but by working inside, he won't have to contend with as many deep routes and can focus on using his 15 years of experience and eight years of games against Rivers to try and jump routes. It will be more difficult for Rivers to find the soft spot of the defense if the Broncos' top three cornerbacks are healthy.

--Broncos WRs Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker and Wes Welker vs. Chargers CBs Richard Marshall and Shareece Wright and S Marcus Gilchrist -- In Week 15, the Chargers contained the Broncos' receiving corps -- which did not include Welker. Barring an unexpected setback, Welker is expected to play Sunday, which places the onus squarely on Gilchrist, who moves to slot cornerback when the Chargers go into the nickel. San Diego will need Gilchrist to handle Welker one-on-one. If he needs help, then the Broncos' outside targets will be open for longer gains.

# Knowshon Moreno — and his monstrous tears — appears on regional cover of SI

By Ben Eagle  
SI.com  
January 8, 2014

Moments before the Broncos kicked off against the Chiefs on Dec. 1, Denver Broncos RB Knowshon Moreno had a moment to remember. As the national anthem blasted from the stadium's speakers, tears streaked down Moreno's face. It prompted the question: What could bring a running back in the midst of a breakout year on one of the best teams in the NFL to tears?

In this week's issue of Sports Illustrated, senior writer Tim Layden finds the truth behind Moreno's tears.

"You saw those tears and you wondered, What makes a player cry like that before a game? Especially a player like Knowshon Moreno, who is finally thriving in the NFL," Layden writes. "In addition to his rushing stats, he caught 60 passes for 548 yards, by far the best in his career, and three more TDs. And he did this for a team with 13 wins and home field for as long as it survives in the AFC playoffs — Denver will face the Chargers on Jan. 12 — peaking- with a 37-carry, 224-yard game in the bitter cold against the Patriots on Nov. 24."

"It's always been that way for me, all the way back to high school and college," Moreno said of the emotional moment. "During the anthem it's always quiet and still, so I take in the moment and say a little prayer. Usually there's no camera on me. I thank the Lord for letting me play the game. I thank Him for everything. I run through my whole life right there at that moment. Even the bad stuff."

The No. 1-seeded Broncos play the sixth-seeded Chargers in the NFL divisional round on Sunday, Jan. 12.

# There's a story behind Knowshon Moreno's tears

By Tim Layden  
SI.com  
January 8, 2014

You saw the tears. And you can't forget the tears because they were unlike any two tears you have seen. Maybe you saw them while watching CBS's broadcast of the Broncos game in Kansas City on Dec. 1, when cameras caught Denver running back Knowshon Moreno crying during the closing notes of the national anthem. Or perhaps you caught them coming out of a second-quarter commercial break, the moment rebroadcast after Moreno scored on a three-yard pass from Peyton Manning. Or maybe you saw the tears later that night on SportsCenter. Or in the GIFs and mash-ups and montages that swept across the Internet like a winter storm: Knowshon crying to Whitney Houston, Knowshon crying to Michael Bolton, Knowshon crying to Justin Timberlake.

The tears formed at the base of Moreno's eyes and then rushed over his cheekbones as if they were blasted from tiny garden hoses, enough water to nurture the grass at his feet on the Arrowhead Stadium sideline, to hydrate any small animals that might have wandered past. "Alligator tears," Paige Elway said to her husband, Broncos executive vice president John Elway, so impressed that she mixed both reptiles and idioms. It was an outpouring that reduced famous weepers Dick Vermeil and Terrell Owens and Ray Lewis to wannabes. "I've never seen anybody cry like that," says Denver left guard Zane Beadles. "Never seen that amount of tears."

On the team flight back to Denver after a 35-28 win, players passed around screenshots and video of Moreno's lachrymal moment. "Guys were joking around," says rookie running back Montee Ball, "saying that they heard Knowshon slobbering and sobbing all over the place." At least three Twitter accounts were created for Knowshon's Tears. Back in Belford, N.J., where Moreno spent his adolescence, his grandmother and guardian, Mildred McQueen, started getting phone calls soon after CBS showed the tears, from friends and family.

They wanted to know, Why is Knowshon crying?

\*\*\*\*\*

You were curious too. You saw those tears and you wondered, What makes a player cry like that before a game? Especially a player like Knowshon Moreno, who is finally thriving in the NFL. In his fifth season, the 5' 10", 215-pound Moreno rushed for 1,038 yards and 10 touchdowns, both career highs. He caught 60 passes for 548 yards, by far the best in his career, and three more TDs. And he did this for a team with 13 wins and home field for as long as it survives in the AFC playoffs --

Denver will face the Chargers on Jan. 12 -- peaking- with a 37-carry, 224-yard game in the bitter cold against the Patriots on Nov. 24. "He's been our bell cow," says coach John Fox, evoking the bovine metaphor that coaches lovingly employ to describe the most reliable of running backs. Moreno has earned Manning's trust and respect, and there is no more valuable currency in the Broncos' locker room -- or in any locker room west of Foxborough. "He's a horse," says Manning, opting for the equine metaphor. "I love his passion. I love his intensity. I love having him standing next to me back there. It's a very comfortable feeling."

Still, those tears. Only two of them, but each enough to fill a shot glass; Hollywood tears, Broadway tears, the tears of a broken, beaten, fearful man. Or not. Here the 26-year-old Moreno sits in an overstuffed leather chair in the glass-walled lobby of the Broncos' training facility in the Denver suburbs. Outside the temperature has not risen above single digits in several December days, and blinding sunshine bounces off piles of snow. "The tears?" Moreno is asked.

"Not uncommon at all," he says. "It's always been that way for me, all the way back to high school and college. During the anthem it's always quiet and still, so I take in the moment and say a little prayer. Usually there's no camera on me. I thank the Lord for letting me play the game. I thank Him for everything. I run through my whole life right there at that moment. Even the bad stuff."

The bad stuff. Like spending much of the first 10 years of his life bouncing between ramshackle apartments and homeless shelters in New York City with his young father. Like emerging from that struggle, through the love and generosity of his grandmother, to become a star at Middletown (N.J.) South High and at Georgia, to be taken with the 12th pick in the NFL draft, and then seeing that career imperiled by the punishing combination of wealth, stupidity and injury. Like finding himself a stereotype -- a rich, young athlete driving a Bentley with comically inappropriate vanity plates, arrested for DUI. Like being stuck, in his fourth year as a professional, imitating other teams' running backs all week on the scout team, wearing sweats on Sunday afternoons, labeled a bust: No-Show Moreno. Like injuring his hamstring. Like blowing out his ACL. Like hurting the reconstructed knee again.

All that bad stuff.

\*\*\*\*\*

His story has been told often, but only from the age of 11 onward. Family members preferred it that way. The story always made passing reference to a father and a mother and to the construction of Knowshon's unusual name, but only began in earnest when he was in middle school in New Jersey, living with McQueen, his maternal grandmother, outrunning his classmates in furious games of tag, hinting at the athletic skills that would carry him all the way to the NFL. But there is more.

Sitting in the glass lobby of the Broncos' practice facility, Moreno sketches the edges of a life he lived as a child. He tells the story only because he was asked, and

he tells it without pause or drama, with the same smile he wears for most of every day. He sheds no tears, alligator or otherwise. Afterward, Moreno's mother, grandmother and his uncle Gary, three relatives with whom he has close relationships, fill in more details about Knowshon's early life. His father does not participate in the retelling of this story.

Moreno was born as the child of two children: His mother, Varashon McQueen, was 16 when Knowshon was conceived; his father, Freddie Moreno, was 17. Both teenagers lived in the Bronx. Varashon, one of three children, was named after a character in a short story written by her father, William McQueen. Freddie was called Knowledge, a name he received as a member of the Five Percent Nation, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam that was founded in the 1960s; he was the second of five children born to Puerto Rican immigrants and was raised by his mother at a housing project on Fish Avenue. The young couple gave their son a name built from their own: Know for Knowledge, Shon for Varashon.

Knowshon lived briefly with both of his parents, but the couple never got married and did not stay together long. "[Varashon] was young, and she got herself into certain situations as young people sometimes do," says Mildred of her daughter. ("When I was young," says Varashon, "I was out going to a lot of clubs and parties -- that's true.")

As a toddler, Knowshon was moved among several residences, living sometimes with his paternal grandmother, sometimes with his father and sometimes with his grandmother and mother in New Jersey. He was seldom in the same place for more than a week or two. "I just remember going back and forth," says Knowshon. "It seemed like I was all over [New York City's five] boroughs."

Knowshon's father eventually became his primary caregiver, and the two of them lived together. It is unclear how this arrangement took root, although Varashon says that she was not happy with it. (Mildred McQueen says she is unaware of how Knowshon came to live with his father; Sports Illustrated's attempts to reach Freddie Moreno were unsuccessful.)

In his early 20s, according to Gary, Freddie designed T-shirts and sold them off a table near his apartment building on West 133rd Street, in Harlem. Knowshon remembers the T-shirts. "They had cartoon characters," he says, "and sequins." Freddie would sell his wares into the small hours of the morning, with his young son nearby, helping out. "I can't say it was fun, really; it was business," says Knowshon. "But it was exciting when we sold a shirt and somebody gave you money for it."

That business did not endure. Freddie and Knowshon left the Harlem apartment, and when he was, Knowshon estimates, between six and nine, they moved frequently. Sometimes they were able to find a small apartment, but they also lived for long periods in homeless shelters. "It was a tough situation," says Gary Moreno, 41, an audio-video specialist with the accounting firm Deloitte. "My brother and 'Shon would find an apartment, and that would be good for a few months. Then

they would have to move and the shelter situation would come up again. That cycle repeated itself a few times." Most of the shelters were in the Bronx or upper Manhattan, and Knowshon says he attended school as often as possible while moving between shelters and apartments.

"I guess you could say it was a little bit of a struggle for us, going from shelter to shelter," says Knowshon. "It would be tough for anybody, but it was something we had to do. And everyone there was in the same situation. Everyone was hungry. We always made do. When we were in an apartment, whatever we had in the house, we'd eat -- bread and ketchup, I remember that. It was delicious at the time. I used to kill those sandwiches. My grandma was there a lot, to help us out. She would give us a few dollars, and we could go to the store or whatever, just to get by."

McQueen, now 71, was born Mildred Howard in Edison, Ga., and later moved with her family to the southeastern Alabama town of Ashford. Her father was a farmer and subsequently worked on the railroad and in a paper mill. Mildred attended Alabama State for a year and then moved north to New York City, where she met and married a professional magician and amateur writer named William McQueen. Later, as a grandmother, she doted on Knowshon from birth and became gradually more troubled during visits to shelters to see him. "I definitely did not approve of the situation," she says today. "I felt I had to take over because I didn't want to see [Knowshon] end up on the street, and I could see that coming. I decided to step in and make the best of it."

McQueen says she sued for and was awarded custody of Knowshon in Bronx Family Court. To that point the young boy had periodically spent time living with McQueen; now, at 12, he was moving into a bedroom in her home in Atlantic Highlands, N.J. Shortly thereafter they moved to Belford, a coastal town 10 miles -- and a world -- across Sandy Hook Bay from Brooklyn and the rest of New York City.

It was just the two of them; William McQueen had relocated to Florida for easier access to the cruise ships that employed him onboard. (He still lives there, apart from Mildred, though the couple remains married.) On visits home William taught Knowshon the very magic tricks -- such as the "multiple coin trick" -- that the running back will occasionally drop on a teammate today. Moreno has sustained a relationship with his mother, who is now 44, lives near Mildred in New Jersey and says she is studying to obtain an online degree in psychology while receiving financial support from her son. Knowshon describes his relationship with his father as more distant. "I talk to my dad once in a while," he says. "Usually when he's at my uncle's house."

Knowshon made the varsity team as a freshman at Middletown South. "He fumbled a couple times in a game against Neptune High his freshman year," says Steve Antonucci, Moreno's coach. "And he came over to the bench and said to me, 'I can't do this, take me out.' I said, 'Are you out of your mind? You're the best player on the field.' I threw him back out there, and he scored two touchdowns."

Middletown South didn't lose a game after Knowshon's freshman season, winning three state titles. Moreno rushed for more than 6,000 yards and accepted a scholarship to Georgia, where he redshirted one season and then rushed for 2,734 yards and 30 touchdowns in two years. He left for the NFL without submitting paperwork requesting an evaluation of his probable draft status, a service available to potential draftees with college eligibility remaining. ("I forgot to do that," he says, "but I knew I was going somewhere else to compete.") The first running back taken in the 2009 draft, he signed a five-year, \$16.7 million contract.

His career began relatively smoothly; Moreno led the Broncos with 947 yards that year and started the first two games of 2010 before missing the next three with a left hamstring injury. He recovered to finish the season with a team-leading 779 yards and 37 receptions. In '11, the staff that drafted Moreno, including coach Josh McDaniels, was gone, and as Tim Tebow led the Broncos to their surreal playoff run, Moreno was nagged for most of the season by that same dodgy hamstring. (Moreno had inexplicably dived into Crossfit training in the off-season, and while he says he was in "great shape," he'd also dropped to 195 pounds from his customary 215.) He didn't get on the field in two of the first three games and then played sporadically for the next six weeks, mostly as a third-down back. Still, Fox, in his first year as coach, saw promise. "He was coming back," says Fox. "He was getting sharper."

In Week 10 at Kansas City, Moreno broke a 24-yard first-quarter gain on which he hurdled Chiefs safety Brandon Flowers. Late in the first quarter he popped outside and went for 22 more yards -- "an explosive run," says Fox -- but tore his right ACL on the play, ending his season just as he seemed to be on the cusp of validating his draft spot and his contract.

Less than three months later, in early February 2012, Moreno was stopped by police for driving 70 mph in a 45-mph construction zone. He failed a Breathalyzer test and was charged with driving under the influence. The plates on his Bentley convertible read SAUCED, a punch line that didn't need a joke. (Months later Gary Moreno would explain that sauced and saucy were commonly used among Moreno family members to describe a lively, aggressive attitude. Try selling that to Twitter.) Moreno paid a fine and was sentenced to 24 hours of community service. That spring, Elway drafted running back Ronnie Hillman from San Diego State in the third round and brought back veteran Willis McGahee for a second year. A writer for NFL.com proffered, "We wouldn't be surprised to see [Moreno] released by the team before the season."

In the first two weeks of 2012 he carried just eight times for 15 yards -- and lost a fumble. He was placed on the inactive list for the next eight games and relegated to the scout team during the week. But this is the thing about Moreno: You can hurt him, you can bench him, you can make him live in a homeless shelter. But you cannot break him. For eight weeks he became a beast on the "look squad" (so named because it gives the first team a good look at the upcoming opponent). The scout team quarterback was journeyman Caleb Hanie. "On scout team," says Hanie, a five-year veteran, "I've seen good players who sulk and take a couple reps

because the coach is making them do it, and then just sit out. With Knowshon, you had to pull him off the field. I didn't know what to expect from him, but he seemed like he put everything out of his mind and went to work every day."

During the season Moreno talked to his uncle Gary. "He said, 'I'm back in the shelter again,' " says Gary. "That's the way he looked at it. He said, 'I'm gonna do what I gotta do to make it right.' "

"This is a business," says Moreno. "What could I do? They wanted to take a look at the young guy, Hillman. Some guys get mad or go in the tank. I'm the kind of guy who doesn't harp on things I can't control. I tried to be ready to play at any time."

That moment arrived on Nov. 18, 2012, when McGahee was injured in Denver, against the Chargers. Moreno started the last six games of the year and rushed for 510 yards. Bell-cow territory. But in the third quarter of what would become a playoff loss to the Ravens, he reinjured his right knee. He went back to Dr. James Andrews, who, Moreno says, "cleaned out" some meniscus damage and also gave him a stem cell injection to promote healing in the joint.

This year he's been more than just the team's most reliable running back; he's been a maturing presence in the locker room. Through the early years of his career he was a ball of frantic energy, often without direction, bouncing around the locker room like a grade-schooler on Red Bull. "He was kind of crazy-passionate," says Fox. Now that passion has been refined. "He's channeled that energy," adds kicker Matt Prater, one of Moreno's best friends on the team. "He's settled down and learned when to use it."

When Ball, a second-round pick brought in to challenge Moreno, fumbled against New England in that Week 12 game, he sought out Moreno the next day. "I knew he had a experience with fumbling," says Ball. "He told me, You're holding the entire organization in your hands when you carry the ball; your teammates and the coaches and fans -- everybody. It's a mental thing. Everybody holds the ball tight. He helped me realize how much it means to hold that football."

\*\*\*\*\*

Moreno has no bigger fan than Manning. Since Knowshon was in high school, he has habitually jumped up from tackles and jogged back to the huddle (or the no-huddle). "I love how fast he gets up," says Manning, never one to overlook details. "My dad even mentioned that to me. He's getting some big hits the way he plays, but he hops right up. That's deflating to a defense. I've seen guys who have been through a lot. Knowshon had high expectations, then he had to compete for a roster spot, then play on scout team. He knew that could be it. And his attitude has been the best it could possibly be."

Still, it's not always easy to throttle back the energy. On Oct. 6, with 1:40 left in the fourth quarter, the Broncos were in a historic shootout with the Cowboys in Dallas, tied at 48 and facing third-and-one from just outside the Cowboys' one-yard

line. With the Broncos lined up in formation, Manning can be seen on the CBS telecast walking back to Moreno and talking animatedly. Moreno waves his arms, as if frustrated. "If we score a touchdown there, they get the ball back and maybe go down and score a touchdown to tie it," explains Manning now. "So I'm saying to him, 'Knowshon, you've got to get one yard, but you can't get two.' And he's arguing back at me. 'I can't do that! I can't do that!' I said, 'You've got to do that.' He only knows one speed, so I know it's killing him. It was so against his nature. But he did it, and he got one yard and he kind of eased up and went down. And we kicked the field goal and won."

Moreno asks, "Do you know how hard it is to gain exactly one yard?"

It's not so hard to get rid of a Bentley. Moreno now drives a Dodge Charger V10 -- not exactly a family sedan, but a major step back in terms of bling. The license plates? "Numbers and letters," says Moreno. He might have the opportunity to trade up again if he wishes: His career year has come on the cusp of unrestricted free agency.

Much of Moreno's social life takes place in front of a TV screen with an Xbox controller in his hands and a headset stretched across his skull. Prater is among his closest friends but says, "Most of our conversations are over the headset, playing games. Knowshon is a serious gamer." It's through gaming that Moreno stays tight with his friends back in New York City -- most pointedly his uncle Gary and his cousin Rasheem (Wonder) Wells, but also the other members of a team they call Kings of the Street. They go by Obvious, Johnny Handsome, Mr. Barrio, Film and Bubbles, and they play Madden, NBA 2K and Battlefield until their fingers bleed.

They all live across the cold Hudson River from New Jersey, where Knowshon grew fast and strong and where the Super Bowl will be played on the first weekend in February. If the Broncos get that far and the jets fly overhead, the fireworks explode and the anthem is sung, of this you can be certain: There will be tears.

# Brady and Manning: Making Extraordinary Plays Look Routine

By Andy Benoit  
MMQB/SI.com  
January 8, 2014

This will be the seventh divisional playoff weekend that has featured Tom Brady and Peyton Manning. At 36 and 37, respectively, both men rank among the best ever at their position and are amazingly still improving. Elite is an overused word to describe quarterbacks, and it really doesn't do either Brady or Manning justice. They are future Hall of Famers because they've mastered the little things that often go unnoticed. To best understand this, let's examine two plays (out of endless possibilities) that appear to be routine but are in fact extraordinary.

Let's start with Brady. He's one of the shrewdest field readers in NFL history not because of how quickly he recognizes who's open, but rather, how quickly he recognizes who's not open. Unrefined quarterbacks stare at a receiver to learn he's covered. Average quarterbacks glance at a receiver to learn that he's covered. Good quarterbacks read primary defenders to learn who is covered. Brady reads multiple defenders at the same time, analyzing not only their coverage assignment but also their body angles. This enables him to rapidly work into later progressions.

Consider this example from Brady's last divisional round appearance, in 2012.

Manning has similar cunning in his progression reads, which are often set up by his extensive work at the line of scrimmage. The trending narrative is that this cunning has allowed Manning to overcome his weakening arm. That's fair, but it shouldn't be hyperbolized. Yes, Manning has lost some power, but he's not Chad Pennington. Manning can still pinpoint difficult throws from unconventional angles. Perfect ball placement has long been his most under-appreciated trait. When coupled with his field awareness, special things happen. Here's an example from early this season when Manning all but pulled the ninth of his record 55 touchdowns out of a hat.

The subtle but significant attributes of Manning and Brady create unique advantages for their teams. Whether this leads to another AFC Championship Game appearance remains to be seen, but this much is guaranteed: We'll see quarterbacking at its most brilliant in this weekend's AFC divisional games.

# An NFL Ratings Bonanza

By Richard Deitsch  
MMQB/SI.com  
January 8, 2014

While the football-airing networks strive for production excellence and quality broadcasting each week, the ultimate scoreboard is ratings. For television executives, your best opportunity for that winter house in Vail is when viewership numbers are rolling, and the opening week of the playoffs could not have gone better for the networks thanks to a combination of frigid weather across the United States and matchups decided in the final minutes. Last weekend NFL games averaged 34.7 million viewers, the most-watched wild-card weekend ever.

Leading the way was FOX's coverage of the 49ers' last-second win over the Packers, the most-watched telecast of any kind since Super Bowl XLVII (Feb. 3, 2013). The telecast drew an astonishing 47.1 million viewers, setting a wild-card playoff record on any network since at least 1988, according to FOX. It was 11% higher than the previously most-watched wild-card game, Steelers-Broncos in 2011, which drew 42.4 million. The game peaked in the final half hour (7:30-7:51 p.m. ET), with an astonishing 53.4 million viewers.

NBC's telecast of the Saints' first road playoff victory in franchise history was the most-watched wild-card Saturday game in NFL history, averaging 34.4 million viewers. The game peaked at 36.6 million for the game's final minutes from 11-11:23 p.m. ET. The network's earlier Saturday broadcast—the Colts' come-from-behind victory over the Chiefs—averaged 27.6 million viewers, with viewership peaking at 38.1 million. If you combined the two games, NBC's broadcasts averaged 30.8 million viewers, up 14 percent from last year's 26.9 million average for those games.

The Chargers' win over the Bengals on CBS was viewed by an average of 30.9 million viewers, the highest in 19 years for an early Sunday AFC wild-card game and up 4% from last year's game in the same time slot. The average viewership peaked at 36.2 million in the game's final half-hour.

The wild-card numbers augur monster ratings as the postseason heads into the divisional round this weekend. For those interested in how networks did during the regular season, I have some highlights below:

## CBS

- The network said its regular-season schedule averaged 18.7 million viewers, a 6% increase over last year's 17.7 million viewers. The 18.7 million viewers were second highest number of average viewers in 26 years for the regular-season AFC television package.

- The Top 10 markets (in descending order through Week 16) for CBS's NFL coverage: Kansas City; Buffalo; Indianapolis; Cincinnati; Baltimore; Pittsburgh; Nashville; Denver; Boston; Cleveland.

Pregame: The NFL Today averaged 3.3 million viewers, about 39% lower than FOX NFL Sunday.

## FOX

- FOX said its regular-season schedule delivered its most NFL viewers since the network began broadcasting NFL games in 1994. The network's games averaged 21.2 million viewers, an 8% increase over last year's viewership (19.7 million) and 5% over 2010 for the most-watched NFL on FOX season ever. FOX said its four most-watched NFL seasons have come over the past four years (2013: 21.2 million; 2010: 20.11 million; 2011: 20.96 million, and 2012: 19.7 million).

- The network's national game of the week—the late-afternoon window—averaged 27.2 million viewers. It was FOX's most-watched package on record, eclipsing the previous record set in 2009 (26.2 million viewers).

- FOX said it increased its female viewers in 2013, including the demographics of women between 18-34, women 18-49 and women 25-54 (the latter was up 10%). The season average among women 18-49 tied for the highest-rated ever, and women between 25-54 ranked as the network's best ever.

Pregame: FOX NFL Sunday averaged 4.8 million viewers, up 4% in audience over last year (4.6 million viewers) and 39% higher than CBS's The NFL Today.

## ESPN

- ESPN said its 17 Monday Night Football telecasts averaged 13,679,000 viewers. It was the third-most viewed season in ESPN's eight years of presenting MNF. The network had six of cable's 10 biggest audiences for the calendar year among viewers, and ESPN said eight times during its schedule it won the night as the most-watched network among households and total viewers—cable or broadcast—in prime time.

- ESPN's most-viewed MNF game came on Sept. 9 when 16,524,000 viewers watched the Eagles at Redskins season opener.

- The 10 highest-rated markets for Monday Night Football in 2013: 1. New Orleans; 2. Sacramento; 3. Las Vegas; 4. San Diego; 5. Richmond, Va.; 6. Seattle-Tacoma; 7. Norfolk-Portsmouth, Va.; 8. Washington D.C.; 9. Charlotte; and 10. Baltimore.

- Monday Night Football on ESPN Deportes averaged 45,000 Hispanic households and 68,000 Hispanic viewers for the 17-game schedule in 2013, the most-watched MNF season on record for ESPN Deportes among Hispanic viewers.

- ESPN's Monday Night Football online streaming generated an average minute audience of 610,000, an increase of 31% compared to 2012.

Pregame: Sunday NFL Countdown averaged 2.2 million viewers (up from last year's 2.1).

## NBC

- Sunday Night Football averaged 21.7 million viewers (up from 21.4 million in 2012) for its 19 NFL regular-season telecasts, the second-best viewership mark in NBC's eight seasons of broadcasting the NFL's Sunday primetime package. (The highest ever was 21.8 million, in 2010.)
- The most watched SNF broadcast was the Eagles-Cowboys game on Dec. 29. It drew 27.4 million viewers.
- Sunday Night Football was the No. 1 show in prime time for the fourth consecutive fall television season, and it won every key adult and male demos, including Adults 18-49. The show ranked first among Women 18-49, the first time the NFL primetime package won the fall TV season in that demo. It was also tops among Women 18-34 for the fall primetime for the third year in row, and it tied for No. 2 with The Voice in the Women 25-54 demographic behind only The Big Bang Theory.
- The Top 20 TV markets for Sunday Night Football: 1. New Orleans; 2. Denver; 3. Richmond; 4. Indianapolis; 5. Las Vegas; 6. Sacramento; 7. Albuquerque; 8. Dallas; 9. Baltimore; T-10. Seattle; T-10. Kansas City; T12. Washington D.C.; T12. Norfolk; 14. San Diego; 15. Charlotte; 16. Phoenix; T-17. Pittsburgh; T-17. Nashville; T-17. Austin and T-17. Greensboro.

Pregame: Football Night in America averaged 8.0 million viewers in 2013, up 3% from last season.

## NFL NETWORK

- The 13-game schedule produced the most-watched season for Thursday Night Football, with an average of 8.0 million viewers. That was up 10% from the 2012 season average.
- The most-viewed game came in Week 3 when an average of 11.1 million viewers watched the Chiefs defeat the Eagles on Sept. 19. The game's 7.0 rating was the highest-rated Thursday Night Football telecast in NFL Network history.

Pregame: NFL GameDay Morning averaged 478,000 viewers for the 2013 season.

## QUICK HITS

1. FOX awarded the team of Kevin Burkhardt and John Lynch with the call of Saturday's Saints-Seahawks game. (Erin Andrews will be on the sidelines.) The divisional game assignment is given by FOX Sports executives to the team they felt had the best season behind lead announcers Joe Buck and Troy Aikman. "We've found Kevin, John and Erin to be a really enjoyable and comfortable broadcast team," said FOX Sports executive producer John Entz. "They have fantastic chemistry both on and off the air and it shows during their broadcasts. Both (producer) Pete Macheska and (director) Artie Kempner deserve a huge amount of credit for bringing this crew as far along as they have in such a short amount of time." I wrote about Burkhardt's unusual path to the NFL broadcast booth before the season.

2. NBC had the good fortune of landing the Colts' epic comeback win over the Chiefs last week. How did those in the booth assess how the broadcast documented the second half of the game? "We were very careful to document both sides of the comeback, all while trying to stay out of the way because the game had an amazing energy of its own," said game producer Rob Hyland. "We used commentary, graphics and highlights to give the comeback the proper historical perspective, but it was just as important to chronicle the disproportionate number of Kansas City injuries. They were down to their third-string running back in an NFL playoff game and that contributed to the narrative."

3. CBS is streaming its coverage of the AFC playoffs (on CBSSports.com) for the first time ever this postseason. The divisional games this Saturday and Sunday, as well as the AFC Championship Game on Jan. 19, will be part of the coverage. FOX streamed the Niners-Packers game on FOX Sports Go on Sunday—the first NFL game streamed by the services—and there were significant tech issues, at least early. FOX Sports PR issued a statement during the second quarter of the game: "Our understanding is that the technical issues we were experiencing have been resolved, and we apologize for any inconvenience."

4. CBS NFL analyst Dan Dierdorf will call his final NFL national broadcast on Saturday after 30 years in the booth. The 64-year-old Dierdorf and Greg Gumbel have the Colts-Patriots. On the idea of a tribute at game's end, Dierdorf said on a Tuesday conference call, "I wouldn't want to clutter the end of this game with making it anything about me."

5. NBC did a very cool thing last Saturday by assigning former Saints safety Steve Gleason to serve as the guest social media editor for the Saints-Eagles game. Gleason tweeted through his @TeamGleason Twitter account using eye-tracking technology to type. The assignment raised awareness for the fight against battling Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), as well as provided some fantastic commentary (<https://twitter.com/TeamGleason/statuses/419642803975892992>). Here's hoping we see more of Gleason tweeting games for the NFL networks in the future.

# Denver Broncos' D keying on Chargers' run game

By Kevin Patra  
NFL.com  
January 8, 2014

The Denver Broncos know the San Diego Chargers' plan for Sunday's tussle. They've seen the blueprint before.

"As a defense, we just have to go out there and stop the run, stop them from getting second-and-short, third-and-short and get (quarterback) Philip Rivers off his spot where he wants to pass," defensive end Malik Jackson said, per The Denver Post.

Chargers running backs gobbled up 168 rushing yards on 44 carries in their 27-20 win over the Broncos in Week 15.

Ryan Mathews was the workhorse that day, galloping for 127 yards on 29 carries. Philip Rivers has received all the praise -- deservedly so -- for his career renaissance, but Mathews merits credit for carrying the Chargers into Divisional Round Weekend.

During the four-game winning streak that allowed the Chargers to stay alive in the playoff race, Mathews gained more than 99 yards on the ground with 24-plus carries in each contest.

Mathews left San Diego's Wild Card Weekend win over the Cincinnati Bengals with an ankle sprain. However, he insists he will play Sunday against the Broncos.

Denver defenders know that if they allow the Chargers to run the ball, it minimizes the opportunities for quarterback Peyton Manning and the Broncos' offense. Defenders pointed to getting off the field on third down as crucial to success.

"They were like 50 percent (converting in Week 15), and that was the key," linebacker Wesley Woodyard said. "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."

Peyton Manning can cover for many of the Broncos' defensive flaws, but he needs the ball to do it. If the Chargers spend Sunday running all over Denver's defense, we'll get to witness more of those classic Manning sideline faces.

# QB Index: Old guard, new generation clash in playoffs

By Gregg Rosenthal  
NFL.com  
January 8, 2014

The new generation of quarterbacks has arrived. One year after the class of 2012 took the league by storm, this young crop of signal-callers has moved a step closer to taking over the league. They are starting to advance in the playoffs.

The final eight teams alive provide a perfect dichotomy of new school versus old school. Half of the remaining teams are led by mobile quarterbacks in their second or third season: Cam Newton, Andrew Luck, Russell Wilson and Colin Kaepernick. In the other corner, the old guard looks as strong as ever: Peyton Manning, Tom Brady, Drew Brees and Philip Rivers.

Change on a league-wide level happens gradually. Manning and Brady have shown remarkably few signs of decline, but Father Time is undefeated. They are both over 36 years old and can stay at this level for just so long. College football is producing quarterbacks with mobility, almost exclusively. It's hard to find guys like Rivers or Manning among the best prospects in each draft. Players like Luck, Wilson and Newton all need to throw well from the pocket to succeed, but their athleticism makes them different to prepare for.

We've been ranking every quarterbacks throughout the season, and you can see our year-end rankings here. Let's take a look at how each quarterback is playing entering the season's best weekend of football.

## Indianapolis Colts at New England Patriots

I'm still trying to process what Andrew Luck accomplished against Kansas City. It was, in so many ways, a typical Luck 2013 performance. He missed more open throws than you remember, but most of them happened in the first half. He made a few poor decisions and paid for them dearly with three interceptions. And then Luck made so many plays that took your breath away. These are plays that other quarterbacks just can't make.

People talk about Luck's pocket movement, but not enough. A young Tom Brady was the best I've ever seen at creating extra time to throw in the pocket -- until Luck came along. He's just silly. Indianapolis' offensive line held up well last week in the second half, and Luck has been increasingly effective as the Colts' offense has grown more aggressive in recent weeks. Four of their five second-half touchdown drives went for 80 yards or more. The Colts are built around the quick passing game, not unlike the Patriots.

After a slow start to the year, no player has been better than Brady in the second half. His numbers have declined somewhat since Rob Gronkowski was hurt, but the Patriots' running game has picked up the slack. The Colts' defense struggled to cover Kansas City's running backs and quick throws last week. Look for New England to have more of a ball-control offense than we're used to.

#### New Orleans Saints at Seattle Seahawks

The clash of the generations will take center stage during Saturday's matchups. The part of the story that no one is talking about: Drew Brees and Russell Wilson aren't playing their best football lately.

It's amazing the Saints finally won a road playoff game last week on a night when Brees was not effective. He struggled badly in the first half for six straight possessions. Brees missed open throws deep, and he did not have a lot of life on his passes. He's lucky the Saints' defense picked him up after two early interceptions.

Brees bounced back with a solid, if unspectacular, second half. The running game led the way. It has to be a concern for the Saints that Brees has struggled in three straight outdoor starts against Seattle, Carolina and Philadelphia. He has three touchdowns and four picks in those games, including a 147-yard effort in Seattle. The Saints' offensive line was abused in two of those games.

Wilson has not played his best football down the stretch as well. He has four touchdowns and three interceptions in that span, including two Seahawks losses. The Seattle pass protection is a yearlong problem that hasn't been solved, and Wilson has occasionally started to leave the pocket too soon because he expects pressure to come. This is a tougher matchup than conventional wisdom suggests. The Saints' defense is playing at a high level, while the Seahawks' offense is erratic.

#### San Francisco 49ers at Carolina Panthers

I wrote about the top 10 quarterbacks age 25 and under last offseason. Kaepernick has enjoyed a birthday in the meantime, but it's a treat that we get to watch two of the top five in this game.

It's hard to judge Kaepernick's play last week because the conditions were so brutal. Both he and Aaron Rodgers struggled with accuracy down the field. Kaepernick is doing a better job going to his check downs than early in the year, and that is largely due to the incredible protection he's been afforded. Carolina's front seven roughed up San Francisco last time and forced Kaepernick into one of the worst performances of his career (22 pass attempts, 91 yards, six sacks.)

The return of Michael Crabtree has changed the 49ers' offense. Kaepernick is more willing to throw the ball to Crabtree, even when he's well covered. And for all the running Kaepernick did last week, the two key plays of the game were throws from

the pocket. (His touchdown to Vernon Davis and his late third-and-10 throw to Crabtree.)

The 49ers showed a willingness to call runs for Kaepernick more against Green Bay than they did early in the season. The Panthers also figure to run Newton plenty. The Panthers' passing attack did not progress throughout the season, and Newton's accuracy was inconsistent at best. He missed a lot of throws in his final two games against New Orleans and Atlanta. Newton, however, had an uncanny knack for making key throws in big moments. That's been chalked up to "maturity" from Newton, but the Panthers' passing game is less explosive now. Newton is one of the most dangerous weapons in football, but that was true in 2012 as well. The defense is just better now, and Newton is smarter about avoiding big mistakes.

### San Diego Chargers at Denver Broncos

Philip Rivers is coming off a near-flawless performance. Rivers had only four incompletions against Cincinnati. Two came on miscommunications with a receiver, and one was thrown away. San Diego's ball-control style has worked well against Denver, averaging more than 38 minutes per game. Time of possession is overrated, but the Chargers get points for their efforts and the Chargers' offensive line is playing better of late. It's easy to imagine Rivers picking Manning apart with a lot of third-and-5 completions. The Chargers' staff has put so much pressure on Rivers by not throwing on early downs, and he has come through.

Rivers is a game manager in the best sense of the word. He's in control of the flow of the game, not unlike Manning. Just watch him look off Bengals safety Reggie Nelson in the play to the right.

There's not much left to say about Manning's season that hasn't been said. I'm most interested to see if Denver's sudden propensity to throw the ball deep in December carries over into the postseason. San Diego's secondary gave up a ton of big plays for most of the year, but it has improved greatly over the last six weeks.

Manning and Rivers are similar in many ways, and their meeting guarantees that at least one of the "old guard" quarterbacks will make it to the final four. It will be a weekend to enjoy some of the greatest players of all time, and one of the most promising young quarterback crops the league has ever seen.

It's not often we see career paths cross quite like this, and I can't wait to watch it.

# Quarterback similarities define all four games in divisional round

By Brian Billick  
NFL.com  
January 8, 2014

Looking at the eight teams left in the NFL playoffs, one thing quickly jumps out at you: eight elite quarterbacks. You might not think the eight QBs remaining are the eight best signal-callers in football, but they all probably fall somewhere within the top 10 or 12, and that says a lot about the importance of each player to his respective team.

In this weekend's divisional round, the matchups are highlighted by quarterback pairings full of similarities. Of course, the 45 other players on each team will significantly impact results, but these four QB duels will set the tone. Take a look:

The Commanders: Drew Brees and Russell Wilson

New Orleans Saints at Seattle Seahawks, Saturday, 4:35 p.m. ET, Fox

Both of these quarterbacks were downgraded entering the draft due to their lack of ideal size. Brees is listed at 6-feet tall ... and maybe he is (with his helmet on). Wilson, meanwhile, is listed at what might be a similarly optimistic height of 5-11. What they share beyond that is status as fierce leaders whose teammates would follow them anywhere. Even more, Brees' arrival in New Orleans gave the Saints an identity; Wilson's presence in Seattle accelerated the Seahawks' rise, as well.

Seattle blew out New Orleans, 34-7, in Week 13 by shutting down the run game (Mark Ingram, Pierre Thomas and Darren Sproles combined for 33 yards on 15 carries) and harassing Brees in the pocket. If the Seahawks can do so again, expect a similar result.

What both defenses will try to do is apply pressure up the middle and get arms in the face of the opposing quarterback. The Seahawks' defense is better suited for that, but if the Saints can spring Ingram, they've got a chance, especially since Seattle's secondary isn't what it was at the beginning of the season.

The All-Americans: Andrew Luck and Tom Brady

Indianapolis Colts at New England Patriots, Saturday, 8:15 p.m. ET, CBS

One quarterback is a cosmopolitan "metrosexual" with an UGG Boots endorsement deal. The other is an obsessive gym rat who surely is the last starting quarterback in the NFL to use a flip phone. While Brady and Luck diverge in a style sense, they share a fierce -- almost manic -- competitiveness.

It's no coincidence that they engineered the two unlikeliest comebacks in football this season: Brady brought the Patriots back from a 24-0 halftime deficit against Denver in Week 12 to secure a 34-31 overtime win; Luck, just last week, dug the Colts out of a 38-10 second-half hole to earn a thrilling, 45-44 wild-card victory over Kansas City.

If you go back and look at those two games, you'll find both quarterbacks were largely subpar in the first half, and both became frustrated with themselves because nothing was working. But they never stopped believing, and that persistence kept their teammates believing as well, thus sparking those improbable rallies.

In Week 11 of last season, a very different Patriots team blew the doors off Indy, 59-24. The Patriots aren't where they were a year ago -- having endured too many injuries on both sides of the ball this season -- but you can bet they'll find a way to neutralize T.Y. Hilton and make Luck try to beat them with someone else. For the Colts in New England in January, that won't be easy.

The New Hybrids: Colin Kaepernick and Cam Newton

San Francisco 49ers at Carolina Panthers, Sunday, 1:05 p.m. ET, Fox

I've questioned this notion that "Dual-threat quarterbacks will revolutionize football" before, and I'll continue to do so until it actually becomes more than a notion. Randall Cunningham ... Michael Vick ... Tim Tebow ... We've been through an entire generation of hybrid QBs, and each new subject has been billed as a game-changing figure. But show me one dual-threat who's been consistently stellar and won championships in the pros. Steve Young? He might come the closest, but take another look at his stats; while Young ran a lot early in his career, in his Super Bowl-winning season, he totaled just 293 rushing yards. Young's greatest career success came with him working as a passer.

But I'll admit that if anybody is to break the mold, it could be one of the two quarterbacks in 49ers-Panthers. It's been an uneven season for Kaepernick, a full-time starter for the first time. He was on the cover of every magazine this side of People and Rolling Stone over the offseason, and he started strong in the 49ers' season-opening win over Green Bay. But he was hurt by the decimation of San Francisco's receiving corps. With Michael Crabtree back in the fold, Kaepernick has played better, and the Niners have rolled off seven straight wins. Meanwhile, Newton is enjoying his best season to date, having shown signs of maturing into a terrific leader, making better decisions than he did in his first two years.

With two rugged defenses on the field, though, this game is not likely to be settled by the legs of either quarterback. The key will be which QB passes more effectively -- and whether Carolina's Steve Smith can be close to 100 percent.

## The Classics: Philip Rivers and Peyton Manning

San Diego Chargers at Denver Broncos, Sunday, 4:40 p.m. ET, CBS

It's not just their tall, prototypical builds and bulky knee braces; it's also their superior pocket presence and persistent toughness. While most of the other surviving quarterbacks can hurt you running the ball, Rivers and Manning are old-school dropback passers who only run as a last resort (and only if you're using the term "run" loosely).

It's been a great season for Rivers, who was unfairly maligned in the past as the Chargers' talent surrounding him winnowed away. He's been sharp all season. Add in Ryan Mathews' renaissance and a stout Chargers front seven, and this San Diego squad is a very difficult playoff match.

San Diego must establish a running game Sunday, because the Bolts still don't want to get into a shootout with Manning, especially given the question marks in the Chargers' secondary. Manning is playing at the top of his game, and with tight end Julius Thomas combining with the best trio of wideouts in the league (Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker and a healthy Wes Welker), San Diego will be hard-pressed to keep up with the Broncos. I know the Chargers beat Denver in Denver just last month. I don't expect it to happen again.

# 2014 NFL Draft order: Top three needs for all 32 team

By Daniel Jeremiah  
NFL.com  
January 8, 2014

With the NFL regular season completed, here's a look at the draft order, with the top three draft needs for each team. The order of the teams is determined by record (using strength of schedule as a the first tie breaker and alphabetical order as a second tiebreaker) and does not include projections about playoff outcomes. Teams 21-32 are playoff teams, and those teams' draft order will be determined based on postseason results. If any ties cannot be broken by strength-of-schedule, the divisional or conference tie-breakers, then a coin toss will determine the order.

## 1. Houston Texans

Record: 2-14

Team needs: QB, OT, safety

Analysis: I'm not convinced Case Keenum is the long-term answer at the QB position. I would be very surprised if they passed on the top signal-caller in this draft.

## 2. St. Louis Rams (from Washington Redskins)

Record: 3-13

Team needs: OL, WR, safety

Analysis: The Rams -- who own this pick due to the trade made by the Redskins so they could select Robert Griffin III in the 2012 NFL Draft -- need to upgrade the offensive line and this is shaping up to be a strong offensive line class. They have drafted several wide receivers in the last few years, but they still need a true No. 1 wide receiver. Tavon Austin has a bright future in the slot, but they still need a go-to-guy on the outside.

## 3. Jacksonville Jaguars

Record: 4-12

Team needs: QB, DE, OT

Analysis: Jacksonville is another team that should be in the quarterback market. However, if they fall in love with a pass rusher, they could nab a quarterback at the top of the second round.

## 4. Cleveland Browns

Record: 4-12

Team needs: QB, RB, OG

Analysis: I will be very surprised if this selection is anything other than a quarterback. The Browns are loaded with extra picks in this draft, and they could package a few of them to move up for a QB.

#### 5. Oakland Raiders

Record: 4-12

Team needs: QB, WR, OT

Analysis: The Raiders are another team that is unsettled at the quarterback position. They could also use a legitimate No. 1 wide receiver and some help up front on both sides of the ball.

#### 6. Atlanta Falcons

Record: 4-12

Team needs: DE, OL, TE

Analysis: Atlanta is desperate for an outside edge rusher to plug into its defense. An offensive tackle like Jake Matthews would also make a lot of sense.

#### 7. Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Record: 4-12

Needs: DE, TE, OT

Analysis: Tampa's defense is loaded up the middle, but it could use a dominant edge rusher. An offensive tackle like Michigan's Taylor Lewan would also fill a need.

#### 8. Minnesota Vikings

Record: 5-10-1

Team needs: QB, DE, OG

Analysis: The Vikings are very unsettled at the quarterback position, and I could see them going in that direction.

#### 9. Buffalo Bills

Record: 6-10

Team needs: OT, safety, DE

Analysis: The Bills could use another offensive tackle as well as some youth at defensive end. Buffalo linebacker/pass rusher Khalil Mack would be a very popular pick, and his versatility would give defensive coordinator Mike Pettine a lot of flexibility.

#### 10. Detroit Lions

Record: 7-9

Team needs: CB, WR, safety

Analysis: The Lions need to address the cornerback position and it might be smart

to draft more than one in the early rounds. If they decide to pass on a cornerback in the first round, finding a receiver to take some heat off Calvin Johnson would make a lot of sense.

#### 11. Tennessee Titans

Record: 7-9

Team needs: Safety, DE, QB

Analysis: The Titans have a very fast, aggressive defense but they could use a more athletic, cover safety as well as another edge rusher. Jake Locker's inability to stay healthy could also factor into the decision to add another QB to the mix.

#### 12. New York Giants

Record: 7-9

Needs: LB, CB, interior OL

Analysis: Jon Beason has been fantastic since his arrival from Carolina, but there is still a need at the other linebacker spots. They are also in need of some more speed and athleticism in the secondary.

#### 13. St. Louis Rams

Record: 7-9

Team needs: OL, WR, safety

Analysis: If the Rams secure an offensive lineman with their top selection, they could look in several different directions. They could upgrade the secondary, add another receiving weapon for Sam Bradford or supplement the pass rush with another defensive lineman.

#### 14. Chicago Bears

Record: 8-8

Team needs: DL, Safety, Interior OL

Analysis: The Bears' defensive line has been ravaged by injuries this season and they need to add some youth to the position. Finding an upgrade at the safety position should also be a focal point in this draft.

#### 15. Pittsburgh Steelers

Record: 8-8

Needs: OT, safety, CB

Analysis: The Steelers have missed on a few offensive linemen in the past few drafts, and they need to upgrade the offensive tackle position. The secondary is one of the oldest in the NFL, and they could easily go in that direction with this pick.

16t. Baltimore Ravens (pending coin flip)

Record: 8-8

Team needs: WR, OT, CB

Analysis: Baltimore's offense hasn't looked the same without Anquan Boldin. They also haven't played that well in the secondary during the 2013 season. Ozzie Newsome will always take the best available player, but it would be tough to pass on a talented wideout to complement Torrey Smith.

16t. Dallas Cowboys (pending coin flip)

Record: 8-8

Needs: DE, CB, safety

Analysis: George Selvie has done a nice job this year but the Cowboys could use some more depth at defensive end. The safety position has been an issue for the past few years and it wouldn't be a surprise if they decided to address that problem with their first-round pick.

18. New York Jets

Record: 8-8

Team needs: WR, OG, CB

Analysis: The Jets have a talented defense, but they need a lot of work on the offensive side of the ball. I wouldn't be shocked if they jumped back into the quarterback market this spring.

19. Miami Dolphins

Record: 8-8

Needs: OT, OG, RB

Analysis: The Dolphins offensive line has been the story both on and off the field. They need to upgrade both the OT and OG spots and they also need to find a three-down running back.

20. Arizona Cardinals

Record: 10-6

Team needs: OT, CB, OLB

Analysis: The Cardinals are playing much better up front this season but they still need an upgrade at offensive tackle. They are loaded at inside linebacker but they could use an edge rusher to complement Calais Campbell. John Abraham is playing well this year but he's 35 years old.

## Eliminated playoff teams

### 21. Green Bay Packers

Record: 8-7-1

Team needs: TE, safety, LB

Analysis: This draft is shaping up to be very deep at the cornerback position and the Packers could go in that direction or possibly land Jermichael Finley's replacement.

### 22. Philadelphia Eagles

Record: 10-6

Team needs: OLB, Safety, CB

Analysis: The Eagles are in good shape on the offensive side of the ball, although adding a receiver might be an option. I think they'll be more inclined to add a dynamic defensive player.

### 23. Kansas City Chiefs

Record: 11-5

Team needs: WR, DL, ILB

Analysis: Andy Reid would love to add a field-stretcher in the passing game. Also, adding a stud to play next to Derrick Johnson would make this front seven even nastier.

### 24. Cincinnati Bengals

Record: 11-5

Team needs: CB, OLB, Safety

Analysis: The Bengals have a very talented roster but they could use more depth at the cornerback position. Also, a playmaking safety would be a nice addition.

## Remaining playoff teams

### 25. San Diego Chargers

Record: 9-7

Team needs: CB, OG, OLB

Analysis: The Chargers' offensive line has played much better this season, but they could still use an upgrade along the interior. They have spent a lot of picks on pass rushers over the last decade, but they're still in the market for a difference-maker on the outside.

### 26. Cleveland Browns (from Indianapolis Colts)

Record: 11-5

Team needs: QB, RB, OG

Analysis: Joe Banner and Michael Lombardi should be able to address the running back position later in the draft. This would be a good spot to upgrade the interior of the offensive line or possibly draft an explosive wide receiver to pair with Josh Gordon.

#### 27. New Orleans Saints

Record: 11-5

Needs: OT, OLB, CB

Analysis: The Saints' offensive line is very solid on the interior but they could upgrade the tackle position. With all of the young, talented quarterbacks in the NFC, you can never have enough cornerbacks.

#### 28. New England Patriots

Record: 12-4

Team needs: Interior OL, DL, CB

Analysis: Protecting Tom Brady needs to be the first priority and they also need to add some more youth and athleticism to their defensive line.

#### 29. San Francisco 49ers

Record: 12-4

Team needs: WR, DL, CB

Analysis: The 49ers have two excellent possession wide receivers (Anquan Boldin, Michael Crabtree) but they could use an explosive, stretch-the-field playmaker at the position. Justin Smith continues to play at a high level but he can't play forever.

#### 30. Carolina Panthers

Record: 12-4

Team needs: WR, CB, OL

Analysis: The Panthers need to continue to build around Cam Newton and nabbing an explosive pass catcher with this pick would make their franchise quarterback happy.

#### 31. Denver Broncos

Record: 13-3

Team needs: OT, CB, DL

Analysis: Protecting Peyton Manning and adding depth to the cornerback position should both be high priorities in the upcoming draft.

## 32. Seattle Seahawks

Record: 13-3

Team needs: WR, TE, OL

Analysis: A big-time tight end would be a perfect fit for Russell Wilson and a true No. 1 wideout would also make sense. The offensive line hasn't played well down the stretch and that is another area that could be addressed in this draft.

Teams currently without first-round pick after trading it away

Indianapolis Colts (traded to Cleveland Browns)

Record: 11-5

Team needs: Interior OL, WR, LB

Analysis: Upgrading the offensive line is the No. 1 priority. There should be plenty of quality interior linemen available in the middle rounds.

Washington Redskins (traded to St. Louis Rams)

Record: 3-13

Team needs: DL, safety, interior OL

Analysis: The Redskins could use help across the board on defense and the offensive line also needs to be upgraded.

# Colts would have kept Peyton Manning and drafted Andrew Luck if former GM Bill Polian got his way

By Gary Myers  
New York Daily News  
January 8, 2014

In the period before Bill Polian was fired as Colts vice chairman after they went 2-14 without Peyton Manning in 2011, he went to team owner Jimmy Irsay with a quarterback plan.

He suggested to Irsay that even though Manning was coming off serious neck surgery and missed the 2011 season that he pick up his \$28 million option bonus and then with the first pick in the draft select Stanford quarterback Andrew Luck.

Polian knew it would be a drain on the Colts' salary cap, but he wanted to keep Manning — he obviously went on to make a full recovery from the surgery — and let Luck sit and learn from Manning.

"Andrew would have backed him up for a couple of years," Polian told the Daily News on Wednesday. "When the time was right, he would have stepped in. What the team around Andrew would have looked like at that point, given the salary-cap issues, was a question. It would have been tight, but it could have worked. It would have been my preference, but Jimmy still had final call."

Polian's plan became moot when Irsay fired him and then the Colts pulled off the smoothest handoff in NFL history: Manning to Luck.

Some teams search for generations and never find a franchise quarterback. They have the first overall pick and select Tim Couch, David Carr or JaMarcus Russell. The Colts had the good fortune to be terrible in the right years (1997 and 2011), allowing them to first take Manning in 1998 and Luck in 2012. They have gone from one of the greatest players in NFL history to the best young quarterback in the game.

"They deserved good luck after what they went through in 1983," Ernie Accorsi said Wednesday.

Accorsi was the Colts general manager in 1983. He picked John Elway first overall, but he refused to play for coach Frank Kush, and owner Robert Irsay traded him one week later to the Broncos without Accorsi's knowledge or approval. "When you look at the Colts franchise, they went from (Johnny) Unitas to Bert Jones, then end up with Peyton Manning and Luck," Accorsi said.

In the final nine years Manning played for the Colts, he won four MVPs, went to two Super Bowls and the playoffs every year. "Suck for Luck," became the battle cry in Indianapolis in 2011. The Colts took it seriously.

Luck, considered the best quarterback prospect since Manning in 1998, was sitting right there for them with the first pick. The Colts cut Manning less than two months before the draft rather than pay him the option bonus and then handed the franchise over to Luck.

Manning signed with Denver and will face the Chargers in the divisional round on Sunday. Luck goes against Tom Brady and the Patriots on Saturday night in Foxborough. If they both win, they face each other in the AFC title game on Jan. 19 in Denver.

"I'm sure they didn't want to go 2-14," Accorsi said. "What happens if they go 2-14 and there is no quarterback? People have good luck and bad luck. In this business, you have a tendency to dwell on the heartbreak. It just broke well for them. God bless them. Luck is some quarterback."

Manning was the starter the opening game of his rookie year against Dan Marino, who was nearing the end of his career. He retired after the 1999 season. In the 14 seasons after Marino, the Dolphins have started 17 different quarterbacks. It started with Jay Fiedler and now they hope they have found their guy in Ryan Tannehill, picked seven spots after Luck in 2012.

Tannehill has started all 32 games in his two seasons, but has yet to make the playoffs.

In between, the Dolphins started such stars as A.J. Feeley, Gus Frerotte, Joey Harrington, Daunte Culpepper, John Beck and Chad Henne. The Colts stink for one year and get the best quarterback prospect in more than a decade. It almost isn't fair.

"It's just serendipity," Polian said. "It just happens."

The 49ers went from Joe Montana to Steve Young, but the circumstances were different. Bill Walsh traded for Young in 1987, but he didn't take over as the starter until 1991 when Montana was out with an elbow injury. The Packers went from Brett Favre to Aaron Rodgers, but Rodgers was a late first-round pick who sat on the bench for three seasons until Favre retired, unretired and then was traded to the Jets.

Polian said the Colts "were in the right place at the right time," to get Luck. "More power to them."

He revealed that if he knew how serious Manning's neck injury was at the time of the 2011 draft, he would have taken either Colin Kaepernick or Andy Dalton in the first round.

"We loved them both," he said.

That, of course, means Luck probably wouldn't be in Indianapolis.

But because of the lockout, the Colts and their trainers could not have any contact with Manning from March 12 to July 25. When the Colts realized later in camp that Manning was not going to be ready for the season — he eventually needed surgery — Polian had to scramble. He talked Kerry Collins out of retirement, he got hurt in the third game, then the Colts went with Curtis Painter and Dan Orlovsky.

That led to 2-14 and a little bit of luck.

# Broncos bring fresh energy this time?

By Kevin Acee  
San Diego Tribune  
January 8, 2014

This is by no means an attempt to make an inferno from a harmless ember, to manufacture bulletin board material from a throwaway quote.

But it sure seems the Denver Broncos believe they weren't themselves the last time they played the Chargers.

"It was just one of those games we just weren't at our best," Broncos linebacker Wesley Woodyard said Monday to the Denver media. "I really don't remember too much about it, but I do remember we really didn't have that edge that we should have had on the field. It happens, and it can't happen again. That was just one of those nights we didn't show up to play our best game."

And while, as a San Diego columnist, I'd love to take issue with that assertion, I cannot.

You can see where it might be true that the Broncos tripped over their own excellence when the Chargers went to Sports Authority Field and temporarily stalled the inevitability that was Peyton Manning & Co.'s trek to being the AFC's top seed.

The Broncos entered that game (which was played exactly one month before this Sunday's Divisional round game will be) with an 11-2 record, having twice beat the Kansas City Chiefs and in control of the AFC West and all but certain to earn a bye in the postseason.

They were without Wes Welker on offense, and four defensive starters from their November game in San Diego did not play that night. Welker and three of the defenders will play Sunday.

Prior to that December game, the Broncos had not lost at home this season, and the Chargers entered that game with a losing record.

It happens.

"I was a little happy, you know, because they put one on us the last time," Denver receiver Andre Caldwell told the Denver Post. "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."

Yes, this is going to be a different kind of game.

In the buzzing Chargers locker room at Paul Brown Stadium on Sunday, Eric Weddle gushed about how far the Chargers have come this season, especially in the past six weeks or so, and he was ebullient about the significance of a road playoff victory, in particular for the advancement of a young defense.

Then, abruptly, he laughed. It was a sort of sadistic chuckle, actually. And he said this: "We know the challenge that is ahead of us. Let's not get it twisted."

As this column is not meant to incite, it is also not meant to diminish.

The Chargers can beat the Broncos again. To do so, they must, essentially, duplicate what they did a month ago – controlling the ball and pestering Manning.

But you have to consider the different circumstances. There is no advantage to be given this time to one team being more feral than the other. In fact, while the Chargers are playing with virtually nothing to lose, the Broncos are motivated by their playoff exit last year.

"They've been playing hungry," Broncos receiver Eric Decker said of the Chargers. "I think from (the Dec. 12) 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."

They will this time.

# PFT's 2013 league MVP

By Mike Florio  
ProFootballTalk.com  
January 8, 2014

With five awards down and three to go, it's time to unveil the biggest (albeit most anticlimactic) of them all.

The 2013 PFT NFL MVP is PFM.

Yes, Peyton F. Manning. We don't know whether his middle name starts with an F; for our purposes, the F stands for something else entirely.

I could elaborate on his credentials, but do I really need to? He beat the existing record for passing touchdowns by 10 percent. He set the record for single-season passing yards — even if it merits a fleur-de-lis shaped asterisk. He led his team once again to the top seed in the AFC.

The other finalists, in our assessment, were Chiefs running back Jamaal Charles, Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, Eagles running back LeSean McCoy, Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson, and Panthers quarterback Cam Newton.

# Peyton Manning: I'm nearing the end, so I'm enjoying it more

By Michael David Smith  
ProFootballTalk.com  
January 8, 2014

Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning knows that his Hall of Fame career, which started in 1998, can't go on much longer. So he wants to savor every moment.

Manning said after a cold outdoor practice today in Denver that he's eagerly anticipating Sunday's game against the Chargers, but he's also trying to enjoy every day at work, and appreciate the fact that he's fortunate to be getting ready for a playoff game on Sunday.

"It'll be a great atmosphere Sunday playing a good football team, and there's nothing else I'd rather be doing than to be in that opportunity," Manning said. "It's certainly my goal to enjoy the preparation — not just the game, to actually enjoy the preparation part of it, enjoy being around the guys. Because certainly the light is at end of tunnel for me, no question, so you enjoy these things maybe even more than maybe you have in the past."

At age 37, Manning obviously doesn't have many more opportunities like the one he and the Broncos have right now. He has to hope he has three more games to enjoy, culminating in the Super Bowl, and that his 16th NFL season doesn't come to an end on Sunday.

# Big divisional-round favorites haven't had it easy in recent years

By Mike Wilkening  
ProFootballTalk.com  
January 8, 2014

If the Saints or Chargers win this weekend, they could keep a rather fascinating streak alive.

In each of the last six postseasons, an underdog of more than a touchdown has won outright in the divisional-playoff round, according to Marc Lawrence point spread data.

In fact, favorites of more than a touchdown are just 6-7 overall in this span.

To repeat, seven of these big favorites didn't even get out of Round Two.

The streak began in 2007, when the Giants (+7.5) upset Dallas and the Chargers (+10.5) won at Indianapolis. The next year, the Cardinals (+10) stunned the Panthers. Then, in back-to-back postseasons, the Jets went on the road and won as nine-point underdogs, first stunning the Chargers in San Diego, then knocking off the Patriots in Foxborough.

In the previous two postseasons, the eventual Super Bowl winner has entered the divisional round as a sizable underdog and emerged one step closer to the Lombardi Trophy. In 2011, the Giants (+9) rolled at Green Bay. Finally, the Ravens (+9) upset the top-seeded Broncos in Denver last January.

Digging a little deeper, we find that at least one underdog has won outright in each of the last eight postseasons. In fact, we have to go back to 2004 to find a season where all four favorites survived the divisional round.

According to multiple line-tracking websites, the Chargers (+9.5) are the biggest underdogs of Round Two, per Nevada oddsmakers. The Chargers, the No. 6 seed in the AFC, visit No. 1 seed Denver on Sunday afternoon.

The Saints, who play at eight-point favorite Seattle on Saturday afternoon, are the second-biggest underdogs of Round Two, with the Colts (+7) the third-biggest underdogs. It's quite possible Indianapolis could close as a consensus underdog of more than a touchdown, too.

The Panthers, meanwhile, are currently one-point home underdogs to San Francisco on Sunday. Since 2003, home teams are 24-16 straight-up in the divisional round, with home teams winning at least three games in the divisional round in each of the last two seasons.

The last two divisional-round teams to lose, of course, were the 2012 Broncos and 2011 Packers, who ultimately had something of an excuse.

After all, they were defeated by Super Bowl champions.

# Playoff Mentality

By Gray Caldwell  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- For the Broncos, the 2013 season has felt very business-like.

After each one of their 13 wins, there wasn't a lot of celebration in the locker room. Winning the AFC West for the third consecutive season? That was just the first goal. Earning the AFC's No. 1 seed? Goal number two.

But the ultimate goal was always there in the back of their minds.

"Every team wants to start the beginning of the year and set their sights on the Super Bowl at the end of the deal. It's been no different for us," tight end Jacob Tamme. "We focus each week, but the long vision—the sight out on the horizon—is getting to the Super Bowl and finding a way to win that game. In order to do that, we have to find a way to win this one. And that is all that matters right now."

That's why that business-like focus has been there this week, just as it has been all season.

But the team certainly knows it's not the regular season anymore.

"It's the playoffs," wide receiver Eric Decker said. "The mentality, obviously, it's turned up a notch. It's win or go home for us and last time we played these guys we didn't have the result we wanted. I thought that was a good wake up game for us just to get back as far as executing on third down, even first and second down—being more physical in the trenches. We're excited about this opportunity. You take it one game at a time and you focus on the details at hand and you just make sure that, again, it's all about execution."

Even though no one in the locker room considers Sunday "just another game," the players are approaching it the same way they have all season, because that's what has gotten them to this point.

"That's why it is just like another week in that respect. I mean, we've been playing hard all season. Every game has been big to us," Tamme said. "I think everyone understands what is at stake. We've been playing that way all year. Guys are ready to go. Guys are going to prepare hard all week, go out there and let it loose on Sunday."

For Terrance Knighton, this week's preparations are an entirely new experience. The fifth-year defensive tackle has never been to the postseason.

He said this week is about controlling his emotions.

"Trying to hold them back, trying to save it for Sunday," he said. "Right now I'm just focusing on the process, going over the game plan and just trying to master that before Sunday."

That mentality was echoed by tight end Julius Thomas and rookie defensive tackle Sylvester Williams.

Both said that the Broncos need to be themselves and play the way that won them 13 games in the regular season.

Denver finds itself in a nearly identical situation to last season's playoffs, when a 13-3 record earned them a first-round bye and home-field advantage throughout the playoffs.

But Decker said things feel different this time around.

"I would say that there's a lot more confidence in the locker room this year than last year," he said. "Last year we went on a little run there and I don't know if we got comfortable but we didn't finish. We were hungry this year as far as coming into the offseason, coming into training camp making sure that when we go out and play we make sure we finish everything we do. We've had some bumps in the road but I think that adversity has helped us as a team and grow together as a team. Again, our focus is making sure that every single person does their job so we can have that success."

Head Coach John Fox alluded to a famous line from The Wizard of Oz, "There's no place like home," when asked about hosting in the Divisional Round for the second consecutive season.

But it's still up to the Broncos to play well regardless of location in order to move on in the tournament.

The first step will be taking on a San Diego Chargers team on a hot streak, having won five straight, including last weekend in the Wild Card Round of the playoffs.

"We won 13 games this year, so I don't know what you consider us if you consider them a hot team," Knighton said. "We went on our streaks here and there, we had our bumps in the road, and I think that's made us a better team. We faced a lot of adversity this year and now it's time to put up or shut up. All of the injuries and guys not playing or things like that – no more excuses."

Decker said the team's goal is to get off to a quick start and get the Sports Authority Field at Mile High faithful going early. Using the fans to their advantage can only help the cause.

"I think," Tamme said, "it's going to be a heck of a game."

# United in Orange, Time to Ride Friday

By Gray Caldwell  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 8, 2014

DENVER -- In the city and county of Denver, this Friday is officially United in Orange, Time to Ride Friday.

Denver Mayor Michael B. Hancock made the proclamation Wednesday morning to support the Broncos leading up to their divisional playoff game this Sunday.

Fans are encouraged to wear orange on Friday to help celebrate the occasion. In addition, the team is inviting fans to create good-luck signs for the team on Thursday between noon and 2 p.m. MST at the Denver Pavilions downtown.

The mayor also announced additional ways the city and its partners are supporting the Broncos, which includes lighting the City and County Building with orange and blue lights from Friday through game day.

The Denver International Airport sign on Peña Boulevard will be lit orange, and overhead signs will be programmed to cheer, "Go Broncos." Broncos Executive Vice President of Football Operations John Elway will also greet DIA passengers with a message on the train, and DIA employees will wear United in Orange, Time to Ride buttons.

City employees are being asked to wear their best Broncos gear, and downtown buildings and businesses throughout the city are encouraged to display orange and blue lights and Broncos signs.

The Broncos, Downtown Denver Partnership, VISIT DENVER, Larimer Square, National Western Stock Show and Elitch Gardens are adding to that support by lighting the D&F Tower in orange and blue, hanging Broncos banners along the 16th Street Mall and in Larimer Square, lighting the Elitch Gardens Ferris Wheel orange and blue, broadcasting 850 KOA's live game coverage over the Southwest Rink at Skyline Park sound system, offering free skating and skate rentals at the Rink located on Arapahoe and 16th Street to anyone who wears orange or Broncos gear and flying Broncos flags during National Western Stock Show rodeos.

The Rink on Arapahoe and 16th Street opens at 10 a.m. on Saturday, and early-risers can get free lessons and skate rentals from 8 to 10 a.m.

Lastly, Mayor Hancock will place a friendly bet with San Diego interim-Mayor Todd Gloria. The terms are expected to be discussed on a phone call at 2:55 p.m. MST today.

Tentatively, if the Chargers lose, Mayor Gloria will send Denver a tasting of some of San Diego's Mexican food. If the Broncos lose, Mayor Hancock will send a sampling of Denver's green chile.

Below is the full proclamation from Mayor Hancock declaring this Friday, Jan. 10, 2014 as United in Orange, Time to Ride Friday.

# Manning's Eyes on Opportunity

By Gray Caldwell  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- This is what the Broncos have been working toward.

Ever since the team walked out of frigid Sports Authority Field at Mile High last January, fresh off a heartbreaking, double-overtime loss to the eventual Super Bowl-champion Baltimore Ravens, the Broncos have been motivated to get back to the playoffs and reverse the outcome.

"I think we've kind of used that throughout the season," quarterback Peyton Manning said. "We talked about that going into the month of April, with our weightlifting and our offseason training, about using that to fuel you, to make you do an extra set of sprints or an extra set of squats, whatever it may be. We've used it on the practice field."

They used it as the team marched to its second consecutive 13-3 season, its second consecutive No. 1 seed in the AFC and its third consecutive AFC West title.

"I think you always want to have something to try to drive you, fuel you and make you better than the year before," Manning continued. "I feel like we've done that and, like I said, we're excited to be at this place right now."

Along the way, the Broncos seemed to set records nearly every week.

The team topped the 40-point mark in a franchise-record six games, and tied an NFL record with three 50-plus-point outings. The team's 606 total points in the 2013 regular season represented a single-season NFL record. The club became the first in league history with five players scoring 10 or more touchdowns. Eric Decker and Demaryius Thomas became just the second wide receiver duo in league history to produce 1,000 yards and 10 touchdowns each in consecutive seasons, joining Randy Moss and Cris Carter. And Manning had the most prolific regular season of a quarterback in NFL history, setting league records for passing yards (5,477) and passing touchdowns (55).

All that production didn't matter if it didn't contribute to wins. But it did. Thirteen of them, earning the Broncos a first-round bye and home-field advantage throughout the playoffs.

"To be in this game means you have done something well," Manning said. "It means you've played good football all season, giving yourself an opportunity. Only eight teams left, just four games this weekend – we're excited to be one of them. Glad to be in this tournament and looking forward to getting out there Sunday."

This Sunday brings a rematch with the division-rival San Diego Chargers in the postseason for the first time in the two teams' history.

Denver and San Diego split the regular-season series, but the most-recent contest was a 27-20 Chargers win at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

The Chargers held the ball for nearly 40 minutes, which almost doubled Denver's time of possession. That strategy, which included three San Diego drives that spanned at least 11 plays and six-and-a-half minutes of game time, helped lead to the win.

Whether the Chargers will try to duplicate that effort on Sunday is yet to be determined.

"You never know how a game is going to play out," Manning said. "Just because something happened the previous game, or two games, doesn't mean it's going to happen again. And so you prepare for the game plan, but you go out, you have to be ready to adjust to a shootout, to a low-scoring game, whatever it may be. You certainly see lots of different types of games here in the postseason. I've always believed that. It's going to be a team effort. All three phases are going to need to contribute – offense, defense and special teams. That is what we're working on getting ready for right now."

That Week 15 game was Denver's last one at home. The team closed the regular season with back-to-back wins on the road in Houston and Oakland.

Tack on the bye week in the first round of the postseason, and it will have been exactly one month in between Broncos home games when the team steps onto the field on Sunday.

"It will be good to get back home and our fans will be excited," Manning said. "We'll need them in an important way – counting on them to be loud. And our players are excited to be back here at home."

The Broncos know they will need to be at their best to move on in the playoffs, and Manning believes that the adversity the team overcame throughout the season -- from injuries to a suspension to even losing their head coach for a month due to heart surgery -- will serve them well in that cause.

"We feel like we've been through a lot during this season in order to get ourselves this opportunity," he said. "You're playing a good football team and it's going to be a good football game. A lot of familiarity between both teams. I would say there is a lot of knowledge amongst both teams. That kind of evens out and kind of comes down to who makes more plays on the field. That is kind of how I know to approach it and that is kind of what I believe about playoff football."

For Manning, this will be his 21st playoff game. With 177 passing yards on Sunday, he can pass Joe Montana and Brett Favre for the second-most passing yards in postseason history.

In all that experience, the quarterback said the way in which he goes about preparing for the games has changed over time.

"It's going to be a great atmosphere on Sunday, playing a good football team, and there is nothing else I would rather be doing than be in that opportunity," he said. "And so that is certainly my goal to enjoy the preparation – not just the game – to actually enjoy the preparation part of it, enjoy being around the guys. Because certainly, the light is at the end of the tunnel for me – no question. And so, I think you enjoy these things maybe even more than maybe you have in the past."

"This is why you have the offseason work, this is why you meet as often as you do in April, May and June – it's for opportunities like this."

As Manning mentioned, last year's Divisional-Round loss to the Ravens has been in the back of their minds as fuel ever since.

But the team isn't necessarily looking back at last year to define what it wants to accomplish now. Manning, in the midst of his 16th year in the NFL, said he believes each season takes on its own identity -- and this one has yet to take its shape.

"This is the 2013 season, 2014 postseason, and it's its own chapter," he said. "We're looking forward to hopefully writing it for a number of more weeks."

# Moreno Makes Sports Illustrated Cover

By Gray Caldwell  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- For the Divisional Round of the NFL playoffs, Sports Illustrated put together several regional covers.

One of them highlights the Broncos -- specifically running back Knowshon Moreno.

Moreno's career year has been covered as recently as this morning on DenverBroncos.com, but the SI story -- written by Tim Layden -- focuses on the emotions Moreno showed just before kickoff of the Broncos' Week 13 showdown with the Kansas City Chiefs at Arrowhead Stadium.

CBS cameras caught Moreno with tears streaming down his face during the National Anthem.

"You saw those tears and you wondered, What makes a player cry like that before a game? Especially a player like Knowshon Moreno, who is finally thriving in the NFL," Layden writes. "In addition to his rushing stats, he caught 60 passes for 548 yards, by far the best in his career, and three more TDs. And he did this for a team with 13 wins and home field for as long as it survives in the AFC playoffs — Denver will face the Chargers on Jan. 12 — peaking- with a 37-carry, 224-yard game in the bitter cold against the Patriots on Nov. 24."

"It's always been that way for me, all the way back to high school and college," Moreno said of the emotional moment. "During the anthem it's always quiet and still, so I take in the moment and say a little prayer. Usually there's no camera on me. I thank the Lord for letting me play the game. I thank Him for everything. I run through my whole life right there at that moment. Even the bad stuff."

# Broncos Part of Massive NFL Ratings

By Brandon Moree  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — Since the start of the 2013 regular season, 34 of the top 35 most-watched television programs were NFL games.

The Broncos played in 10 of the top 25 of those games, with six games in the top 15 and two in the top five.

Denver's win in Dallas on Oct. 6 was the Broncos' most-watched game, as it was viewed by 28.3 million people – the fourth-largest TV audience of the season. The second matchup with the Chiefs came in right behind the Dallas game with 28.1 million viewers, putting that game fifth on the list.

The only non-football game on the list of the top-35 most watched programs was the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, which came in 22<sup>nd</sup> place with 25.2 million viewers.

Though the parade garnered a sizable TV audience, it was still just the third-most watched program of the day as the Packers-Lions game on FOX and drew 28.3 million viewers and the Raiders-Cowboys game on CBS set the high-mark for the season with 31.8 million viewers.

For the season, 205 million unique viewers tuned into NFL games this year, representing 81 percent of television homes and 70 percent of potential American viewers according to the Nielsen Company. An average of 17.6 million people tuned in to each telecast, a number bested by only the 2010 season, which averaged 17.9 million.

Just like last season, in each of the 17 weeks, an NFL game was the most-watched program and for the fourth consecutive year Sunday Night Football was the most-watched program of the fall season. The Week 17 SNF showdown between the Eagles and the Cowboys that decided the fate of the NFC East had 27.4 million viewers, making it the ninth-most watched game of the season and the most-watched primetime game in regular-season history.

Monday Night Football was the most-watched series on cable for the eighth consecutive season. Thursday Night Football on the NFL Network had its best season with an average of 8.1 million viewers, making it the most-watched Thursday Program on cable.

# Phillips Ready For Former Team

By Brandon Moree  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – Defensive end Shaun Phillips is the Broncos' team leader in sacks with 10 of them for 77.5 yards lost. He's registered 13 quarterback hits, defended five passes and forced a pair of fumbles this season.

He's become a leader on the Denver defensive line.

But a year ago he was a Charger, and Sunday his path will cross with San Diego's for the third time this season. Only this time the stakes are much higher.

"For me, it doesn't matter what team it is," Phillips said. "It just happens that it's the Chargers on the schedule. But of course I'm excited – it's your old team. You always want to play against them. And they're playing good football right now, so it's going to be a great challenge for us and it's going to be a great challenge for them."

In the first meeting between the two teams this season – Phillips' return to San Diego – the Broncos won 28-20 and Phillips sacked his old teammate, quarterback Philip Rivers.

When the two teams met again in Week 15, Phillips again sacked Rivers, one of his two tackles on the night. Phillips is looking forward to continuing that streak Sunday against a player that he has been competing with since before they both entered the NFL in 2004.

"We go back from the Senior Bowl, we used to jaw at each other, to me beating him at dominoes," Phillips said. "He's just a competitor and he hates to lose. And that is good. That is what makes him a really good quarterback. But we also have a bunch of guys on defense that hate to lose, as well. So that is why it's going to be a fun challenge for both sides of the ball."

Phillips was drafted in 2004 by the Chargers and played the first nine years of his career as a division rival of the Broncos. In the offseason before the 2013 season, Phillips signed with the Broncos with fellow Chargers Louis Vasquez and Quentin Jammer.

Sunday he'll line up across from the Chargers again, something that he said is a motivating factor for him – evidenced by his two sacks of Rivers this year.

"Yeah, it's definitely a chip on my shoulder," he said. "I think I've had good games both times we played them. I always want to play well every game. Again, for me,

it's no hard feelings because they're a great organization. They brought me in, they drafted me and they treated me well. So I'm not saying anything negative at all.

"But of course, anytime you play against your old team, you always have a little chip on your shoulder, a little extra edge to get after them. And that is what's going to happen."

# Moreno Carrying Career Year Into Playoffs

By Brandon Moree  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – Nearly five years ago, running back Knowshon Moreno was selected 12<sup>th</sup> overall by the Broncos in the 2009 NFL Draft.

At the end of the 2013 regular season, he stands as the only Bronco in team history to finish a season with more than 1,000 rushing yards and 500 receiving yards.

But the road between those milestones has been anything but smooth.

“I think it says a lot about his makeup and how he just stuck to it,” Head Coach John Fox said of the running back’s 2013 season – his first 1,000-yard rushing campaign.

“We brought in different backs throughout that time. I wasn’t here for his whole five years so I can’t speak to when I wasn’t here, but since I’ve been here I’ve seen a remarkable change in just how he prepares and how he performs.”

In his first season, he led the Broncos with 947 yards on 247 carries and had nine total touchdowns in 16 games. He led the team in rushing again in 2010 and pulled in a then-career high 37 catches, but an ACL injury shortened his 2011 season.

At the start of the next season, Moreno was behind Willis McGahee on the depth chart, and by Week 3 he was listed as inactive and stayed there until McGahee suffered a season-ending injury in Week 11 against the Chargers.

After eight weeks of scout-team and special-teams duty in practice, Moreno was re-activated.

Since that time, Moreno has been one of the best running backs in the NFL. From Week 12 of 2012, when he took over as the starting back, through the 2013 season, he ranks seventh in the NFL in rushing yards and fifth in rushing touchdowns.

“I guess it did (motivate me) a little bit, but at the same time, it’s a business,” Moreno said earlier this season of his inactive status in 2012. “Sometimes you can’t control everything that happens. You only can do what you can do just to make yourself better. At that time I was just trying to make the team better by doing special teams and doing scout work for the offense.

"I never got down or anything. I have some great teammates that had my back at all times."

In the final six games of the 2012 season, Moreno tallied more than 500 yards and three touchdowns and despite missing some of OTAs recovering from injury, he came back in 2013 even stronger.

Not only was he the team's leading rusher, he finished the regular season with the fourth-most rushing yards in the AFC. With three receiving touchdowns in addition to his 10 on the ground, Moreno tied for fifth in the NFL for touchdowns this season.

Moreno's fifth NFL season has been, unquestionably, his best.

Eight times this season Moreno had more than 100 combined yards and he set a new career high at New England with 224 rushing yards. Twice he had a multi-touchdown game, including in Week 6 against Jacksonville when he found the end zone three times.

When the dust settled on the 2013 regular season, Moreno had set new career highs in starts, rushing yards, rushing touchdowns, catches and receiving yards while tying his career mark for receiving touchdowns.

And through all of those touches, he didn't lose a single fumble.

"I think I've said it before," quarterback Peyton Manning said. "He has just been just a rock for us back there. He has been a downhill runner, has run hard, has been excellent on the screen, he catches the little 5-yard passes and turns them into 10-and-12-yard gains. He is always going downhill and my opinion is that that is tough for a defense when a guy is downhill as opposed to side-to-side.

"I think he's delivering a lot of blows and he's been just rock solid for us all season and I'm very happy for him."

But now, the regular season has expired and the Broncos have turned all of their attention to the postseason and all those numbers, stats and records from the regular season have been rendered meaningless.

"It's like the first game all over again," Moreno said. "Beginning of the season, things are sped up that much faster. It's a one-game elimination."

Moreno said that the key for the success of the running game this year has been focusing on consistency and not trying to do too much. Taking what the defense gives was another point of emphasis.

As simple as they sound, those can be challenging for a player who plays with a high amount of energy and emotion. No moment better exemplifies Moreno's

intensity than when cameras caught tears streaming down his face in the minutes leading up to the Broncos game in Kansas City.

But that emotion is part of what makes him a great teammate – that and his unselfishness.

“I still think he has his moments on the field where he gets a little fired up, and that’s a good thing though,” Offensive Coordinator Adam Gase said. “We want to see that out of our guys. We can tell he cares a lot about (football), it means a lot to him. He wants to make sure he does the best he can for his teammates—he’s such a team player. He never says anything about, ‘Hey give me the ball,’ or ‘Can I get more touches?’ He never says anything, and I know there have been a few situations where we probably should have stayed with him or gone to him more.

“He’s always just done what we’ve asked him to do and that’s really been impressive.”

Gase went on to praise Moreno’s maturity, something that has been evidenced by both his increased production on the field and his role as a leader off of it.

Moreno said earlier this season that whatever question the younger running backs have, he’s answered.

But the next question he must answer will be asked by the Chargers defense Sunday in the Divisional Round of the AFC playoff. Moreno acknowledged that it would be a tough game, but that’s exactly what the team is preparing for.

Moreno’s only other playoff experience came a year ago, but that game is the last thing on his mind.

“I’m not worried about last year, to tell you the truth,” he said. “I’m ready for this year, ready for this new season. Last year is last year. Let’s get it going this year.”

# What They're Saying: McCoy, Rivers

By Mike Morris  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 8, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The year has changed – and so have the stakes – but for Chargers Head Coach Mike McCoy, the approach to Sunday's AFC Divisional Round playoff game against the Broncos in Denver remains no different from when the teams last met a month ago at Sports Authority Field in Mile High.

"It's another game to us," McCoy said during a conference call with the Denver media on Wednesday. "When you look at it, we're going to play the same. It's another game you've got to go in and play. We're going to do what we do, the coaches are going to put their best game plan together, and go out and have the players execute it."

The Chargers emerged from that Dec. 12 showdown with the Broncos victorious – just as they have in each of their last five games. Last Sunday, they went into Paul Brown Stadium in Cincinnati and defeated the NFC North-champion Bengals 27-10 – traveling a course that has led them from being on the verge of elimination from playoff contention at the onset of December to a January rematch with the Broncos, with a trip to the AFC Championship Game on the line.

"I think they've done a great job of buying in, working extremely hard, having good weeks of practice," McCoy said. "That's where we've been, as you mentioned, for the last six weeks of the season and everyone is in that same boat right now. Everybody is in the same boat of 'It's all or nothing' and, 'If you lose, you're done.'"

For Philip Rivers, the gut-check that the Chargers underwent after dropping to 5-7 after a 17-10 loss at home to Cincinnati on Dec. 1 caused the veteran quarterback to question whether San Diego would miss the postseason for a fourth consecutive year – after making the playoffs in each of his first four seasons as a starter from 2006-2009.

"When you're sitting at 5-7 and even when we got to 7-7, there's no denying, it's human nature—you have that thought in the back of your head that, 'Are we going to be four years in a row out of the postseason and another year is going to pass?'" Rivers said. "There was never that quit in us, but that thought crosses your mind."

Instead, the Chargers responded by reeling off four consecutive victories – including a 27-20 win over the Broncos in Week 15 – and then knocked off the Bengals on the road in the Wild Card Round. It's a late-season surge of momentum that Rivers noted is beneficial for the Chargers entering their biggest game to date – but also a momentum surge that, alone, won't clinch a victory on Sunday.

"Certainly the emotion factor is positive," Rivers said. "We're playing with a lot of confidence, but at the same time, it's challenging and you've got to sustain it. But I think it's not very hard getting in this round of the playoffs to be mentally prepared, focused and excited. I don't think that's a problem as far as from a mindset standpoint – us fading. Obviously we've got to go play our best game to date to find a way to win this game."

It's a task that Rivers and the Chargers were able to achieve last Sunday in Cincinnati. Despite only attempting 16 passes, Rivers threw a key third-quarter touchdown pass to tight end Ladarius Green that gave the Chargers a 14-10 lead they would never cede – and San Diego rushed for 196 yards in reeling off 20 unanswered points.

"I think we just played it the way we had to win the game," Rivers said regarding the Chargers' win in the Wild Card Round. "That's what the objective is all the time but especially in playoff football you just find a way to win, whatever that may be."

He was quick to add, however, that he doesn't anticipate the Chargers' offensive attack against the Broncos on Sunday will shake out the same way.

"I wouldn't expect that there will only be 16 attempts this week," Rivers said with a laugh. "But obviously, see how the game goes."

In the Chargers' Week 15 victory over the Broncos, San Diego held the ball for a nearly 18-minute advantage in time of possession and kept Denver's offense on the sidelines for much of the game. McCoy noted, however, that San Diego's plan entering the third matchup of the season (the Broncos defeated the Chargers 28-20 in Week 10) won't necessarily be the same.

"The plan changes each week and you go with the flow of the game and see what you're doing well at that point and time, 'What do you think going to the game plan of what are you going to expose, how are you going to attack a certain team?'" McCoy said.

One of the keys in that game – running back Ryan Mathews, who rushed for 127 yards and a touchdown in Week 15 – will again be in action for the Chargers.

"He is going to be healthy on Sunday," McCoy said.

He also updated the status of center Nick Hardwick, who was injured in last week's game.

"He's working through the normal protocol like everybody does when you get (a concussion)," McCoy said.

And while Rivers will once again play counterpart to Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning on Sunday, the Chargers quarterback noted that the game isn't about

their individual matchup – and that their head-to-head history has no bearing on this game.

“It’s not me versus him by any means and this is a new team and he’s in a new place, new deal—I think all those things,” Rivers said. “I know history there’s certain records and things as far as how you stack up against certain opponents and you mention since I’ve been here what our record has been in Denver, but I really think every game stands alone and all that stuff throws out the window, especially in a playoff game.”

Similarly, McCoy noted that his own familiarity with Manning – after working with the quarterback during the 2012 season, when he was the Broncos’ offensive coordinator – wasn’t the reason for the Chargers’ victory Week 15. Instead, he cited his team’s execution on the field – which he noted will again be crucial to determining how the Chargers fare on Sunday.

“We could call out every play, or call out every defense, whatever it is,” McCoy said. “The players have to go out and execute it. Peyton is good enough, he knows where to go. He sees a certain coverage and knows where to go with the ball. So it’s all the players, give the players all the credit for the way they played last time. We’ve got another big test against them this week. We’ve got to play our best to win.”