

Kiszla: Broncos' Champ Bailey is far from the "I'm finished" line

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
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Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey knows what people think: He's washed up. Old. Broken down. A step slow. A 12-time Pro Bowler reduced to a defensive liability.

"I've listened to the radio. I've read the newspaper. And I've heard all these things: 'He's done. He's lost a step. Yada, yada, yada,' " Bailey told me Thursday. "It's funny. Because those people don't know me, they don't understand me, and they don't know what it takes to play in the NFL. So I took it all in stride. But it's all motivation. I used every little thing I heard as motivation. Did I ever think I was done? Hell, no."

For 14 NFL seasons, Bailey was the league's premier shut-down corner. He threw a blanket on the best receivers in football with the flair of a matador, and made his artistry look effortless.

Then something funny happened to Bailey this year. The bull got Champ. His body betrayed him. And it hurt.

Check that. For Bailey, his 15th NFL season hasn't been the least bit funny.

"I'm not going to cry about it. It was bad. But I feel good now, and I'm ready to go," Bailey said. "A lot of my motivation for getting back to playing had nothing to do with anybody around me. It was just me. It's just the way I am. You're not going to tell me I can't do something."

At age 35, Bailey got torched deep by Father Time. During the team's second game of the preseason, the turf in Seattle bit Bailey in the foot. It was a Lisfranc sprain, which causes pain in the arch with every step a man takes. It's an injury that has been cursed for centuries, all the way back to a time when calvary men in Napoleon's army suffered the curse of Lisfranc, the prescribed remedy was amputation.

"I had a million thoughts go through my head with this injury. And I've never had to deal with something like this. This was definitely my toughest challenge of my career. I wanted to see if I could overcome it," Bailey said.

In the most obvious of ways, this is the worst football season in Bailey's brilliant NFL career. He couldn't get on the field. In 16 regular-season games, Bailey made only 14 tackles. Reduced to a footnote on Denver's 13-3 record, he lost his starting job at outside cornerback, a position built on equal parts swagger and skill.

In a more subtle way, however, this season reveals why Canton, Ohio, eagerly awaits the honor of swinging wide the front door to welcome Bailey's entrance into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

From fighting the betrayal of an aching body to suffering the indignity of standing on the sideline in his uniform at Kansas City as the Denver defense hung on for a 35-28 victory against the Chiefs, there were ample reasons for Bailey to cry tears of self-pity. But the best defensive player in franchise history refused to let any of us see him sweat.

The grace with which Bailey has stared down his athletic mortality is the very definition of mental toughness and a testament to his professionalism.

"It hasn't been easy," Bailey said. "I was ticked. I was frustrated. But I live with it. So I'm going to make the best of it."

When San Diego beat Denver 27-20 on Dec. 12, Bailey didn't play a down. But, to the credit of the coaches and the veteran cornerback, the Broncos have figured out a way to do right by Bailey and improve the team's maligned defense at the same time.

Bailey has moved inside to nickel back, reducing the number of snaps he plays in a game, while leaving the task of running stride for stride with receivers on the outside to Chris Harris Jr. and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie in a Denver secondary that extensively employs man-to-man coverage.

"I've always been a mainstay out there on the field, but it's not like that now. I accept it," Bailey said. "I'm not going to sit here and predict what's going to happen next year. But I expect to start every year."

Early in 2011, shortly after John Elway returned to the Broncos as vice president of football operations, Bailey could have left the team. He decided to stay. Loyalty in pro sport? It's rare. But it still exists.

"I could have run out of here. I was a free agent," Bailey said. "But I wanted to be here in Denver. And Elway wanted me to be here. I wanted to be a part of what Elway started with this team. I didn't see this guy touching anything and being a loser. He hasn't lost in football."

At age 35, Bailey knows the end to his career is inevitable. But he's not done yet. Far from it.

For starters, there's a Super Bowl to win.

Wesley Woodyard guarantees Broncos will be ready for Chargers

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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The belief was the Broncos were flat. Their intensity wasn't there. They weren't crazy about playing a Thursday night game.

That had better be the case, because the San Diego Chargers manhandled the Broncos in their Dec. 12 meeting at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

On both sides of the ball.

"We've been talking about it this whole week. That was the last team to come in and beat us," said Broncos wide receiver Demaryius Thomas. "Basically, they did everything better than we did."

The Chargers beat the Broncos that night 27-20, and it wasn't that close. San Diego went ahead 24-10 early in the third quarter, and the Broncos didn't make it interesting until Peyton Manning threw his second touchdown pass to Andre Caldwell nearly five minutes into the fourth quarter.

The Broncos and Chargers will be meeting for the third time this season when they play Sunday in Denver. The winner advances to the AFC championship game, which will be played Jan. 19. The loser is finished.

"Honestly, looking at that (Dec. 12) film, we weren't at our top, we weren't at our best," said Broncos linebacker and co-captain Wesley Woodyard. "Anytime we play those guys, it's going to be a close game. It's one of our greatest rivalries. They were a great team a few years back and they're still a good team now, so it's always going to be that up-and-down battle. But I guarantee we're going to be ready this week."

Welker's worth. In their first 13 games with Wes Welker in the slot, the Broncos were 82-of-170 on third down (48.2 percent). In their first two games without Welker — against San Diego and Houston — the Broncos were only 4-of-20 on third down (20 percent).

Welker is back from his concussion injury and will play Sunday.

"The main thing is, they played us a certain way because we didn't have him, I think," Thomas said. "With him back, I think they'll try to switch it up. You never know. But our main thing is, it's another threat on the field that can help us."

Dominance defined. The Broncos-Chargers game Dec. 12 was especially lopsided in the running game. The Chargers had a whopping 44 rushing attempts for 177 yards. The Broncos had 11 carries for 18 yards.

Those numbers scream out how San Diego dominated play at the line of scrimmage on both sides of the ball.

"It's not one thing that they did that got us off there," said Broncos running back and Sports Illustrated cover boy Knowshon Moreno. "They did a lot of things. Blitzing, stunts, everything — and made plays doing those things and got us off the field."

Injury report. Defensive lineman Derek Wolfe (seizurelike incident) and safety Rahim Moore (leg) were the only Broncos who didn't practice Thursday.

John Lynch makes football hall of fame cut; Karl Mecklenburg, Terrell Davis out

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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Former Broncos safety John Lynch has made the Pro Football Hall of Fame cutdown to 15 modern-era finalists.

Lynch was a 15-year safety who played the final four seasons of his career (2004-07) with the Broncos. He played his first 11 seasons with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, including their Super Bowl championship season of 2002.

There was disappointment in the Hall of Fame announcement Thursday as three other former stars — running back Terrell Davis, safety Steve Atwater and defensive end-linebacker Karl Mecklenburg — failed to make the cut from 25 semifinalists to the final 15.

The modern-era ballot will eventually be cut from 15 to five for Hall of Fame election Feb. 1.

"First, I want to say for T.D., I understand longevity plays a part in it, but to be the best player in the league for two or three years, I think is a Hall of Famer," said Lynch, who is in Seattle preparing to cover the Seahawks-New Orleans Saints playoff game for Fox.

"And then I want to say I'm extremely honored that I was able to make it this far. It's a helpless feeling going through a process like this, and I'm humbled by this."

Terrell Davis gets snubbed by Pro Football Hall of Fame again

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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Former Broncos running back Terrell Davis has been eligible for the Pro Football Hall of Fame since 2007. All seven years he has come up for vote, Davis has made the modern-era semifinalist list to 25.

All seven years he has failed to take the next step to the final 15. Clearly, lack of longevity is hurting Davis.

He had but four seasons for Hall of Fame voters to consider. Here's what he did in those four seasons:

1995: 1,117 yards, 7 TDs
1996: 1,538 yards, 13 TDs
1997: 1,750 yards, 15 TDs, Super Bowl MVP
1998: 2,008 yards, 21 TDs, NFL MVP

Four very good seasons; three great seasons in which he was the best running back in the league.

My thought is if Davis can "get in the room", meaning where the 46 Hall voters gather to discuss the 15 finalists on the eve of the Super Bowl, he will get serious consideration because of his incredible postseason record.

In eight postseason games, from 1996-98, Davis rushed for 1,140 yards — 142.5 yards per game. Ridiculous. Absurd. He gained 91 yards in his first playoff game, then had seven consecutive 100-yard games.

Any running back who can average 142.5 yards per postseason should have his bust bronzed in Canton.

Even in playoff week, all back to normal for John Fox, Broncos

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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As John Fox sauntered over to the sideline for his five-minute bull session with the media, all was back to normal for the Broncos.

There had been reason to wonder earlier in the week.

During practice Monday and Wednesday, Fox, the Broncos' head coach, skipped his usual visit with local members of the Fourth Estate (or toy department as many members of the Fourth Estate consider sports media).

Instead, Fox stayed on the practice field as his players and coaches went through position drills. What was going on here, playoff week?

The Broncos do play the San Diego Chargers in an AFC second-round playoff game Sunday at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Taking on the personality of their coach, Broncos practices Monday and Wednesday seemed to demonstrate heightened intensity.

The team seemed loose on Thursday. What does it all mean? Probably nothing. Kickoff is scheduled for 2:40 p.m. Sunday. May the best team win.

More significantly for the Broncos is they will be as healthy as possible for the game. The only Broncos player not participating in practice Thursday was defensive lineman Derek Wolfe, who has been essentially out since suffering a seizure-like episode Nov. 29 on a team bus ride to DIA.

Wolfe won't play Sunday. Neither will Von Miller, Ryan Clady, Kevin Vickerson or Rahim Moore. But injuries have also been part of the Broncos' routine this season.

Did Chargers try to pull a fast one with Nick Hardwick?

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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Apparently, I diagnosed Nick Hardwick's concussion much faster than the San Diego Chargers.

I was watching the Chargers-Cincinnati Bengals playoff game Sunday when CBS showed a replay of Hardwick, San Diego's veteran center, clearly staggering, much like a boxer who has been knocked woozy in the ring. I immediately said to myself (there was no else in the living room with me): "The Chargers can't deny a concussion after that replay."

And then come to find out, the Chargers tried denying it. The Chargers announced Hardwick suffered a recurrence of a neck stinger. He didn't come back in, so no big whup. But it wasn't until Wednesday that the Chargers came clean on Hardwick's concussion.

I know Chargers coach Mike McCoy. He oozes integrity. He's honest. And as the Broncos well know, he's a heckuva coach. But this disconnect with the medical staff cannot happen. Not with concussions. Not in today's watchdog NFL world it can't.

"He's working through the normal protocol like everybody does when you get (a concussion)," McCoy told the Denver media during a conference call Wednesday. "During the game he had his stinger, so he was working with that the whole game. Then after the game in the locker room and doing everything they diagnosed him with a concussion."

How the Chargers confused Hardwick's stagger with a stinger, I'm not sure. Earlier this season, in a game Nov. 17 at Sports Authority Field at Mile High, the Broncos' medical team was treating a neck injury to slot receiver Wes Welker only to take him out a couple minutes later for a concussion. But Welker didn't stagger, and as he lay on the field he was referring the medical team to his neck.

And the Broncos announced the concussion before the next series. Still, the Broncos received some guff for not immediately diagnosing Welker with a concussion.

It took the Chargers' medical team a couple more days to determine Hardwick's concussion. Based on the stagger I saw, Hardwick's concussion was not mild. It was obvious.

Secondary ticket market slow for Broncos-Chargers playoff game

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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If you're not a season-ticket holder, money is tight but you're dying to watch the Broncos play in an AFC playoff game, this is the week to go.

The Broncos got upfront playoff money from 96 percent of their season-ticket holders and the remaining 4,000 tickets sold out in roughly 30 minutes. But thousands of those ticket buyers have been trying to resell for this week's game against San Diego Chargers in hopes of: a) raising money to pay off the Christmas bill, and b) saving up for the really big event that would be the AFC championship game Jan. 19 against the New England Patriots (or Indianapolis Colts).

The resell ticket market inventory for the Chargers' matchup, though, has so far been greater than demand.

"It definitely is struggling," said Roger Jones of Alliance Tickets. "Everybody is selling their tickets. I've got tickets right now in my office, upper level are selling for \$140. Lower level are selling for \$225. And you can get a 50-yard line ticket for under \$400."

Those prices are still above face value, but it's not like they're going for three mortgage payments as many big games command.

It didn't help that the Broncos just played the Chargers last month at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

"It's just not a hot ticket," Jones said. "I have an office in Seattle, and the Saints played there on a Monday night in December. That game was crazy. But this game, all week long we struggled. The game isn't good up there, either."

"What happens when you're the No. 1 seed, people are looking ahead and going, 'I'll take the money (for the second-round game), watch it on TV and wait for the championship game.'"

Jones figures the secondary market would explode if the AFC championship game pits the Broncos and Peyton Manning against the Patriots and Tom Brady. It would also do well if the Broncos met Andrew Luck and the Indianapolis Colts in the championship but not near as well as the Manning-Brady game would command.

Broncos Q&A: How many times has a division sent three teams to the playoffs?

By Joan Niesen
The Denver Post
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This one comes via Twitter from @danlewismedia, and the answer is five, including this season, which has seen the AFC West's Broncos, Chiefs and Chargers all make the postseason. That answer comes with one caveat, though: I'm just looking at seasons dating back to 2002, when the NFL broke each conference into four divisions from three.

Here are the other instances:

2006 season, 2007 postseason: The Eagles (10-6), Cowboys (9-7) and Giants (8-8) all made the playoffs out of the NFC East.

2007 season, 2008 postseason: The Colts (13-3), Jaguars (11-5) and Titans (10-6) all made the playoffs out of the AFC South. The Cowboys (13-3), Giants (10-6) and Redskins (9-7) all made the playoffs out of the NFC East. The Giants, the first wild card, eventually won the Super Bowl.

2011 season, 2012 postseason: The Ravens (12-4), Steelers (12-4) and Bengals (9-7) all made the playoffs out of the AFC North.

Broncos forced to overcome attrition on defense in NFL playoffs

By Joan Niesen
The Denver Post
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The story begins with No. 54, with a 24-year-old nobody. His name is Brandon Marshall. His Wikipedia page doesn't even have a photo, and Dec. 29 he was playing for the Broncos.

Playing five days after being promoted from the practice squad, where he spent the season's first 16 weeks.

Playing on defense, not even special teams, albeit in garbage time.

This season, the Denver defense has been plugged with replacements, caulked with other teams' castoffs. There's a defensive end who doubles as a rapper and was cut by the flailing Jaguars in November. There's the NFL's lone remaining XFL player. There's undrafted players and rookies, and there's Marshall.

He got his improbable shot on a defense with its sights realistically set on the Super Bowl, and if that sounds crazy, you haven't been paying attention.

By the numbers, the Denver defense — ranked 19th in yards allowed this season — doesn't even deserve to make the playoffs, except that these playoffs are teeming with poor defenses throughout the AFC: the Patriots, the Chargers, the Colts. The Broncos have a chance. In fact, the odds are in their favor — even if the numbers aren't quite.

Let's start with 21, as in 21st, as in the ranking, in terms of yards allowed, of the 2006 Colts' defense. That's the season Manning won the Super Bowl, not the 2002 season, when he had the eighth-best defense, or 2007, when he had the third-best. Not in 2012 with the Broncos, when Von Miller and company vaulted the Denver defense to second-best in the NFL in yards allowed.

"When he was with the Colts ... at times they were depleted, but Peyton Manning always seemed to elevate the players that were available to play," said ESPN analyst Herm Edwards, a former NFL cornerback and coach.

It's a two-way street, though. Manning's presence often redefines the approach his defenses face. Teams have learned that the way to beat Manning is to run, run, run and keep Manning off the field while further exhausting his team's defense.

Also, paying Manning and his high-flying offense can mean less money to pay for defensive players. The financial concern hasn't really been the case in Denver,

though, where instead it's been fax machines, ACLs, marijuana, compartment syndrome, a seizure and more.

It's been a weird season.

"We're still professionals," said defensive end Shaun Phillips, who earned a starting job at Robert Ayers' expense. "It's 'next man up.' We have a bunch of guys eager to play football and who love learning to play football. We all piggyback on each other and help each other."

Miller injury hurts

Which brings us to the next number: four. That's how many players who will start in Sunday's home playoff game against the Chargers were expected to be defensive starters this season.

Only linebacker Danny Trevathan, safety Duke Ihenacho, defensive tackle Terrance Knighton and cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie topped the depth chart in the summer, and the defense's two leaders, Wesley Woodyard and Champ Bailey, are relegated to specialized roles because of lingering injuries.

Then there's the injury. The big one. The one that if you'd told anyone about a year ago, they'd have said it would break the Broncos. It's Miller's ACL. No matter the suspension, no matter his slow easing back into competition, there's no way around it.

Chargers coach Mike McCoy spelled it out as clear as day in a conference call with Denver media this week.

"Von is one of the best players in the league," McCoy said. "He's very talented."

Edwards is a Miller fan too.

"He's a threat," he said. "He's a guy that you're concerned with, because he can come off the edge, and this is a game where when you open up the formation to create matchup problems for your defense, the way you counter is you have to have an edge guy."

Signs of improvement

Even so, the loss might not doom the Broncos. Miller had five sacks in nine games this season. The rest of the defense had 36, giving the Broncos a total of 41 — not quite last year's league-leading 52, but still a perfectly respectable number, good for 13th in the NFL and just above the league average.

So the pass-rush pressure has been there much of the time. The coverage just hasn't, at times, and a run defense that was the best in the NFL to start the season

— at least on paper — fell off to seventh in terms of yards allowed. There were moments at midseason when the defense looked bad — very bad — but even if three of the Broncos' final four opponents had losing records, Denver's defense finished strong.

Against the Titans in Week 14, the defense allowed 254 yards, the fourth-fewest Tennessee put up all season.

The next week, in a loss to the Chargers, it allowed only 337 yards, the Chargers' fourth-fewest of the season.

The same held in Week 16, with Denver allowing only 240 yards to the Texans.

Then, in Week 17, Oakland managed only 255 yards, its second-fewest of the season.

It's not a perfect indicator of improvement — one could argue that Oakland and Houston, at least, had checked out — but it's something.

According to Knighton, it's the start of something.

"The defense is at a point right now where we're ready to prove that we can be a great defense and get us to this championship," he said. "You play hard in the regular season to put yourself in a good position for the playoffs.

"It's the reason it's called the regular season and the postseason. It's two different seasons. We have to play at an elite level to win the Super Bowl, and that's what we're going to do."

Don't even think of suggesting that it's too late.

Taking a look at the Denver "D"

Analyzing Denver's defense heading into Sunday's playoff game against the San Diego Chargers at Sports Authority Field at Mile High:

Defensive linemen

Denver's defensive line has seen injuries and illness sideline two starters, Derek Wolfe and Kevin Vickerson. Also, Shaun Phillips moved into a starting role during the season after Robert Ayers was named a starting end at the beginning of the season.

As a unit the group has been solid, although its numbers against the run were perhaps inflated early in the season. ESPN analyst and former NFL player and coach Herm Edwards said that if he had to pick one player as the MVP of the Broncos' defense this year, it would be Phillips, who finished the regular season with 10

sacks and 32 quarterback hurries. As a unit, the defensive line accounted for 41 sacks this season, good for 13th in the NFL.

Linebackers

Denver's linebacking corps was perhaps the most changed unit as the season evolved. The team knew it would be missing Von Miller — who's technically listed as a linebacker — for its first six games with his suspension, but it had no idea that a nagging injury would reduce Wesley Woodyard's role. His replacement, Paris Lenon, wasn't even on the Broncos' roster to start the season.

There has been a pleasant surprise — or development, depending on your perspective — among the linebackers. Danny Trevathan has emerged as a leader at the position with Wood-yard's reduced role. Apart from Miller, Trevathan has graded out the highest among Denver linebackers on Pro Football Focus, ranking 11th among outside linebackers in 4-3 defenses.

Cornerbacks

Without Champ Bailey for much of the season and with him now relegated to a limited role, the Denver cornerbacks look different than they have in almost a decade. Chris Harris was a bonus in terms of his production, though, stepping into Bailey's slot with more consistency and effort than anyone could have expected. Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, the other starter, has been solid in a season when he was asked to prove himself or move on. And rookie Kayvon Webster, despite rocky patches, has shown a lot of promise.

Rodgers-Cromartie and Harris graded out among the top-10 cornerbacks in the NFL on Pro Football Focus, making the Broncos the only team in the league to have two starting cornerbacks among the top 10.

Safeties

When it comes to pass coverage this season, the Denver safeties have been the weaker link. Duke Ihenacho still is growing into his role. Rahim Moore was fine, but not great, before his injury. Mike Adams provided a spark later in the season when he stepped into a starting role, and having a veteran presence among the group seems to have helped.

On the season, the Broncos allowed 4,070 yards passing, sixth-worst among NFL teams.

Denver Broncos' turf is as obsessed-about as the players

By Susan Clotfelter
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You think you've got lawn challenges.

Do you have a nearly thousand-pound equine mascot galloping across your turf to stop on a dime? A couple dozen boot-wearing dancers spinning and kicking on it? Cleat-wearing, millions-earning athletes twisting, charging and crashing on it?

Ross Kurcab has all of that. And multiple millions of spectators ogling it, in person or on TV.

The Denver Broncos turf manager and his team of 13 grass gurus are responsible for making sure this field of dreams is up to scratch. If he does his job right, he's certain some sportscaster, somewhere, will say, "The field looks great today!"

Which makes him inwardly groan, just a tiny bit.

"It's not for looking at," he said. "The question is, how's it gonna play?"

The play's the thing

Homeowner, cut yourself some slack. The high-profile swath of emerald at Sports Authority Field at Mile High is not like your lawn. Repeat: Not anything like it.

Recall, if you will, the dun- brown field at Lambeau last weekend in Green Bay in which the 49ers squashed the Packers.

That grass wasn't dead. It was "fully dormant," said Kurcab. That means the plants had basically hibernated for a time, waiting for warmer temperatures (something above zero, perhaps) and longer days to send up new green shoots.

"But that field played fantastic," Kurcab said. A sports field manager's priorities are safety and playability. Appearance is always third. Not unimportant, but third.

Nor was the Packers' field frozen. Like Mile High, it has miles of heating pipes underneath it. Frozen ground "is a player safety issue," said Kurcab, who's held his title for 30 years. Think expensive, potentially career-ending injuries. Then think twice about playing your next touch-football game on a frozen or drought-baked park field.

NFL fields have to meet tight standards for shock absorption. In addition to frequent testing by Kurcab's team, an independent monitor for the NFL strolled the field this week at Mile High with a simple, yet fairly precise gizmo that looks like an oversized tire pump, taking hardness readings.

Traction gets measured, as well, with a gauge that pushes cleat-like blades into the turf, then tries to turn them. That measurement is less precise, and there are no standards it must meet, Kurcab said. "But we can compare ourself to ourself" with readings from other games.

Players like a lot of traction; they don't want to slip. Too much? Some research says there's potential for injury. It's an evolving and inexact science, he said.

The year-round crop

Your lawn is grown in soil, or what passes for soil in Colorado. But the Broncos' field is grown in what's best described as a cross between a giant sponge and a 100-yard slab of lasagna.

From the bottom up, irrigation pipes and heat pipes (21 miles of the latter) wind through 4 inches of half-inch-diameter pea gravel. A 10-inch thick layer of 90 percent sand, 10 percent peat and porous ceramic granules, tops the gravel. The 10-inch layer provides the turf's long, intertwining roots with both good drainage and water-holding capacity. From this ideal medium emerge the tender leaves visible to gamegoers.

There's more you don't see: Running vertically through the root zone, and peeking out only about a quarter-inch above the soil, is the turf's deep-green secret: bundles of thin, polypropylene fiber. There is one four-fiber bundle in each square three-quarters of an inch — 30,000 miles of fiber throughout the field — to stabilize it. The Dutch-made turf reinforcement system, called GrassMaster, was a six-figure purchase Kurcab spent two years researching and selecting.

"It's a great system, because it resists divots and tearing," he said. And it lets him boast that the Broncos play on 100 percent real grass.

But once again, it isn't like your grass at all. Most lawns are a blend of grass varieties. The Broncos' field has one type: fast-growing perennial rye. Because grow fast it must.

With the GrassMaster system in place, patches of worn-out turf (midfield wears out faster than end zones) can't just be dug up and replaced. "We have to re-establish the grass cover from seed," Kurcab said. So they do just that, whenever time between games allows.

The grass you'll see Sunday was overseeded four weeks ago, the day after the Dec. 12 game with the San Diego Chargers (of which, let no more be said).

Some of the seed was presoaked in buckets of water on the turf shop's warm floor. The morning after the game was planting time for both wet and dry seed. Planting wet seed is handwork: Humans walk the field, flinging seed, because "once it's wet, it's like sticky rice — it gums up the machine," Kurcab said. The seeding machine then pokes holes, spreads the dry seed and moves all the seed into the holes. Then it is watered (Toro irrigation heads, with moisture, temperature and salinity sensors) and fertilized.

The field can't be kept too wet and warm — referred to as "juiced" — or fungus can start. And it can't get too dry. "You can always tell grass is trying to drought out," said assistant turf manager Chris Hathaway. "It'll start to get a purple cast."

So they watch it. Check it. Cover and uncover it. "Read and react," said Kurcab.

Showtime

Every day, 24/7, the weather dictates almost every moment of what goes on with the Broncos' turf. But as the countdown to game time continues, the stakes and pressure rise.

Last weekend's snow and cold snap meant the turf team rolled out loosely woven covers onto the field on Jan. 3, before bad weather arrived. They managed to get the covers down before the wind began gusting. Sometimes waterproof tarps are laid out to keep the field from becoming too wet.

Hathaway and Kurcab — neither of whom have lawns of their own to stress over — watch multiple forecasts daily and pay Skyview Weather for morning updates and consultations.

In Monday morning's sunshine, it was time for Hathaway to roll back the permeable covers to reveal the tender, 1- to 1.5-inch-tall leaves of green. "We'll probably mow tomorrow," Hathaway said, "but hold off on the water."

In the guts of the stadium, Kurcab fired up a blower that forced warm air up through the field. You could see the thin rime of snow on the growth covers began to lose its grip.

Wednesday, the team painted logos on the grass. More days of testing, monitoring and the chore of clearing every speck of snow from the stadium (per NFL rules) lay ahead.

And more watching. "Read and react," Hathaway echoed.

On Game Day, the turf's dance card will likely be full starting at 5 a.m. with live media shots. It will get a fresh mowing, time and weather allowing. (The forecast calls for a dry, 43-degree game.) The 14-member turf crew will set up goalposts

and benches and yardage pylons, heaters and nets, other fixtures of the field, making ready for pregame and the 2:40 p.m. kickoff.

Sometime in the fourth quarter, if all is going well, Kurcab might pay attention to the score.

Until then, "I watch from the knees down," he said.

Hochman's Mailbag: Broncos defense, Tecmo Bowl and "Major League"

By Benjamin Hochman
The Denver Post
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On Thursdays, sports columnist Benjamin Hochman presents his mailbag, which touches on both sports and popular culture. To submit a question for consideration, send an e-mail to Benjamin or find him on Twitter.

@abohlim: who do you think will be the 2 heroes on defense/special teams for Sunday's game, given the Broncos win?

BH: What's up, Al? A fun question for sure. Obviously a lot of this is just a guessing game, but the storyteller in me hopes that one of the defensive heroes is Champ Bailey. He fared well in the previous two games, playing in the nickel, and maybe, just maybe, we'll see one more glimpse of the old Champ — and in these playoffs, when it matters most.

Football is constantly moving forward. We're always looking ahead to who will play, how the teams will match up, etc. If a guy's not able to play, we don't spend too much time thinking about him. As such, Champ has been a yesteryear afterthought for the majority of the season. We all cherish his Hall of Fame accomplishments, but this year, he's just been a banged-up guy who couldn't carve his niche.

And of course, Champ will want to redeem himself after his last playoff game, in which Torrey Smith torched him. I can't sit here and guarantee anything from Champ Bailey, but I can say that he sounds like he's healthier now than he's been all season. So if anything, perhaps we'll see a Champ we haven't seen in the 2013 season.

Another name I'll throw out is Terrance Knighton. The loquacious but menacing defensive tackle was Denver's second-highest rated defensive player this season on Pro Football Focus (behind the injured Von Miller), penetrating the pocket often. He also tallied one of his three sacks this season in the win against San Diego on Nov. 10.

@mizzoupoke: When the Broncos win the SB this year, who do u think Pat Bowlen will say this one is for? Or will Elway say "This one's for Pat!"?

BH: I can TOTALLY see that happening. Very creative and fitting. Now let's just see if they can get by San Diego.

Here are two ridiculous but intriguing stats:

- The last three Super Bowl champs won 10 or fewer regular-season games. The Chargers are the only team left that can extend that streak.
- The past FOUR Super Bowl winners played at Philadelphia in the Eagles' home opener that year. This year, Philly's home opener was against, yep, San Diego. (This tidbit was courtesy of San Diego Union-Tribune columnist Kevin Acee.)

@brettggraham: at the South / Kennedy hoops game, just watched a kid untie another's shoe - coach went nuts - refs were in disbelief - no call

BH: Of course, this is a reference to former Nugget J.R. Smith, who twice tried to untie an opponent's laces while they stood waiting for a free-throw attempt. I know it's kind of funny to some, but it's super bush league in my opinion. I am ALL for silly, creative stuff. But this could have an effect on the outcome of a play, if a guy trips on a shoelace. And that play could have an effect on the outcome of a game. I'm sure the J.R. "Mensa" Smith wasn't thinking about the integrity of the game when he did that, but maybe he will now that he was fined \$50,000 by the NBA (Smith later apologized on Twitter).

J.R. was the NBA's sixth man of the year last season, but this season, he's been horrid at times, as has his Knicks team. I saw an ESPN report that said the Knicks were looking to trade him to another team, which made me wonder — perhaps the only team that would want this guy is Dennis Rodman's.

@robjordan: 13' Broncos v 88' Raiders in Tecmo Bowl. Who wins?

BH: Oh, mama! This would be an epic game. As many know, Bo Jackson was as close to unstoppable as any athlete in video-game history. But the deep pass was a killer on Tecmo Bowl, and with so many weapons, I can see Peyton Manning upstaging Vincent Edward.

@PierrePelican: Heywood leads the league in most offensive categories, including nose hair. When this guy sneezes, he looks like a party favor.

BH: HA! My followers and I had a fun Twitter discussion Wednesday night about the movie "Major League," which was airing on MLB Network. I still say "Bull Durham" is the best baseball movie ever, no offense to the Matt LeBlanc vehicle "Ed," but "Major League" is top five, loaded with brilliant lines.

Here's my favorite:

One thing that caught my eye during the viewing. So Jake Taylor calls the signal in which he will point to the fences, like he's calling his home run shot, and then he'll bunt. When he does so, Willie Mays Hayes (on second base) takes off with the pitch, and scores on the play. BUT — the first pitch after the called shot is a

brushback to Taylor, and Hayes doesn't take off with the pitch. So that was possibly a base-running mistake by WMH, swept under the rug with the team swept over by excitement following the RBI bunt single on the following pitch.

Also, little-known fact: The Rockies picked Roger Dorn in the expansion draft.

Elway hits another jackpot in free agency

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — John Elway followed up possibly the best free agent signing in NFL history — Peyton Manning — with another jackpot this season.

Wes Welker and Louis Vasquez helped transform the Broncos offense into the highest-scoring team in the Super Bowl era, and a bevy of defensive signings helped rescue a unit that was hit hard by injuries and illness.

Vasquez, a fifth-year right guard lured from AFC West rival San Diego, earned All-Pro and Pro Bowl honors after anchoring an offensive line that allowed the fewest sacks in the NFL (20) this season and produced a league-high six games without allowing a quarterback takedown.

Welker, pried away from Tom Brady in New England, caught a career-high 10 touchdown passes despite missing the final month with a concussion, one of a record five Broncos to reach the end zone 10 or more times.

None of the other seven teams still playing has more than one "go-to" player who has double-digit TDs.

Although Welker (two years, \$12 million) and Vasquez (four years, \$23.5 million) were the cornerstones of the Broncos' free agency haul, Elway, the team's executive vice president, signed a slew of others who also played big roles in helping the Broncos go 13-3 for a second straight season.

Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie (\$5 million), Terrance Knighton (two years, \$4.5 million), Shaun Phillips (\$1 million), Quentin Jammer (\$1.1 million) and Paris Lenon (\$940,000) all turned into big bargains.

They kept a depleted defense functioning through a rash of ailments that claimed starters Von Miller, Rahim Moore, Kevin Vickerson and Derek Wolfe and also turned captains Champ Bailey and Wesley Woodyard into backups.

"We brought in good guys and these guys have been effective for us all year," Bailey said. "And I thought T-Knight should have made the Pro Bowl. I thought DRC should have made the Pro Bowl. I mean, that's the type of years they had."

Last month, Elway signed Jeremy Mincey when he was released by Jacksonville and the defensive end has helped the Broncos shore up a run defense that was exposed by running back Ryan Mathews and the Chargers (10-7), whom they'll face again Sunday in the AFC Divisional playoffs.

Elway's philosophy is to build through the draft but to add veterans to fill the gaps but only if they're "guys that will fit in that locker room the right way."

Elway doesn't want anybody who will put individual desires ahead of team goals and spoil the chemistry.

This locker room may be chock-full of superstars but there aren't any super-sized egos or self-centered jerks.

Mincey, who was released by the Jaguars after missing two team meetings and falling out of favor with a front office that gave him a four-year, \$20 million contract last year, had to pass muster in Elway's eyes before he was brought on board.

The Broncos reached out to the Jaguars and determined a change of scenery and a reunion with Denver defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio, who was his head coach when he had his best seasons in Jacksonville, would rejuvenate his career.

"Peyton knew exactly who I was when I walked into the locker room and welcomed me with open arms and said, 'We need a guy like you around,' and I said, 'Appreciate it.' That made me feel really good from a guy like that," Mincey said.

Knighton, who also played with Mincey in Jacksonville, said he's been nothing but a pro's pro since his arrival in Denver.

A trio of the free agents — Phillips, Jammer and Vasquez — were long-time Chargers who will be facing their former team this weekend.

Vasquez signed at the start of free agency and he was the only free agent named All-Pro this season, giving Elway arguably the best free agent signing two years in a row.

Phillips came on board over draft weekend to replace Elvis Dumervil and he led Denver with 10 sacks.

Jammer, a starter for the last decade with the Chargers, started just one game for the Broncos this season, and that was only because Rodgers-Cromartie sent him out in his place in San Diego on Nov. 10, unbeknownst to the coaches.

Jammer is like the other free agents in that he was lured by the chance to play with Manning. Unlike the others, he hasn't seen the field much. But he harbors no regrets.

"I'm trying to win a ring," he said. "I can't be picky."

Shaun Phillips anxious to face Rivers, former team

By Pat Graham
Associated Press
January 10, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — Shaun Phillips definitely knows this much about former teammate Philip Rivers: He runs his mouth about as well as an offense.

The Denver Broncos hybrid linebacker-defensive end certainly appreciates that, because Phillips is quite a talker, too. He figures the best way to quiet the San Diego quarterback is simply by sacking him. That's the plan anyway when Phillips goes up against the Chargers, his former team, on Sunday in an AFC divisional game.

Actually, Phillips and Rivers have some history with jawing at each other, dating back to playing in the 2004 Senior Bowl.

"I think I chased him out of bounds or something like that, and I was like, 'You better run out,'" Phillips recounted. "He was like, 'What are you going to do?'"

And then they each end up being drafted by the Chargers — Rivers fourth overall and Phillips in the fourth round. Their squawking back then remains a running joke between them.

No joke, though, is the respect Phillips has for Rivers. He's making sure his teammates on the Broncos' defense are on high alert as well.

Not that they need any advanced warning. Rivers is 10-6 all-time against Denver, throwing for 3,830 yards and 27 TDs.

"He's just a competitor and he hates to lose," Phillips said. "That's 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's why it's going to be a fun challenge for both sides of the ball. It's football. And it's playoff football.

"So the excitement is there, the atmosphere is going to be set and it's going to be a good game."

Phillips is one of three Chargers going against their former team, along with All-Pro offensive guard Louis Vasquez and defensive back Quentin Jammer.

"Anytime you play against your old team, you always have a little chip on your shoulder, a little extra edge to get after them," Phillips said. "And that's what's going to happen."

Phillips came on board with the Broncos over draft weekend to replace Elvis Dumervil and he led Denver with 10 sacks, including two against the Chargers.

Since his arrival, the 6-foot-3, 255-pound Phillips has brought a little swagger to Denver's defense. He became a vital component to Denver's success with Von Miller's early season suspension and even more now that Miller's sidelined with a knee injury.

"He's a true competitor," linebacker Wesley Woodyard said. "A dominant guy for the Chargers for a long time."

No arguing that. He had 69½ in his nine-year tenure with San Diego.

"I'm pretty sure he's pretty amped up to get back out there," said Woodyard, whose team split with the Chargers this season, with each squad winning on the road. "I'm definitely glad to say that I'm happy he's on our team."

Phillips is sure to give Rivers an ear full on the field. It's just the nature of their relationship.

Still, he thinks Rivers sometimes draws a bad reputation for his fiery emotions.

"Everyone thinks he's talking trash, saying cuss words and stuff like that," Phillips said. "The guy doesn't even curse. But he is competitive."

To fans in the Mile High City, Rivers is sometimes viewed as public enemy No. 1. Rivers understands the animosity, but tried to thaw the ice a little bit.

"I have a great respect for Denver and that atmosphere and those fans and that organization, so there's no hatred from my end," Rivers said. "There's respect there, from my standpoint. I don't know if that goes the other way or not. Again, I love playing there and I'm looking forward to it."

Phillips feels the same way. Fittingly — at least for him — the road to the Super Bowl goes through his former team.

"I'm not even going to jump down the Super Bowl road yet," Phillips said. "If we beat San Diego, then we can worry about the next step. But right now, we're going to focus everything on stopping Rivers, Ryan Mathews and the receivers that they've got. And that is all that is on our mind right now."

"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."

Chargers-Broncos Capsule

Associated Press
January 9, 2014

SAN DIEGO (10-7) at DENVER (13-3)

Sunday, 3:40 p.m. EST, CBS

OPENING LINE — Broncos by 9½

RECORD VS. SPREAD — San Diego 10-6-1, Denver 11-5

SERIES RECORD — Broncos lead 58-49-1

LAST MEETING — Chargers beat Broncos 27-20 on Dec. 12

LAST WEEK — Chargers beat Bengals 27-10; Broncos had bye

AP PRO32 RANKING — Chargers No. 13, Broncos No. 2

CHARGERS OFFENSE — OVERALL (5), RUSH (13), PASS (4)

CHARGERS DEFENSE — OVERALL (23), RUSH (12), PASS (29)

BRONCOS OFFENSE — OVERALL (1), RUSH (15), PASS (1)

BRONCOS DEFENSE — OVERALL (19), RUSH (7T), PASS (27)

STREAKS, STATS AND NOTES — First time the longtime division rivals are meeting in the postseason. ... Chargers held the ball for nearly 18 minutes longer than Broncos in 27-20 win on Dec. 12, the only home loss of the season for Denver. ... San Diego led the league in 10-play drives (39). ... First-year head coach Mike McCoy knows the Broncos well after spending four seasons in the Mile High City as offensive coordinator. ... QB Philip Rivers is 10-6 against Denver, throwing for 3,830 yards with 27 TDS and 12 interceptions. He's 6-2 in Denver. ... RB Ryan Mathews ran only one time in the second half at Cincinnati because of an ankle injury. Mathews was the only back to top 100 yards on the Broncos in the regular season, gaining 127 yards on 29 carries last month. ... Mathews rushed for a career-high 1,255 yards in 2013, the eighth-best performance in franchise history. ... WR Keenan Allen set rookie team records in receptions (71) and yards (1,046). ... The Broncos captured their 13th AFC West title this season, moving past Oakland (12) for most among division members. San Diego has 10. ... Coach John Fox is the fifth coach in NFL history to secure division titles in his first three seasons with a team. ... Denver finished the regular season with an NFL-record 606 points. ... QB Peyton Manning set league records for yards passing (5,477), TDs (55) and

first downs through the air (289). ... Manning is 167-73 in the regular season and 9-11 in the postseason. ... WR Wes Welker missed the last meeting with San Diego due to a concussion. He's been cleared to play. ... The Broncos are the first team to have five receivers catch at least 60 passes. WR Demaryius Thomas led the way with 92 receptions. ... Denver also is the first team to have five players with at least 10 touchdowns in a season: Thomas (14), Knowshon Moreno (13), Julius Thomas (12), Eric Decker (11) and Welker (10). ... Moreno had 10 TD runs and 3 TD catches. He also topped 1,000 yards rushing for first time in his 5-year career with 1,038 yards. ... CB Champ Bailey missed both games against San Diego this season with a nagging foot injury.

Chargers tasked with stopping Manning again

By Bernie Wilson
Associated Press
January 9, 2014

SAN DIEGO (AP) — The Chargers stunned the Denver Broncos five weeks ago, making Peyton Manning look average and claiming a road victory that was part of a late-season surge that helped sweep San Diego into the playoffs.

They'll have to do it again Sunday in a divisional-round game against the top-seeded Broncos in Denver to keep their January joyride going.

"We're going to come in there with a vengeance and see if we can shock the world again," Pro Bowl safety Eric Weddle said Thursday.

As much as the Chargers' offense contributed to the 27-20 victory at Denver on Dec. 12, defensive coordinator John Pagano came up with a game plan that helped frustrate Manning and the high-powered Broncos.

The Bolts held the Broncos to season lows in points and total offensive yards (295). The Broncos had only 18 yards rushing.

The Broncos were forced to punt on four straight possessions in the second and third quarters, a streak that started with three straight three-and-outs.

"It's always a challenge for us as a staff for putting those things together when you see an opponent for the third time," Pagano said. "There's so many things that they know about us and we know about them. It really comes down to between the lines, players going out and executing. Sometimes you can't worry about, 'Oh, they've seen this before, or done this before.' You've just got to go out and execute. If players go at a high level no matter what the call is and we got execute, you're always going to have that success.

"We know each other so well that you've got to disguise a little bit and change it up a little bit."

Pagano said the Chargers communicated well, didn't give up big plays and tackled well.

"When you do those three things defensively, it always gives you an opportunity to win."

While Manning is 3-1 against San Diego since coming to the Broncos, the Chargers eliminated the Manning-led Indianapolis Colts from the playoffs following the 2007 and 2008 seasons.

Pagano said every game is different and can change on one play.

He mentioned a big play in Sunday's 27-10 wild-card victory at Cincinnati. With the Bengals driving for the go-ahead score in the second quarter, inside linebacker Donald Butler forced Giovani Bernard to fumble after a reception just before halftime Sunday, with San Diego's Richard Marshall recovering in the end zone.

"When Donald made that caused fumble down there in the red zone, the football universe rotated and it switched," Pagano said. "Those are the things that change for you. Each game's different. We've got to go out and we've got to execute. All the success of the past staffs and past players have had, you hope to play at a high level like they did before."

Nonetheless, there's something special about playing Manning.

"He's the best. He's one of the greatest to ever play our game," Pagano said. "It's how we are every Sunday, though. It's the No. 1 offense. It's the greatest offense to ever play in the National Football League, yards-wise, production-wise. It's a big-time challenge, in a hostile environment, that our guys are getting their minds right and getting focused on."

The December victory at Denver was special in a lot of ways for Pagano.

When rookie coach Mike McCoy awarded game balls in the locker room, the first one went to Pagano.

His father, Sam, watched from the sideline. Pagano and his older brother, Chuck, coach of the Colts, played for their father at Fairview High in Boulder.

Sam Pagano will be on the sideline again Sunday.

"He'll be right down there, guarding the heaters, like always," John Pagano said. "He's always right there. Anytime you can get him down on the field, it's exciting."

Also Thursday, Ken Whisenhunt, who's in his first season as San Diego's offensive coordinator, refused to confirm reports that he'll be interviewed this week by Detroit, Tennessee and Cleveland for their head coaching vacancies.

"I understand the process and I appreciate the interest, but I just want to make sure everyone understands we're focused on the game Sunday," Whisenhunt said.

How can he focus with three interviews in as many days?

"It's not hard," he said. "It's a playoff game. That's where the focus has been. Anything outside of that has been secondary."

Asked if he bought a house here or is renting, he said: "I've enjoyed living here."

Whisenhunt was offensive coordinator with Pittsburgh when the Steelers won the Super Bowl after the 2005 season. He coached Arizona into the Super Bowl after the 2008 season, losing to the Steelers.

McCoy doesn't think Whisenhunt's busy interview schedule will be a distraction or keep him from preparing for the game.

"I have complete confidence in our entire staff that there's one goal in mind. That's to find a way to win this game. That's been our mindset and we're not changing that," McCoy said.

Looking for Super Bowl tickets? You pay, they play

By Rick Freeman
Associated Press
January 9, 2014

NEW YORK (AP) — Welcome to the Super Bowl, where demand always beats supply and the teams don't really matter.

The NFL championship game is one of the largest sports and entertainment spectacles in the world. The teams aren't exactly afterthoughts, but tickets are going to move quickly no matter how popular the two contenders are.

In fact, the number printed after the dollar sign on the front of a Super Bowl ticket has about as much in common with the price paid by its holder as the point spread does with the final.

Less, actually — the point spread is at least an informed prediction that comes from the bookmakers' observations of previous events and the price the public will pay to bet its teams.

So, as we near the big game on Feb. 2 at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., let's take an inside look at the ticket trade.

HOW MUCH? Even on NFL.com, users in search of tickets are directed to a resellers' website, operated by Ticketmaster. On Thursday night, the cheapest ticket available was over \$3,000. (The league also conducts a lottery to purchase tickets for \$500. These cannot be resold.)

On Stubhub, people were willing to part with seats for a little more than \$2,500, 24 days and an hour before kickoff. Needless to say, these were all in the nosebleed sections. But fans eager to lock down seats now would probably be advised to wait.

"What were probably going to see is over time, the closer we get to the game, the more the prices will drop," said Smita Saran, Stubhub's senior spokeswoman.

Saran said that before last year's game, Stubhub was receiving searches for tickets up to an hour before kickoff.

She also pointed out that fans who purchase on Stubhub have access to a tailgate party where they can pick up their tickets in the parking lot — they'll even give fans a lift there from New Jersey or Manhattan.

But that all depends on someone pulling the trigger on a major purchase.

WHO'S PLAYING? The teams in the game should have some bearing on the price. Large fanbases close to the New York City area — think New England — could cause demand and prices to rise. Three West Coast teams are still alive in the playoffs, and no matter how ardently supported the San Diego Chargers, San Francisco 49ers and Seattle Seahawks are, being a continent away from seeing the game in person will probably thin the horde's ranks.

The remaining teams in order of proximity to Newark Airport, just down the turnpike from the Meadowlands, are the Carolina Panthers (from Charlotte, N.C.), Indianapolis Colts, New Orleans Saints and Denver Broncos.

The halftime show is set. That'll be Grammy-winner Bruno Mars. The 28-year-old pop star isn't as venerable as some of the heavy hitters to grace the halftime stage in the past — Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, the Rolling Stones and Paul McCartney have albums older than he is — but he should be a bigger draw than Up With People.

WHAT'S THE WEATHER LIKE? Regardless of what team is in the game, one more major factor could affect prices — the weather forecast. If the prospect of playing outside in 40-degree weather (the average for East Rutherford, N.J.), doesn't seem so bad, that could be because most of the United States just experienced a polar vortex with nighttime temperatures getting down into the single digits.

As this is the first Super Bowl outdoors in a cold-weather city, there's no data on how a cold snap affects interest in tickets, but after the polar vortex, it's probably safe to assume demand would not be strong to sit outside for four hours or longer on a cold night in northern New Jersey.

WHAT ABOUT TRAFFIC? New Jersey is not known as the easiest place to drive. And that was before Gov. Chris Christie's administration was found to have arranged for intentional traffic jams for political retribution.

After previously assuring the public that his staff had nothing to do with the lane closings in September that caused major backups at the George Washington Bridge, Christie said he had to fire an aide. His news conference to address the scandal made national news three weeks before his state is on display for the world as host of the Super Bowl.

That said, no governor can control New York City area traffic, but the state's transportation authority will be running trains on a new line completed ahead of the stadium's 2010 opening. An armada of buses will also be available, and organizers are discouraging drivers — the host committee website even refers to parking as "4th and Long."

X-FACTOR: If after all of that, fans don't feel like shelling out a paycheck (or two) for the chance to brave traffic and weather to watch the Super Bowl from the upper deck, there's one more consideration — you can't watch the Puppy Bowl at the stadium.

When a captain does more than wear the C

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 10, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Captains are leaders, they set the tone, keep the train on the tracks. They have the votes to wear the C on their jerseys, they push when a push is needed, sometimes they pull to make sure everybody keeps up.

And for two of the Denver Broncos' captains that has meant an adjustment with their own parts of the big picture.

There's Champ Bailey, 12-time Pro Bowler who has never had a question mark next to his name as a starter until this season. And there's Wesley Woodyard, the first player since Hall of Famer Floyd Little to have been named a captain in his first five seasons with the team even before he was named captain yet again in this, his sixth season.

And neither is a defensive starter for the Broncos these days. In the Broncos search for answers on defense, a search that has taken most of the season, Bailey and Woodyard now find themselves as situational players handling their business with the same level of football professionalism they always have.

"Yeah it was definitely not how I scripted out in the preseason but injuries do that and it is what it is," Bailey said. "I'm moving forward. I'm happy about the role I'm in now. I think I'm effective there so whatever helps us get over that hump and win this first game."

Bailey missed all but five games this season with a left foot injury he suffered in a preseason loss in Seattle. In his second game back in the lineup -- Oct. 20 in Indianapolis -- Bailey re-aggravated the injury and missed the next four games.

When he came back, again, against Kansas City Dec. 1, Bailey was not himself, said he didn't have "confidence" in his foot. The Broncos held him out two more games and when he returned the Broncos brought him back as the team's nickel cornerback with Chris Harris and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie in the starting spots.

It means Bailey, a fixture on the outside, in the left cornerback spot, is now in the slot, working the middle of the field with skills he believes he can contribute to the job.

"I feel like I'm a good cover guy, I can tackle, you name it," Bailey said Thursday when asked when he can bring to the job. "I can do anything, what else do you want me to do?"

Granted, it was two struggling offenses, but the Broncos had two of their best defensive outings of the season in Weeks 16 and 17 when Bailey was in the nickel role as they allowed 255 and 240 yards to the Texans and Raiders respectively.

For Woodyard, who was moved into the middle linebacker spot early in the season because the Broncos needed him to, suffered a stinger in the Oct. 6 win over the Dallas Cowboys. He missed the next two games and when he returned the Broncos thought something was missing as the defense continued to struggle at times in its base 4-3 look against opposing running games.

So, the Broncos moved Woodyard out of the base defense, cutting his snaps some, with the belief he would play that much better in the nickel and other specialty packages.

"And I just come to work to be the same Wesley Woodyard, I've always been," Woodyard said. "If you're a leader, you're a leader, not just sometimes. I feel like I'm one of the leaders and I feel like that means you're an example, you do what needs to be done."

The Broncos have other players who were long-time starters in their careers in other places, players such as cornerback Quentin Jammer, safety Michael Huff and even Rodgers-Cromartie -- he's had three games with 32 or fewer snaps this season -- who have played in different roles as the Broncos have dealt with a variety of injuries to go with some struggles in slowing opposing offenses along the way.

Defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio said it's been a necessity as the Broncos had just two players -- Harris and linebacker Danny Trevathan -- top 900 snaps this season. That is a far different look than the Broncos sported last year when they had eight players top 900 snaps.

Del Rio believes it takes a player willing to look at the whole plan to see what's needed and that not every veteran player is up to the task.

"I think that's just the natural progression of it," Del Rio said. "Some people do it well and are very professional and great teammates and remain that and some struggle with that. We're fortunate that we have guys here that understand that winning the game is most important -- understanding what they need to get done for us on Sunday is what's most important. Sometimes you have to put personal ambitions aside and think more in terms of the team and less in terms of your individual self."

"All that matters is winning games," Bailey said. "... It's different, not something I expected, but I've always said individual things are great, Pro Bowls and all that, but I want a ring, I want to play for a ring and you need a team to do that."

Lynch makes Hall cut, other Broncos wait

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- In the free agency season of 2004, then-Broncos head coach Mike Shanahan wanted leadership, experience and some playoff chops in the locker room.

So, Shanahan traded for Champ Bailey and, much like John Elway did last year with Peyton Manning, Shanahan took a chance on a guy coming off neck surgery -- a guy named John Lynch.

Lynch, who played 11 seasons in Tampa Bay and the final four years of his career with the Broncos, was the only player with Broncos ties to make the cut for the final 15 finalists for the Pro Football Hall of Fame's Class of 2014.

The 15 modern-era finalists will be trimmed at the meeting of the Hall's Board of Selectors the day before the Super Bowl.

Former Broncos linebacker Karl Mecklenberg, former Broncos safety Steve Atwater and former Broncos running back Terrell Davis made the cut to the 25 semifinalists, but none of the three were chosen as finalists.

The Broncos, with four Hall of Famers -- John Elway, Gary Zimmerman, Floyd Little and Shannon Sharpe -- continue to be under-represented in the Hall for the team's success level.

They have six Super Bowl appearances as an organization, yet just the four Hall of Famers. Davis, Atwater and Mecklenberg remain on the modern-era ballot.

Broncos' Miller has surgery to repair ACL

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Denver Broncos linebacker Von Miller had surgery Thursday to repair his torn right ACL, the team has confirmed. The procedure, performed by a surgeon in Dr. James Andrews' group, was completed and the Broncos' training staff had been notified by late Thursday afternoon.

Miller

Miller's recovery time is expected to take between six to nine months. Miller, sporting a brace on the knee for support in recent days, has been receiving treatment at the Broncos' facility since he suffered the injury last month.

Miller tore the ACL in his right knee midway through the first quarter of the 37-13 victory over the Houston Texans in Week 16. Miller underwent an MRI the following day and the exam confirmed what some team officials had feared after the game.

His recovery is expected to keep him out of the team's offseason program and likely at least some of training camp. Miller played in only nine games this season. He was suspended the first six games for violating the league's substance abuse policy.

Miller left the Dec. 22 game after his leg buckled as he was fighting to get off a block on a 3-yard completion from Matt Schaub to Keshawn Martin.

Miller finished the season with 33 tackles and was fourth on the team in sacks with five. The third-year linebacker has 35 career sacks, fifth-most in the NFL since his rookie season of 2011, according to ESPN Stats & Information.

Nate Irving has played in Miller's strongside linebacker spot in the Broncos' base defense while the Broncos have used Robert Ayers more in Miller's absence in pass-rush situations.

Broncos' Moreno a storm before calm

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- His tears have their own Twitter handle, and his teammates will usually answer any question about him with a shake of the head and laugh. But Denver Broncos running back Knowshon Moreno took a few minutes Thursday to talk about his emotional style and, yes, those tears that have landed him on the cover of Sports Illustrated.

"I think it was awesome," Moreno said. "It's a cool thing ... it looked pretty sweet."

Make no mistake. Moreno, who just authored his first career 1,000-yard rushing season in the Broncos' record-setting attack, is the fire in the Broncos huddle. In the smooth efficiency of the Broncos high-end, 606-point attack this season, Moreno has usually been easy to spot.

Whether it's his usual pre-game march to the middle of the field, gestures, shouts and all, or his usual, almost immediate post-play bounce from the ground back to the huddle, Moreno's emotions are now on display and getting noticed in his climb to a 1,000-yard rusher with 60 receptions.

None more so than the now life-of-their-own, pre-game tears he shed in Kansas City last month.

"He'll spark it up any time," offensive coordinator Adam Gase said following Thursday's practice. "You never know when it's coming, but his energy level is great to be around."

Gase said he hasn't considered asking Moreno to dial it back.

"No, you let him do his thing, he never goes too far overboard," Gase said. "He knows where the peak is and he'll level out and come back down."

For his part, Moreno says he has always been this way and seems a little surprised at times that the rest of the football world is just catching on in this, his fifth year with the Broncos.

Asked Thursday if having to leave last January's playoff loss with a knee injury will add anything to this year's postseason, Moreno said: "No extra juice. I'm always juiced to the top."

Wide receiver Demaryiyus Thomas has said that it's impossible to calm Moreno down during a game. Moreno's response?

"I think I'm mostly talking to myself," before adding quickly with a smile "I don't

know if I should say that ... I'm just excited to be part of this team."

And if the Broncos do indeed win their way to the Super Bowl, Moreno will certainly be a popular talking point in those hype-filled days leading up to the title game. He played prep football in New Jersey and still has plenty of family in the area.

But more importantly for the Broncos, there's a good bet Moreno will have played a big part in the team getting there.

"I'm excited about the position we're in," Moreno said. "But at the same time we've got to go out there [Sunday], make plays and come out with a victory."

Chargers will see healthier Broncos

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The Denver Broncos will look far differently, especially on defense, when they face the San Diego Chargers this time around.

Defensive end Derek Wolfe continues to be the only player on the 53-man roster who has not practiced this week. Wolfe was held out of Thursday's practice and will not make his return to the playing field in Sunday's Divisional-round game.

But everyone else on the roster is available and continued to work Thursday.

Wide receiver Wes Welker, who missed the last three games of the regular season, including the Dec. 12 loss to the Chargers, continues to be on track to play. With Welker out, The Chargers were able to limit Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning's ability to get the ball to Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker, and Julius Thomas in last month's game.

The two Thomas' and Decker caught just three passes combined after halftime in the loss. That will be far more difficult to do with Welker in the lineup.

"I'm sure (Welker's) missed playing," said Broncos coach John Fox. " ... He is an extreme competitor, I'd say it's fair to say he's pretty excited."

But defensively, the Broncos will also offer a different look. Cornerback Champ Bailey did not play in either game against the Chargers this season, and his presence has enabled the Broncos to have more variety in coverages and tighten things down of late. Bailey has played largely in the nickel (five defensive backs) since his return to the lineup in the regular season's final two games.

"We'll be ready to go," Bailey said. " ... I feel good about where we are, I'm just ready to get to this game."

The Broncos held the Texans and Raiders to 240 and 255 yards, respectively, in the last two games of the regular season with Bailey playing in that nickel role. It has enabled defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio to have far more options in how he allocates the team's personnel. Bailey has received treatment for a left shoulder injury this week, but took part fully in Thursday's practice.

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, then practiced on a limited basis Dec. 27.

He has not practiced since.

Safety Duke Ihenacho and center Steve Vallos, who have suffered concussions in the final weeks of the regular season, took part fully in Thursday's practice, and both would be available for Sunday's game.

Chargers a playoff challenge for Manning

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Perhaps it's because Dave Logan is a former NFL wide receiver.

Perhaps it's because Logan's athletic life is something of a state landmark, having once been selected in the NFL, NBA and Major League Baseball drafts, or that the Broncos' play-by-play voice is also one of the most successful prep football coaches in the state's history.

By when Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning let down his well-rehearsed guard this season, when Manning pulled back the curtain on his emotions a bit it was to Logan in the moments following the Broncos' Dec. 8 win over the Tennessee Titans.

On a day when the kickoff temperature was 18 degrees, Manning had just blistered the Titans' defense on 39-of-59 passing for 397 yards and four touchdowns. And in a postgame interview with Logan, Manning simply said the people who said he couldn't play in the cold could take that "narrative" and "stick it where the sun don't shine."

Those who know Manning well were not surprised and they say, despite his perpetually calm demeanor in interviews, the narratives matter to Manning. Perhaps one of the most driven players to wear a helmet, Manning is often fueled by circumstances.

And at a time when his playoff record is making the rounds -- it's 9-11 -- there is also the matter of Sunday's opponent, the San Diego Chargers. The Chargers are 2-0 against Manning in playoff games -- to close out the 2007 and 2008 seasons, both against the Colts -- and the Chargers are one of three teams to have beaten Manning and the Broncos this season.

It's yet another narrative. And mix in the fact Chargers head coach Mike McCoy was Manning's offensive coordinator in Denver last season so he knows what the quarterback does and doesn't like in a game plan and from a defense.

Also consider that McCoy and Chargers defensive coordinator John Pagano put together a defensive game plan Dec. 12 that was essentially one of the best anybody authored against the Broncos this season. And while it is a testament to the Broncos' record-breaking season on offense that the 20 points scored in the 27-20 loss was their fewest of the year, the Chargers were the only team to limit the Broncos' offense to fewer than 61 plays in a game this season. And the Chargers did it in both games, including a season-low 53 plays in the Dec. 12 game.

Asked if his up-close-and-personal time with Manning helped in devising game plans, McCoy deferred to his players' efforts.

"Players play, coaches coach," McCoy said. "There are 11 guys out there on the field, they've got to play. We could call out every play, or call out every defense, whatever it is. 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."

Manning is in just his second season with the Broncos so many of his teammates are still adjusting to the swirl that follows the future Hall of Famer through a season. His sore ankle earlier this season was the stuff live updates were made of in the news cycle and some of his teammates simply shake their heads at all the fuss, even this week.

"I don't really think about it," defensive end Shaun Phillips said. "I try to worry about our side of the ball. Peyton is going to handle his business. He's been doing that for years. That's something -- when you're great, they're going to find something to nitpick at you. 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."

Manning did admit, like many of his teammates, that last January's double-overtime loss to the Baltimore Ravens, a one-and-done exit from the postseason as the AFC's top seed, provided plenty of fuel this season in many of the team's activities. But Manning has also consistently said if you're just ramping up your intensity now, with the playoffs underway, you probably weren't handling your business properly before that.

"I think we've kind of used that throughout the season," 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. 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."

"I think you just sort of focus on the now. I think we've prepared well throughout this season. I don't think you do anything differently here now that you're only one of a few teams left playing. It means you haven't been preparing the right way all along if you try to do something differently now. I'm not sure that you really look much past this season, the games you played against these guys, the games they played last week, our game we played a couple of weeks ago -- and kind of focus on that. I'm not sure any of the other stuff has a whole lot to do with what actually is going to occur in this game."

NFLN survey/feared player: Broncos

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 9, 2014

There are two words that most NFL people are usually highly averse to during a football conversation.

Folks don't often like the word "surprised," as in, "Were you surprised by [insert whatever was an issue in the previous game here]?"

And folks don't like the word "feared." So when a selection of the Broncos were asked about the league's most feared player, virtually all of them -- nine of 10 to be exact -- took it to mean a playmaker who was difficult to deal with down to down, not somebody who intimidated them.

So while Detroit Lions defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh got the nod as the league's most feared player in the NFL Nation Confidential, Suh got just one of the votes from 10 Broncos who responded to the question.

The winners among the Broncos were 49ers linebacker Patrick Willis, with an emphasis on his playmaking and the ability to affect games, and Suh's teammate in Detroit, wide receiver Calvin Johnson. A lot of people agreed with the Broncos leaguewide, given Johnson finished just behind Suh in the survey and Willis was fourth.

Two of the Broncos went with quarterbacks as their most feared players because, as one of the players put it, "They take everything from you," with Peyton Manning getting one vote and Tom Brady getting one vote.

For Broncos, it's all in their heads

By Ashley Fox
ESPN.com
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Surely it won't happen again, will it?

That is the fear in Denver. That is the overriding concern. The players know it. The coaches know. John Elway knows it. The Broncos' fans most definitely know it.

A big part of playing football is the mental aspect of the game. Players are valued not only for their physical prowess but also their mental toughness. How do they react to adversity? How do they handle success? How do they rebound from defeat? It is all a part of the game.

Denver will be playing the San Diego Chargers on Sunday in a divisional-round matchup, but the Broncos also will be trying to slay the albatross that has hung over the franchise since they lost at home to Baltimore 38-35 in double overtime a year ago.

This Broncos team, like that one, finished the regular season 13-3. This Broncos team, like that one, won the AFC West. This Broncos team, like that one, earned home-field advantage throughout the playoffs. This Broncos team, like that one, watched wild-card weekend from home.

And yet that Broncos team lost to a Ravens team that had limped into the playoffs, beat Indianapolis in a wild-card game the week before and was a 9½-point underdog against Denver. If that Broncos team had made one more defensive stop, just one more play, it would have won the game. It would have advanced. Then, who knows what would have happened?

The narrative changed when Jacoby Jones sprinted down the right sideline behind Broncos defensive back Tony Carter, who eased up, and caught the bomb thrown by Joe Flacco. It changed when Denver safety Rahim Moore leaped into the air and then tried to knock the ball out of Jones' hands, to no avail. It changed when Jones danced into the end zone, tying the game with less than a minute to play.

It is all still there, still fresh, no matter how sick the Broncos are of talking about it.

That's why this first playoff game is so dangerous. You can talk forever about the matchups, about Denver's so-called "five-10" club -- the five players who scored 10 or more touchdowns apiece this season -- about the record setting offense and about Peyton Manning's 55 touchdown passes. But this game could boil down to mental toughness, to who breaks mentally and who doesn't.

Denver will want to push the tempo early. It will want to get San Diego's defense on its heels and make the Chargers play from behind. It will want to turn San Diego into more of a one-dimensional offense, where Philip Rivers must throw and throw and throw to get the Chargers back in the game. That would aid a Denver defense that is playing without its top two pass-rushers from last season, Elvis Dumervil (now with the Ravens) and Von Miller (out for the season with an injury), and finished this season 19th in total yards allowed and 22nd in points allowed.

San Diego will want to replicate what it did in both regular-season meetings with the Broncos this season: control the clock. A lot of teams talk about how the best defense against Manning and all his weapons -- Demaryius Thomas, Knowshon Moreno, Julius Thomas, Eric Decker and Wes Welker make up the "five-10" club -- is a ball-controlling offense. Not a lot of teams can do it.

The Chargers did. Twice. And it wasn't even close.

In Week 10, San Diego lost to Denver 28-20 but kept the game close by dominating time of possession 38:03 to 21:57. On a Thursday night in Week 15, it was a similar story. The Chargers controlled the clock for 38 minutes, 49 seconds, and won 27-20. It was the fewest points the Broncos scored all season. Denver's offense can't score and dominate when it's standing on the sideline.

San Diego coach Mike McCoy and defensive coordinator John Pagano know this. McCoy worked with Manning his first season in Denver. He knows what Manning likes to do, and what he doesn't.

And McCoy also knows that if the Chargers can just hang in there and make a game of it into the second half, doubt could creep into the Broncos' minds. If the game is close in the third quarter and into the fourth, Denver could get tight. It is human nature. The mental part of the game is just as big as the physical.

For all of Manning's greatness, the prevailing theory among defensive coaches is that he often stumbles in the playoffs because he overthinks everything. He dissects everything. He doesn't just go out and let it rip.

Maybe that's right. Maybe it's not. But it speaks to the mental part of the game. And Manning knows the knock on him. He knows his postseason record does not reflect his regular-season greatness.

He wants to change that. He burns for another Super Bowl title.

The Broncos should roll over the Chargers. They should be able to do what Denver did in 1997 a year after it finished the regular season 13-3 but, coming off a bye, lost a playoff game to Jacksonville. They should be able to march to the Super Bowl and win it. They have the talent.

But this game is about more than having talented players. They have to be mentally strong, too. On Sunday, we will find out how mentally tough the Broncos really are.

Peyton Manning's playoff blemish

By David Fleming
ESPN.com
January 9, 2014

Several years ago when I attended the Manning Passing Academy in Thibodaux, La., one of the first people I sought out was Cooper Manning, the eldest of the Manning brothers. You see, as the third of four boys in my family, I understand better than most that if you really want the unvarnished, brutal truth about somebody, just ask their brothers. When I caught up to Cooper, I explained my theory on brothers-as-sources and then I asked him one simple question: After Peyton won Super Bowl XLI, had his notoriously intense, type-A, by-the-book, brother been able to, ya know, loosen up?

Nope, Cooper replied with a knowing chuckle. Not one little bit. Peyton's more Peyton than ever, he said.

This anecdote popped into my head the other day as I sat in front of my computer screen gob-smacked, trying to make sense of what is one of the more startling, and overlooked, stats of this season's NFL playoffs: Peyton Manning, the as-yet-to-be-named league MVP, has gone one-and-done in the postseason a record eight times, four more than anybody else.

For anyone who has enjoyed 2013, The Season of Peyton, something just does not compute. Was this the same guy who, at 37 after four neck surgeries, had just thrown for a record 5,477 yards and 55 TDs while setting a new and virtually unattainable standard of excellence for the art of quarterbacking?

That Peyton Manning? Eight oh-fers?

I mean, in Cincinnati, quarterback Andy Dalton has gone one-and-done three years in a row and they're already talking about running him out of town.

Is it possible that Peyton Manning, the greatest passer of all time, is somehow, secretly, the Buffalo Bills of playoff quarterbacking?

And, if so, with just a few days before the Broncos' first playoff game and Manning's potential ninth one-and-done, why the heck isn't anyone else talking about this? Are we all so mesmerized by his gaudy regular-season stats that we'd just ignore, possibly, one of the most remarkable performance anomalies in all of sports?

Maybe Manning is so good in the regular season he is able to cover up his team's flaws only to watch them get exposed against elite competition in the playoffs? Maybe he played great in these games and his teammates choked? Maybe the Colts and Broncos were underdogs in these games and not expected to win anyway? Maybe, from a historical perspective, losing your first game in the playoffs eight

times is no big deal and we should actually applaud him for getting to the playoffs so often (this is his 13th trip)? Maybe they just ran into a team of destiny, you know, like, eight different times?

Or, maybe, like Cooper had confirmed, Peyton's single flaw, his Achilles' heel, is the fact that the extreme parity and high stakes of the playoffs elevates the importance of the one quarterbacking quality he doesn't possess in droves: the risk-taking, go-for-broke, improvisational, gunslinger mentality.

There had to be some explanation. So, using data originally compiled a year ago by Grantland's Patricia Lee, I decided to get to the bottom of this by breaking down each of Manning one-and-dones.

See for yourself.

GAME 1: Jan. 16, 2000, divisional, Titans (14-3) at Colts (13-3)

Spread: Colts by 5½

Score: Titans 19, Colts 16

Manning performance: 19-42, 227 yards, 0 TD, 0 INT, 62.3 passer rating. Indy didn't score its first TD until after the two-minute warning.

Mitigating factor: Colts defense gave up 162 yards rushing to Eddie George.

Manning blame scale (1-10): 8

GAME 2: Dec. 30, 2000, wild card, Colts (10-6) at Dolphins (11-5)

Spread: Colts by 1½

Score: Dolphins 23, Colts 17, OT

Manning performance: 17-32, 194 yards, 1 TD, 0 INT, 82 passer rating.

Mitigating factor: Colts soft defense gave up 209 yards to Lamar Smith. Sensing a pattern here? Mike Vanderjagt missed a 49-yard field goal in OT.

Manning blame scale: 6

GAME 3: Jan. 4, 2003, wild card, Colts (10-6) at Jets (9-7)

Spread: Jets by 6

Score: Jets 41, Colts 0

Manning performance: 14-31, 137 yards, 0 TD, 2 INT, 31.2 passer rating.

Mitigating factor: Colts had the ball for just 7:44 in the second half of one of the worst shutouts in NFL postseason history.

Manning blame scale: 9

GAME 4: Jan. 15, 2006, divisional, Steelers (12-5) at Colts (14-2)

Spread: Colts by 8½

Score: Steelers 21, Colts 18

Manning performance: 22-38, 290 yards, 1 TD, 0 INT, 90.9 passer rating. Sacked on fourth down with 1:20 to play.

Mitigating factors: Returning a fumble late in the game, the Colts' Nick Harper had a clear path to the end zone and the winning TD, but he was tackled by Ben Roethlisberger. The Colts missed a 46-yard field goal that would have tied the score. The Steelers went on to win the Super Bowl.

Manning blame scale: 7

GAME 5: Jan. 13, 2008, divisional, Chargers (12-5) at Colts (13-3)

Spread: Colts by 11

Score: Chargers 28, Colts 24

Manning performance: 33-48, 402 yards, 3 TD, 2 INT, 97.7 passer rating. Manning threw for more than 400 yards, but his picks ended two excellent scoring opportunities.

Mitigating factors: The Chargers were without their starting QB and running back and were a double-digit underdog, but they still scored 28 points against the Colts' No. 1 ranked scoring defense.

Manning blame scale: 8

GAME 6: Jan. 3, 2009, wild card, Colts (12-4) at Chargers (8-8)

Spread: Colts by 2½

Score: Chargers 23, Colts 17, OT

Manning performance: 25-42, 310 yards, 1 TD, 0 INT, 90.4 passer rating.

Mitigating factors: Manning never got to touch the ball in OT after a 22-yard rushing TD by the Chargers ended the game.

Manning blame scale: 7

GAME 7: Jan. 8, 2011, wild card, Jets (11-5) at Colts (10-6)

Spread: Colts by 2

Score: Jets 17, Colts 16

Manning performance: 18-26, 225 yards, 1 TD, 0 INT, 108.7 passer rating. Manning led a drive with under a minute to play to put the Colts up 16-14.

Mitigating factors: The Jets returned the final kickoff 47 yards and moved into game-winning field-goal range in only five plays.

Manning blame scale: 6

GAME 8: Jan. 12, 2013, divisional, Ravens (11-6) at Broncos (13-3)

Spread: Broncos by 8½

Score: Ravens 38, Broncos 35

Manning performance: 28-43, 290 yards, 3 TD, 2 INT, 88.3 passer rating. Interception in OT led to Ravens' winning field goal.

Mitigating factors: Broncos gave up a 70-yard TD pass with 1:09 to play.

Manning blame scale: 8

Conclusion? I hate to be a killjoy, and I tried until I was dizzy to spin these stats, I really did, but there's no way around it. As great as he is, in the opening games of the playoffs, as my colleague Bomani Jones likes to say, Manning suffers from "First-degree lemonbooty."

Yes, poor play by the defense was a factor in a lot of these games and several times Manning put his team in a position to win only to lose because of a missed field goal or a fluke play. But, for the most part, the more you dig the worse it gets. A perfect example of how we tend to re-write history in Manning's favor is the Ravens game from a year ago. Most of us tend to blame the Broncos' sleepwalking defense for giving up a 70-yard pass to send the game to overtime. Now maybe it's all the fantasy wins he has given us, or all those adorable against-type commercials, but it was Manning's interception in the second OT that set up the winning field goal. Or had you forgotten?

In the Ravens game, for the sixth time in his eight one-and-dones, Manning's passer rating (88.3) was below his career average of 97.2. What's more, the Broncos were playing at home after a week off and were favored by 8½ points. In fact, Manning's team was favored in seven of his eight one-and-dones. Twice they lost to the eventual Super Bowl champs, sure, but the Hall of Famer Manning has been outgunned and one-and-doned by, among others, Mark Sanchez, Jay Fiedler and Chad Pennington.

Adding historical perspective doesn't help Manning's case, either.

Manning has twice as many one-and-dones as any other quarterback in the Super Bowl era. Joe Montana has four in 11 trips. Manning's closest contemporary, Tom Brady, has played in four more playoff games than Manning and has gone one-and-done only two times in 10 trips.

The plain truth is Manning has not played well in the playoffs, overall, but especially so in close games. According to ESPN Stats & Info, Manning has 50 game-winning drives in the regular season and only one in the playoffs. In fact, in one-possession games, Manning is 2-7 overall in the playoffs. (His take on this is classic Peyton: Game-winning drives only mean you did something wrong earlier in the game to fall behind. Not exactly Brett Favre, is he?)

In the regular season, Manning's career completion percentage is 65.5 and his touchdown-to-interception ratio is more than 2-to-1. But in the fourth quarter during the playoffs, his completion percentage falls to 58.3 and he has seven touchdowns against seven interceptions. By comparison, Eli Manning's numbers go in the opposite direction. From the regular season to the playoffs, Eli's completion percentage jumps from 58.5 to 61.5 and his TD-INT ratio goes from 1.3 to 2.1 in the playoffs, where improv and gunslinging often trumps preparation and perfect execution. Eli just had one of the worst regular seasons, ever. Peyton had the best. But in the playoffs, you need a gamer, you need a guy who can scramble out of a sack on third down and complete a pass to someone's helmet, if need be.

Yes, Peyton has the best brain in the game, the best work ethic, best study skills, best field vision, best preparation and best execution but, according to one expert who has studied Manning since his college days, the one thing he lacks is the ability to throw caution to the wind, let the ball fly and make something out of nothing. Normally, when you call Manning a robot it's a high compliment. But not in the playoffs. There, it can be a liability.

Knowing this, defenses tend to play a lot of nickel and dime, clog the field, muddy his reads and get him to overthink and suffer from paralysis by analysis. And, because of his age, his neck and his kudzu-like speed, well, improvising with his feet, the way Cam Newton, Colin Kaepernick or Russell Wilson can, is totally out of the question.

So what does this all mean?

Well, I think the data is pretty clear cut.

If Manning falters yet again Sunday against the Chargers and suffers his ninth one-and-done in the playoffs, he'll still go down as one of the greatest quarterbacks to ever play the game.

Fifty-one weeks of the year.

Breakout season at right time for Broncos' Moreno

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- There is a lesson here, in Knowshon Moreno's long-awaited breakout season, for an NFL player who had been called a bust, had been benched or endured multiple season-ending injuries.

Moreno went through all that in his five years in Denver. Yet as the Broncos prepare for Sunday's divisional playoff game against the San Diego Chargers, he might be the most important offensive skill position player beyond Peyton Manning.

"He has just been a rock for us," Manning said.

With his 13 touchdowns – 10 rushing, three receiving – and his first 1,000-yard rushing season, Moreno proved he could be a grinder and a big-play threat.

"My thing is more just staying healthy, and everything will come to you," Moreno said Thursday.

That it all came in the final year of his contract, after two knee surgeries and after the Broncos have tried to replace him at least three times, made it all the more impressive.

"We were happy for him to get that, especially with how he had been kind of blackballed for most of his career," running back Ronnie Hillman said. "Now, in a contract year, he's balling out, and you've got to respect it."

Moreno is only 26, yet he has outlasted nearly everyone from the coaching staff and front office that drafted him 12th in 2009, and is the third-longest tenured player on the Broncos' offense. The team signed Willis McGahee to be the starter after the NFL lockout ended in 2011, and after Moreno suffered a torn anterior cruciate ligament in late November that year. The Broncos also took Ronnie Hillman in the third round of the 2012 draft and Montee Ball in the second round in 2013.

Moreno even spent eight weeks last season assigned to the practice squad, as he fell to fourth on the depth chart. Then, after replacing an injured McGahee as the starter late last season, Moreno hurt his knee in the playoff loss to the Baltimore Ravens; his 2013 season was in doubt. He needed another surgery and became an after-thought for the running game until Moreno lined up as the starting tailback in the season-opener, a job he kept.

"I've always had that in the back of my mind -- if I could stay healthy that I could definitely help this team out," Moreno said. "And I feel like I did a good job of just staying healthy this whole season."

But more than that, his teammates and coaches saw Moreno was acting like a different person. Although he might still be one of Denver's most unique personalities –he wore a head-to-toe Santa Claus suit to the practice facility on Christmas, just for fun – he has emerged as a leader, in a running back room in which the next oldest player is Ball, 22. Moreno is the emotional compass of a team that could sometimes appear to be robotic.

"He's goofy," Hillman said. "Goofy as hell."

It took the focus of a CBS camera last month to show the country what his teammates already knew: On Sundays, Moreno rides an emotional rollercoaster. He routinely leads his teammates out of the tunnel before games, sprinting at full-speed to midfield. He regularly cries during the National Anthem. After plays, teammates are used to hearing Moreno yap at defensive players – and sometimes even to himself.

"His energy level is great to be around, and you can see a lot of the other guys feed off that," offensive coordinator Adam Gase said. "You let him do this thing. He never goes too far overboard. He knows where the peak is, and he'll level out and come back down."

Moreno will become a free agent after this season, an intriguing prospect given his relatively young age and 2013 performance.

"I'm not worried about 'after,' to tell you the truth. I'm just worried about right now," he said. "That's the only thing I can worry about – right now. I'm happy to be part of this team. Let's get the job done this year."

Is home-field losing its advantage in the playoffs?

By Erik Brady and Jim Corbett
USA TODAY Sports
January 9, 2014

The New Orleans Saints had never won a road playoff game in their 47-season history until last Saturday. Now they hope to win a second just one week later.

They'll have to do it in Seattle, where the Saints have already lost big this season, and where full-throated Seahawks fans are known collectively as the 12th man, a moniker that suggests they're like having an extra player on the field.

"You got to find a way to tune it out and stay focused," Saints cornerback Keenan Lewis says. "We know the situation. This is playoff football. If we lose, we snooze. If we win, we're still in."

Sports teams everywhere agree with Dorothy, who said after her road trip to Oz that there's no place like home. She meant Kansas — and the Kansas City Chiefs understand: They lost last week in Indianapolis, and now they're home alone in Missouri.

NFL teams fight all season for home-field advantage. Then, once they've got it, they can lose it in an instant. Last week, three of four NFL playoff games were won by road warriors. Top seeds, who get a first-round bye and can reach the Super Bowl with two home wins, have won the Super Bowl just twice in the past 10 years.

Champions lately have put the road into Road to the Super Bowl: The Baltimore Ravens won it last season as a four-seed, the New York Giants the year before as a five-seed — and the Green Bay Packers the year before that as a six-seed.

So, is home-field advantage all it's cracked up to be?

"No one is going to say they'd rather play on the road in the postseason," says ex-center Matt Birk, who retired from the Ravens after last season's Super Bowl. "But I do think we overemphasize the importance" of home, sweet home.

The Cincinnati Bengals were 8-0 at home in the regular season — and 0-1 in the playoffs. "They fell behind against San Diego," Birk says, "and had to be thinking, 'Oh, crap.'"

That could be what the Denver Broncos and New England Patriots were thinking last postseason when the Ravens roadies beat them.

"You have to really embrace that challenge" as a road team, Birk says. "It's the us-against-the-world type of deal, especially in the playoffs. The home team is jacked up. The crowd is jacked up. Especially with us last year going into Denver and New England, a lot of people were saying, 'The home team is supposed to win.' So that's a little pressure on them."

Birk figures if a road team can hang in there and keep it close late, the pressure builds on a home team, especially one that has locked up home field through the Super Bowl, if only it can hold serve.

"If you get into that third, fourth quarter and you're leading, the crowd gets a little antsy and the home team can tighten up a little bit," Birk says. "Because you stress the importance of home-field advantage so much all year when you're jockeying for playoff position. Your coach is talking about it, the media is talking about it."

"They make it sound like the Seahawks have home-field advantage throughout this postseason. They make it sound like a trump card, like it's their ace in the hole. The longer a game stays close, it starts to affect some teams and some guys mentally a little bit. It shakes them up."

The Patriots, who play host to the Indianapolis Colts on Saturday, were 8-0 at home this season, but they are just 5-3 in their last eight home playoff games.

"There's no tomorrow in the playoffs," Patriots safety Devin McCourty says. "No matter where you play ... you're going to get everyone's best shot, everyone putting up everything they have into one game. Home field is good. You get to be familiar, you've got your fans. But at the end of the day, it comes down to playing football."

SEATTLE CRANKS IT UP

The Seattle crowd noise tamps down to 87 decibels when the Seahawks are on offense. That's not as quiet as a church mouse, but it's quieter than a car radio at full blast, and their offensive players can hear snap counts.

Opposing offenses often can't. The noise generated by the Seattle faithful — as much as 112 decibels, approaching the sound of a Boeing 747 — causes 2.36 false starts per game, most in the NFL, according to the Seahawks, who've been keeping track since 2005.

"If you screw up, false start, get behind the chains, all of a sudden a negative run — you're looking at third-and-12 against a good home team with a bunch of noise," Seahawks center Max Unger says. "That's a tough ticket, man."

This week the Saints piped in noise at practice to simulate Seattle — and blew out two speakers.

"Just ignore the noise," Seahawks linebacker Heath Farwell says, "if you can." And then he laughs.

Normally, offenses have a built-in advantage because offensive linemen know the signal count, while defensive linemen can't tee off until they see the ball move. But that basic advantage can disappear if offenses feel they must resort to silent counts such as hand or foot signals.

"Then, as an offensive lineman, you're looking at the ball, too," says retired NFL guard Steve Hutchinson, who played for three teams, including the Seahawks. "You're not able to concentrate on your guy and anticipate a snap count."

Birk says the reason the Ravens won on the road a year ago was that their silent-count offense was so good.

"Our silent count was deadly in Denver," Birk says. "I think we got four offsides penalties called against them on the silent counts. That's crucial. Not only was it three or four offsides, but the effect of that. How many other times did (Denver defenders) not get off the ball because they were late off the ball?"

Birk says sometimes the Ravens even used their silent count at home, not because of noise, but "because we were so good at it because we practiced it so much. We took a disadvantage and made it into an advantage."

OFFICIATING CAN BE A FACTOR

Home-field advantage is real, though ethereal. It clearly exists, even if why is hard to say. The usual suspects include the roar of the crowd and the rigors of travel and time zones. But Tobias Moskowitz, a finance professor at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, believes conventional wisdom is wrong.

He is co-author of the book *Scorecasting: The Hidden Influences Behind How Sports Is Played and Games Are Won*, which tracked how often home teams win in each sport. The findings: 69% in Major League Soccer, 60% in the NBA, 57% in the NFL, 55% in the NHL and 53% in Major League Baseball.

"Home-field advantage is no myth," Moskowitz says. "It's consistent in every sport. We looked at all the explanations everyone threw out there, the conventional thoughts about travel and being tired. None of that really matters. Nor does it matter that the crowd is cheering for one side. That doesn't affect players that much. They are professionals.

"But the crowd does have a big influence, through the referees. What happens is the refs start seeing things the way the home crowd wants them to. Not consciously — they are calling games as best they can. But the human condition is that when 50,000 people are screaming, it changes their perception on close calls, the ones that could go either way."

He cites pitches on the corner in baseball and charge/block calls in basketball. "They're making split-second calls under extreme pressure," Moskowitz says. "Social conformity is a natural human tendency."

From 1985-98, NFL home teams won 58.5% of the time, Moskowitz says. From 1999, when the current replay review began, through 2008, NFL home teams won 56% of the time, he says.

"That is a very significant change," Moskowitz says. "We downloaded the data from the NFL and we found unfavorable calls come against visiting teams, particularly when they are winning."

Moskowitz says he discounts travel as a factor in home-field advantage in part based on this: When the Los Angeles Lakers play the Los Angeles Clippers and the New York Giants play the New York Jets, the home team wins at the same rate as when visiting teams travel 2,000 miles. "The only difference," he says, "is the season ticket holders in the stands."

Moskowitz says that, yes, crowd noise in football can make a difference by disrupting offenses, as with the Seahawks, "but that's a small thing, in my opinion." He points out, for instance, that NBA players shoot almost exactly the same percentage from the free throw line in the quiet of home arenas as they do in the din of road ones.

'YOU'VE STILL GOT TO PLAY WELL'

Here's how the Seahawks look at it when they go on the road.

"What we do around here is say, 'We're only facing 11 guys on the opposing team — it's not like they're coming out of the stands,'" Farwell says.

That's even though the Seahawks feel like their fans *are* a 12th man.

This week Saints coach Sean Payton painted the Seahawks' logo on the Saints' practice fields and blew out those speakers. Saints center Brian de la Puente says better than piped-in noise was playing in Seattle last month in a 34-7 loss.

"To our advantage, we've been to Seattle and experienced how loud it can be," he says. "And it's really loud."

So is Denver. Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning is counting on that: "Our fans will be excited. We'll need them in an important way — counting on them to be loud."

This season, as last, the Broncos earned home field with the best record in their conference. The Ravens beat them a year ago. This week, the San Diego Chargers

come calling — and they are the only team to beat the Broncos in Denver this season.

"I know it's going to be a little bit louder than last time in Denver," Chargers wide receiver Kennan Allen says, "but I don't think that will faze us."

Manning dismisses the notion that earning home field throughout confers extra pressure. "It means you've played good football all season," he says, "giving yourself an opportunity."

Broncos coach John Fox likes the comforts of home and sleeping in his own bed.

"I think there was an old movie I saw — you guys might not have been alive — but *The Wizard of Oz*," he says. "There's no place like home."

Fox seems to be forgetting one thing. Dorothy was on the road — the yellow-brick road — and soon enough the Wicked Witch of the West found her home-field advantage melting away. The AFC West champs want to make sure theirs doesn't disappear into a burbling puddle of goo the way it did a year ago.

"I think everybody would rather play at home," Fox says. "But you've still got to play well. That is the bottom line. That is our big task at hand."

Divisional Game Rankings: Broncos, Niners, Saints look for revenge

By Jason La Canfora

CBSsports.com

January 9, 2014 12:37 pm ET

Hoagie season is almost over. It breaks my heart.

It's our last week of NFL games on more than one day, our last weekend with more than two games on the docket and let's hope it can come close to the genuine drama and emotion of Wild Card Weekend. I would take that all over again, without a doubt.

This remains another weekend of the rematch, with the Seahawks and Saints, 49ers and Panthers and Chargers and Broncos all renewing acquaintances. And, for the most part, all of the previous meetings were pretty riveting. Even Seattle's fast and calculated domination of New Orleans was alluring, if for nothing else than its staggering outcome. In the case of San Francisco-Carolina, it might have provided the most physical game of the entire season. The only teams that did not meet up previously are the Colts and Patriots, but even that continues a trend of the best quarterbacks getting to the divisional round.

This is where the cream generally rises, and all of the passers still involved in this tournament very much deserve to be here. No accidents. And, other than Andrew Luck and Cam Newton, two recent No. 1 overall picks, all have been here before. So the stage will not be too big and I expect plenty of hero performances from this group of quarterbacks. Of the four quarterbacks who won last week, oddly enough, only Drew Brees was not in top form. Despite Luck's early interceptions, he was able to singularly rally his Colts for an improbable comeback win at home.

History would tell us that these advancing No. 6 seeds can be dangerous, and more than a few Super Bowl winners have taken that path to a Lombardi Trophy. Will the Saints and/or Chargers continue that trend? We'll find out soon enough.

San Diego at Denver

Sunday, Jan. 12, 4:40 p.m. ET (CBS & CBSsports.com)

Why to watch: The parable of Peyton Manning, and his magical regular seasons and his quick exits from the playoffs, is a familiar one to us all. And, sure, no one is going to win the Super Bowl every year, but Manning's single ring is often held against him -- I've been guilty of it -- and his nine one-and-dones and sub-.500 playoff record are not lost on anyone either. Just as Andy Dalton was the poster boy for quarterback pressure in the wild-card round, now it's unquestionably Manning. Add the fact that the Chargers won at Denver on a short week not too long ago to keep their slim playoff hopes alive and they seem to be a tricky

matchup for the Broncos. Philip Rivers generally fares well against Manning's teams and the Chargers have this team-of-destiny thing going on. So you can see why some are thinking upset here. I certainly don't suspect the Chargers suffer from any nerves or jitters. If anything they are playing with house money. However, anything other than a Lombardi will serve as an abject failure for Manning and the all-or-nothing Broncos. That's a tricky position to be boxed into, and, certainly, Manning has been there before, and no man stands alone in this sport. But this game, fair or not, is all about him and his legacy and trying to defy the odds of an aging quarterback changing teams and getting the ultimate glory. After what the Ravens did in Denver a year ago, and coming off a regular season in which he set the single-season yardage and touchdown records, the expectations for the Broncos simply could not be higher.

Experts' ViewWatch: Chargers-Broncos preview

What to watch for: The Chargers seem to save their best for these games and they have the ingredients to make this a tough matchup. Their pass rush has had success against the Ryan Clady-less Broncos and they have dominated time of possession. (Getting RB Ryan Mathews healthy through four quarters, though imperative for San Diego, will not be easy.) They have a playmaking safety in Eric Weddle, who could be disruptive downfield should Manning take those shots. And they have a quarterback who, next to Manning, may have had the best statistical season in the NFL. Add in Denver's defensive issues, and there's a recipe for an upset. ... Can Denver muster a pass rush, especially now with Von Miller out? Much of that will fall to Shaun Phillips, who had an excellent regular season, but is a long-time former Charger whom opponents know well. ... The Chargers will try to run behind stud rookie D.J. Fluker. He makes their offensive line go. ... What kind of burst does Mathews, who has missed practice time due to mounting injuries down the stretch, have early in the game? ... The Broncos, coming off the bye, could use a crisp start. The more they fall behind, and the more San Diego sticks with the run (40 attempts against a tough Bengals defense last week) the less time Manning spends on the field. ... The loss of space-eating defensive tackle Keith Vickerson could be huge for Denver. Expect a very physical approach by San Diego. ... How much blitzing will Chargers defensive coordinator John Pagano do? That's when Manning can crush you, especially with slot guy/hot receiver Wes Welker back from a concussion. Pagano showed last time around a healthy dose of mixing around his pressure and coverages. Can he fool Manning again? Manning's second-lowest yardage of the season and second-lowest rating came against San Diego. ... Is the Broncos' secondary haunted at all by the Rahim Moore meltdown from the playoffs last year? Denver will need a big game from Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, particularly if he is matched up on rookie WR Keenan Allen.

San Francisco at Carolina
Sunday, Jan. 12, 1:05 p.m. ET (Fox)

Why to watch: Two of the more powerful hybrid quarterbacks in the NFL -- actually, the two strongest and fastest multidimensional quarterbacks in the NFL -- meet with a trip to the NFC Championship Game on the line. Colin Kaepernick has seen it

all before, nearly winning a Super Bowl last year, his first as a starter. Cam Newton makes his playoff debut after the bye last week. They can throw the ball a country mile and make unreal plays with their feet and both will likely have to do plenty of that against two of the top defenses in the league -- units that can attack the passer and force him to get up and run. The two best linebacking corps will be featured prominently in this game, and whichever group can do the best chasing down the other team's quarterback quite likely will win. It's also a meeting between two coaches from contrasting backgrounds, with Jim Harbaugh experiencing nothing but winning since switching over from the college ranks, while "Riverboat" Ron Rivera was seen by many as a possible dead-man walking entering this season, only to emerge as a Coach of the Year candidate. It's the team everyone thought would be here, against the team pretty much no one believed would be here. And, by and large, both teams are built similarly, with potent defense and a penchant for the power run game, led by dynamic, new-age quarterbacks.

What to watch for: When the 49ers needed a play last week at Green Bay, it very often came from the legs of Kaepernick. His ability to break contain and tear down the sidelines was huge, and while he'll have much more difficulty against a quicker, much better Panthers defense, the possibility exists that Harbaugh may have to turn to some designed runs more than he usually likes. Kaepernick is already fifth all-time in postseason rushing yards by a quarterback, averaging 90.5 yards in his four playoff contests. This could come down to which quarterback escapes the most when things break down and gallops down field, particularly on third down. ... Panthers WR Steve Smith says he is playing, but how effective will he be coming back from injury? Can he run normal routes and still stretch a defense? And, even as a decoy, will that be enough against a 49ers secondary battling a slew of injuries as well? ... 49ers linebackers had trouble with seam routes in particular in the postseason a year ago. This could be a game where Panthers TE Greg Olsen sees a lot of targets and where Brandon LaFell takes on the role of primary deep threat. ... Is Frank Gore hitting the wall at all after another season of being the bell cow for San Francisco's offense? Do the 49ers go more running back by committee? ... This should be the healthiest and freshest Panthers edge rushers Greg Hardy and Charles Johnson have felt in quite a long time, and while the 49ers have one of the best offensive lines in the NFL, how much help will they require from the likes of TE Vernon Davis? ... The 49ers offense has finally been moving now that it has Davis, Anquan Boldin and Michael Crabtree all as downfield threats. ... I suspect, just a little, that ex-49er Ted Ginn might be especially fired up for this game after his ups and downs with that franchise. He could be a difference maker. ... The 49ers have made so many East Coast trips already this season, including one to the West Coast of Europe (i.e. London). Does any of that catch up to them now that they have to do it all over again after just getting back from Green Bay early Monday morning?

New Orleans at Seattle
Saturday, Jan. 11, 4:35 p.m. ET (Fox)

Why to watch: Sean Payton is a master motivator, and he has a belly full of material after his team was steamrolled in Seattle in the regular season, a game that helped turn the tide in Carolina's favor as the Panthers went on to nip them for

the NFC South title. Few can play the "us against the world" card like Payton, and if the Saints do not come out with considerably more fire and determination than they displayed last time in the Pacific Northwest, I would be shocked. They also have the services of Darren Sproles now, which restores balance to the offense. And while the Saints proved last week that they finally can win a playoff game on the road, it's something very different to go out to Seattle and win one there. This would be a statement game. Of course, I also expect the Seahawks to have gained some perspective by their home loss to end the season, snapping their 14-game winning streak there, and serving as a reminder that it's by no means preordained that no one dare upset the 12th man. If the Saints offense can operate at close to its normal rate -- the passing game in particular suffers on the road -- then we could have the makings of a shootout. Either way, we have two of the best smallish quarterbacks of this, or any, era meeting once again with a season on the line.

What to watch for: Payton is talking up his defensive coordinator, Rob Ryan, as a head coaching candidate, but if he gets exploited by the Seahawks like he did in the first meeting, that will resonate more loudly than any words. Ryan was repeatedly caught in blitzes and his defense was picked apart by Russell Wilson on third down. One would think his game plan would be vastly different this time around. ... Lots of travel for the Saints, on a short week, playing on a Saturday and playing a night game last Saturday. How do they adapt? ... A week of rest should have done wonders for Seahawks RB Marshawn Lynch, whose workload seemed to catch up with him in December with his yards per carry lagging. His powerful style provided problems for the Saints last time out. ... Is there a bigger wild card in these playoffs than Seahawks receiver Percy Harvin? He played just about 12 snaps of one game all season coming back from major hip surgery in the summer, then looked headed for IR and now is expected to be active this weekend. Even if in a limited role, his return and receiving skills and his ability to create big plays as a tailback or on end-arounds are weapons the Saints would not have seen on tape with his current team. With so much time to prepare for this game, one would expect some wrinkles from Seattle offensive coordinator Darrell Bevell. ... The Saints will need more from TE Jimmy Graham this week. He was barely targeted last week and the Eagles more or less took him away. Graham had just three catches for 42 yards in the first meeting with the Seahawks and that won't get it done this week. ... Look for Payton to keep riding RB Mark Ingram, who is emerging as the feature back for the Saints after a long time as a role player.

Indianapolis at New England

Saturday, Jan. 11, 8:15 p.m. ET (CBS & CBSSports.com)

Why to watch: This is familiar ground for the Pats, as it seems they make it at least this far every year. And this is foreign terrain for the Colts in the post-Peyton Manning era. Generally, coming off a bye, the last coach you want to see is Bill Belichick, with any additional time to prepare leading to an advantage. And after some playoff setbacks in recent years, and with Tom Brady not getting any younger, some will say that this team's window might finally be getting close to closing. Does it bring out the best in them? For all of their issues this season, the Patriots still won a bunch of games and that offense looked pretty good the final

two weeks of the season. This is the time of year when they will look to run the football and be as balanced as possible. It certainly feels like the Aaron Hernandez scandal, and even the latest Rob Gronkowski injury, were a long, long time ago. They have the potential to alter what this season will ultimately be remembered for based on how they perform this month. The Colts may be wondering if their luck will run out after a crazy set of circumstances helped them pull off the second-biggest comeback in playoff history last week, but then again, their quarterback is still just scratching the surface of his greatness and he doesn't shrink from any challenge.

What to watch for: For whatever reason, the Chiefs failed to account for Colts WR T.Y. Hilton last week, despite him being pretty much the only weapon that could get Indy back in the game. Um, Belichick is not going to let that happen. Hilton will be a marked man, likely by CB Aqib Talib and a safety over the top, and if someone else can step up and beat the Patriots, then so be it. TE Coby Fleener might need to have the game of his life, especially if this gets to be a shootout. ... Colts RB Trent Richardson looks like an accident waiting to happen after his fumble last week. Keeping him on the sideline might be the best bet, especially with Donald Brown showing a nose for the end zone. ... The Patriots continue to lose key run stoppers, with Brandon Spikes joining Vince Wilfork and Jerod Mayo on IR. Colts offensive coordinator Pep Hamilton was incredibly patient with the run game most of the season but came out firing in the playoffs. Testing that Pats run defense might not be a bad way to feel his way through this contest. ... New England has a large complement of running backs. Which one, if any, takes the floor here? Kind of have a feeling Shane Vereen has a big role against the Colts. ... The Colts got short on corners a week ago, and were getting beat in the slot. The Pats have the ability to test them repeatedly in that area of the field with receivers Julian Edelman and Danny Amendola. Brady might not even have to look outside the hash marks all that much to be highly effective. ... Can Robert Mathis be at his best outside the dome this late in the season? He was certainly a beast last week. His strip sack helped change the game. ... I expect to see Chandler Jones move around and try to attack a suspect Colts offensive line.

Chargers take mojo, bolo to Denver

The SportsXchange/Yahoo! Sports
January 9, 2014

SAN DIEGO -- Few are giving the San Diego Chargers a chance on Sunday when they face the Denver Broncos in an AFC Divisional Playoff game.

Beating the Broncos at Denver is a tall task -- doing it twice in one month is taller.

So the Chargers, among the hottest teams still remaining, take their mojo and loose attitude a mile high, hoping to upend another rival.

"Well, we have been the underdog all year," Chargers safety Eric Weddle said. "I have been the underdog my whole life, so it is no different."

The undersized Weddle did make the Pro Bowl again, and he typifies this year's edition of the Chargers. Instead of the team focusing on what it couldn't do, it zeroed in on what it could: be smart in the passing game and be tough against the run. All the while, keeping the faith that the roster as a whole was better than its individual parts.

"We are out to continue to believe in ourselves," Weddle said, as the Chargers won their final four regular-season games to qualify for the playoffs, then knocked off the host Bengals in the opening round.

"The great thing about this team is the struggles and the ups and downs have really molded us into what we are right now, which is a confident belief in each other. We are going to stick by each other."

It's easy to see why as the Chargers, the sixth seed, must tame Denver's record-setting quarterback, Peyton Manning, and Denver's ghost of last year's playoffs when it was shocked by the Ravens in double overtime.

The doubters, though, to the Chargers are just like so much background noise.

"We really have a sense and a belief that we are us and we could care less what the outside thinks of us," Weddle said. "It's great to be a part of, because we know everyone is focused on each other and getting better and ultimately to play the best we can. When you are worried about the outside your play suffers and it clouds your mind a little bit."

The Chargers are riding on Cloud 9 after being given up for dead when falling to 5-7 behind a rookie head coach in Mike McCoy. The narrative had been cast that this was step one in a rebuilding process that would take time as the depleted roster was re-stocked.

Instead, the Chargers went from missing the playoffs for the fourth straight year to being four quarters shy of the AFC Championship Game.

"It has been a joy to be a part of this team and to see our growth," Weddle said. "We have an ultimate challenge this week, but we are excited for it."

On offense, the leader is veteran, head-strong quarterback Philip Rivers, never known as a fashion plate but still stirring a new trend with his usual attire -- a bolo tie and boots.

"We went to coat and tie this year for travel attire," said Rivers, an Alabama native. "It was always slacks and shirt as the minimum, and I was always just slacks and a shirt. So we had to go to a coat and a tie this year, so that was my way to not have a neck tie. It is a tie. It is officially a tie."

And if the Chargers win in Denver, the bolo may become the official tie for San Diego.

They will need to overcome a lot of doubt. Despite them winning in Denver last month, the Broncos, the AFC's top-seed, are a 10-point favorite.

Notes: Few believed outside linebacker Melvin Ingram's promise to return this season after he tore his ACL in a May workout. But there was Ingram on Sunday in Cincinnati making a key interception in a critical juncture in the game, his fifth since coming back. "It's very satisfying because you know you put the blood, sweat and tears in and when you get to go out and make a play to help the team move forward, it's always a blessing." . . . This time last year McCoy was directing the Broncos' offense. He appreciates the education he received working under Broncos coach John Fox and others on his staff. "A lot of what we do here, the way I kind of run things, I learned from John and the rest of the coaches I have been around," McCoy said. "I have coached a lot of great players and have been fortunate to work around some good players and good coaches. I am very close with some coaches on that staff. I am here because of them."

Game Scout: Chargers at Broncos

By Derek Harper
The SportsXchange/Yahoo! Sports
January 9, 2014

San Diego Chargers (10-7) at Denver Broncos (13-3)

Sunday, 4:40 p.m. ET, at Sports Authority Field at Mile High, Denver - TV: CBS

*TV announcers: Jim Nantz, Phil Simms, Tracy Wolfson

*Keys to the game: There is a reason CBS announcer Phil Simms said "it's the worst," when asked what he thought of facing an opponent for a third time in one season as an opponent. Whatever the mismatches may be on paper, they are largely marginalized by the familiarity both teams have with each other.

In the case of the top-seed Broncos and their record-setting offense, no one knows the intricacies of the system and how QB Peyton Manning likes to run it than Chargers coach Mike McCoy, who was Manning's offensive coordinator last season. It will be a game of cat-and-mouse between Manning and McCoy. The Chargers beat the Broncos 27-20 in Denver on Dec. 12 and the defense has steadily improved since that game. But Manning also gets WR Wes Welker back from a concussion and Denver will run the ball far more than the 11 times it did after falling into a deep hole in that meeting. During a four-stretch drive, Denver averaged 8.75 yards to go on third downs - situations Manning must avoid with San Diego's improved pass rush. Given time out of manageable passing downs, Manning has a healthy and deep group of downfield weapons who should have little trouble uncovering against the Chargers' secondary.

The Chargers controlled the pace of the first meeting in Denver behind a steady ground game taking advantage of the Broncos personnel shifts and QB Philip Rivers' accuracy. RB Ryan Mathews (ankle) expects to play and San Diego will play keep-away as much as possible. Rivers has an emerging No. 1 threat in WR Keenan Allen, a chain-moved in TE Antonio Gates and a matchup nightmare in the form of 6-6, 240-pound TE Ladarius Green. While Denver finished the regular season with the league's 27th-ranked pass defense and is minus pass-rusher Von Miller, the return of CB Champ Bailey has a positive domino effect on the nickel package, where Rivers routinely targeted rookie Kayvon Webster.

*Matchup to watch - Chargers OLB Melvin Ingram vs. Broncos LT Chris Clark: When the teams met in Denver, Ingram played 24 snaps but failed to make the stat sheet as the Chargers managed just one sack and two quarterback hits on Manning. That was just Ingram's second game back from injury, however, and his fresh legs and speed off the edge have made an increasingly big impact on San Diego's pass rush - and helped make Jarret Johnson more dangerous off the opposite side as well. Clark has played admirably in place of injured Ryan Clady this season, but he's still susceptible to the speed rush - and the type of game-altering turnovers that come from pressure off the blind side.

*Player spotlight - Broncos DL Malik Jackson: With Derek Wolfe unlikely to return from a seizure-like event Nov. 29, Jackson has been thrust into a bigger role as a defensive end in base packages and a tackle in pass-rush formations. ... In the three games Bailey has played from start to finish this year, the Broncos' defense has accounted for 13.3 points allowed per game.

*Fast facts: Rivers is 6-2 at Denver as a starter, and the only quarterback to beat the Broncos in Denver since Manning arrived last season. ... No. 6 seeds have won five of the past seven meetings against No. 1 seeds in the Divisional Playoffs. ... Teams coming off a bye week are 18-14 in the divisional round since 2005.

WHO WILL WIN AND WHY

Broncos QB Peyton Manning has eight one-and-done playoff appearances during his career. There, we said it. And the Chargers are rolling on momentum along with a strong track record in Denver. We'll still go with the record-setting offense at home, healthy coming off a bye week and against a pass defense that gave up more yards than all but three teams during the regular season.

*Our pick: Broncos 38-30

The men behind Peyton Manning's record season

By Vidur Malik
SI.com
January 9, 2014

When looking at the effectiveness of the Denver Broncos' offensive line this season, one must factor in Peyton Manning's otherworldly talents.

One of the best quarterbacks to ever play, Manning is just better at getting rid of the ball than most other passers, which makes it easier to protect him. But that doesn't mean his line can coast in its job of making sure he stays upright and healthy.

For much of the season, the Denver linemen have given Manning a clean pocket, and in turn he has thrown for more touchdowns and yards than any other quarterback in a single season. They've done it despite losing Pro Bowl left tackle Ryan Clady to a foot injury in Week 2, and making do without valuable depth even before then. They allowed Manning to get sacked only 18 times in the regular season, and in November, Pro Football Focus ranked them second in its offensive line rankings.

"I think it's been an amazing year so far," said center Manny Ramirez, after the Broncos' 34-14 road win over the Oakland Raiders in the regular-season finale. "What we were able to accomplish with all the injuries, to be able to come together really says a lot."

Clady's left Lisfranc sprain, which he suffered after signing a five-year deal in the offseason, was the most high-profile loss, but there certainly were more. In June, center J.D. Walton had another surgery on the ankle he injured last season, and was released in December. Center Dan Koppen tore his ACL in July. Guard Chris Kuper has only started six total games the past two seasons after dislocating his ankle in 2011.

Those injuries are tough to stomach, but they provided opportunities for players like Ramirez. The seventh-year pro from Texas Tech, who previously played right guard, took over at center. He has put together a terrific season and earned an alternate spot in the Pro Bowl as a result.

Beside Ramirez in either direction are guards who can hold their own with interior defensive linemen. To his right, Louis Vasquez has played at an elite level. He was voted to the Pro Bowl, and even played at right tackle against Indianapolis when Orlando Franklin was nursing a sprained left knee and ankle. Zane Beadles isn't at Vasquez's level, but he's held down the starting left guard spot.

Though guarding Manning is their most important job, the group must also block for Denver's running backs. The Broncos won't scare anyone with their ground attack, but opening holes for Knowshon Moreno and Montee Ball will be especially important in the postseason.

"We know we're only going to get a certain amount of carries every game, and our focus is to make sure those carries are efficient," Beadles said.

The running game -- and Denver's screen game -- benefits from the line's athleticism. The men up front can pull block effectively and take on defenders beyond the line of scrimmage.

"Where we make a lot of our hay is getting to the second level and blocking those guys," Vasquez said. "Those are the blocks that spring five-, six-yard runs and turn them into 20-, 30-, 40-plus [yards]."

At the flanks are two offensive tackles who must secure the edges of Manning's pocket. Franklin and Chris Clark have different backstories, but both have been adequate blockers. Franklin is a third-year pro who has started every game he's played, while Clark started just six games prior to this season and is only playing because of Clady's injury. Clark did allow a sack of Manning in his first game as a starter against Oakland in Week 3, and he also gave up a sack in the Week 17 win. Despite some occasional mistakes, the tackles have played well and blocked for long enough to let Manning make his reads and throw.

The line hasn't been able to keep Manning completely healthy, though. He sprained both ankles against the Jacksonville Jaguars in October, and those injuries lingered as a mini-controversy for part of the season.

There's also Manning's aforementioned ability to get rid of the ball fast, which has prevented him from hitting the turf more often. That's something his line doesn't overlook.

"We've got to make sure we're able to maintain our blocks for longer than what our average time of [Manning's] release is," Ramirez said.

Manning has made life easier for his teammates, but an 18-sack season is one to be proud of for a line that is not playing at full strength. After beginning the year with so much instability, Denver's offensive line has gone from a question mark to a dependable group.

Julius Thomas Jumped Through Hoops to Get Where He Is

By Robert Klemko
MMQB/SI.com
January 9, 2014

You shouldn't know who Julius Thomas is.

A year ago the Denver tight end thought about dropping his football experiment, cutting his losses and putting to use that business degree from Portland State—the one he earned on a basketball scholarship.

The Broncos were pushing—the way football teams do when legendary quarterbacks sign on for a career nightcap—to have each of their offensive pieces at Peyton Manning's disposal. Thomas was the promising project who played one year of college football after four years of basketball, impressing the Broncos organization on film and in interviews enough to get drafted in the fourth round in 2011.

For many reasons—reasons we'll get to—that was a miracle in itself. But on the docket in the fall of 2012 was an early exit from football, because Thomas wanted to live the rest of his life with a functioning ankle rather than rush back from surgery the previous April.

"He was getting frustrated because they were expecting too much from him coming off of surgery," says his father, Greg, a high school principal and former college receiver. "They told him he wasn't running full speed in one of the preseason games, and he called me and said 'Dad, if this is what it takes, then maybe this isn't for me. I've got to use these ankles for the rest of my life.' "

Word of Thomas' frustration got back to John Elway and the Broncos' front office. A decision came: Shut him down, but not all the way. Rather than put him on injured reserve, Thomas was moved to the practice squad in October, so he could play scout team tight end and outside linebacker and catch up on all those football practices he missed out on because basketball coaches warned him against injury his whole life.

What did the Broncos get in return for a little bit of organizational patience? Just 65 catches and 12 touchdowns in 2013; a Pro Bowl tight end, seemingly out of thin air. Thomas is suddenly on the short list of basketball guys who found success after converting to football. There's Antonio Gates, Jimmy Graham, and, at the moment, Thomas, a focal point of the league's top passing offenses as it takes aim at San Diego in Sunday's divisional playoff slate.

Did even he know it was coming?

"This was always the goal," he says. "Everything hasn't always been easy or clear-cut. All my life, I see an opportunity and it's not clear-cut. How bad do you want it? I decided to see it through."

* * *

This football journey started at Pacific University in Stockton, Calif., in 1983. Greg Thomas likes to retell this story to Julius, as a way of reminding him of the fragile nature of his existence. There was a new offensive coordinator at Pacific, a skinny, dark-haired former safety at the university in his early 30s. Greg was one of the top returning wide receivers on the '83 team, and one of the tallest in the country at 6-6. He got called into the new coordinator's office one day during the spring before his final season.

"Pete Carroll brings me in and he says, 'Greg, I've got an idea,' and he's bouncing all over the place, excited."

Carroll: "You're drawing a lot of double teams at split end. You're huge. I'm gonna move you to H-Back. We're gonna get you in motion, get some single coverage, move you all over the field, okay?"

Greg Thomas: "Ok, whatever."

So Greg, who liked playing football but didn't love it, moved to H-Back. That spring he was run-blocking in practice when two teammates rolled up on his leg, tearing his ACL and MCL. These were the last days of the flayed-open approach to knee surgeries, and Greg's was botched. They went in before swelling subsided, and they put his knee in a cast. A career-ender.

He would graduate, and marry the girl he met at the Palladium Disco in San Francisco a few years earlier. Then came Julius in '88.

"I was pretty damn wild, so there's no telling if things would have gone the same way if I went to the NFL," Greg says. "I like to tell Julius, if it wasn't for Pete Carroll you wouldn't even be born."

Greg raised his son a Raiders fan, and three generations of Thomas men attended home games together. Thomas grew to love football, and while his father encouraged him to play in high school in Lodi, Calif., a basketball coach always got the swing vote. Greg even promised he would reach out to Carroll, by then at USC, and lobby for a football scholarship if Thomas would just play his senior season of football. Thomas declined.

"I let people talk me out of playing in high school and probably shouldn't have," Thomas says. "It was always like, why would you risk injury when you can get a basketball scholarship?"

Portland State and Boise State offered basketball rides, and Thomas chose the Oregon school. It wound up being the perfect spot for reasons he couldn't foresee: When his four years were up and he was on track to play basketball overseas, his desire for one shot at football coincided with a coaching change at PSU. The previous coach ran a run-and-shoot offense and didn't previously recruit tight ends. If Thomas could learn the new coach's offense he could play immediately. Enter first-year tight ends coach Steve Cooper.

"He came out to the workout and he looked like a basketball guy playing football," Cooper says. "He asked questions, and the next day he was better. We go into the film room and he doesn't have any clue what anything is, and then the next day the information is retained. That's how it went for nine months. Julius is just a sponge."

Thomas spent the summer before his fifth year of college and the entire fall semester in the football office, hanging with Cooper, watching film, learning how to critique himself.

"I had already graduated so I had nothing else to do," he says. "It was like, I have this ability, I have to take this chance at the NFL. The time with coach Cooper was really invaluable."

On the field, everything was new, right down to how to catch a football. On the first day of catching passes, his hands were too far apart and at least one ball went caroming off his face. He knew nothing of blocking footwork, or route-running. For the guy who set a Portland State record for basketball games played (121), it was humbling.

"You go from being a senior captain, understanding your job, then going to play football and you have to learn everything," Thomas says. "Our coach was like, 'You've got to get leverage on that guy,' and I'm like 'What do you mean, 'get leverage?'"

The Broncos took note of his 453 receiving yards and first team All-Big Sky Conference selection in one season and shipped tight ends coach Clancy Barone to Portland for an extended stay. Thomas and Barone watched film side-by-side until Barone was satisfied in Thomas's football knowledge. The former Chargers and Falcons coach realized Thomas was a "football rat," going back to those days spent tossing around a football in the shadow of the Oakland Coliseum.

"When you're with him you start to develop that big-picture view," Thomas says of Manning. "You start thinking about everything happening around you."

He also found out Thomas was a model citizen—the peer mediator of the year in his senior year of high school, and the first guy on the Portland State team to sign up for charity work with visiting children. At the combine he flashed 4.6 speed, a 35.5-inch vertical with monster feet (size 16) and hands (10 ¼ inches). The team drafted him 129th overall, signing him to a four-year deal worth \$2.42 million.

There was but one more question mark. Thomas was a jokester, with a permanent smile and a science fiction book in hand (his favorite title: *Beyond the Shadows*). Not your typical NFL tight end. The Big Sky Conference was one thing, the NFL another. Did he have the constitution to handle the it? How would he react at the next level?

"He's such a happy go lucky guy, " Barone says. "That might give you the wrong impression."

Early in the 2011 training camp, Barone says, the Broncos got an answer. Then-QB Kyle Orton targeted Thomas on a seam, putting his receiver square in the path of veteran safety Brian Dawkins. The notoriously hard-hitter lined up the rookie and blew him up in front of everybody—players, coaches, execs and fans. Barone held his breath.

"Dawkins cracked him as soon as he touched the ball," Barone says. "It was one of those ooooooh hits. Everyone wondered if he was going to get up. He bounced up, had the ball in his hands, scored a touchdown and jogged back to the huddle. That spoke volumes to everyone that this guy was not going to shy away from hits."

* * *

Then came the ankle injury, suffered on his first NFL reception, in Week 2 of 2011, when Bengals linebacker Manny Lawson took him down. Thomas missed most of the remainder of the season. One day the following spring, the just-signed Manning was on campus meeting with offensive coordinator Mike McCoy, now San Diego's head coach, while Thomas was rehabbing his ankle.

"Somebody said, 'Hey, come here. There's a guy in here you need to meet,' " Thomas says. "And it was Peyton."

After Thomas's continued ankle troubles last season, Denver's campaign ended in the divisional playoffs, and Manning's window tightened once more. In the offseason Thomas "trained for real," his dad says. He weighs 250 pounds now, after playing at 215 at Portland State. He's running at full speed despite a midseason ankle scare (MRIs came back negative for tears in late October). The partnership with Manning, who has connected with five Broncos for more than 60 catches apiece this season, is a constant learning process. And the notoriously abrasive quarterback is slightly more patient with his pupil.

"Its incredible," Cooper says. "Three, four years ago, we're explaining what Cover 3 is. Now Peyton Manning wants to know why the corner has his left foot up vs. his right foot up in this formation and so on."

Thomas, who says he's still learning how to decipher coverages, explains the Manning effect: "It's hard to pinpoint one thing he does that makes me better. Throughout practice it's just been small tweaks, like explaining the overall route concept. He says, 'You've got to make sure you're out of this area on time because

you've got this guy coming across.' What? That's stuff that wouldn't even cross my mind.

"When you're with him, you start to develop that big-picture view. You start thinking about everything happening around you."

Despite his blossoming awareness, Thomas is still unpolished, especially as a blocker. The Broncos typically don't ask him to play the traditional tight end role with a hand in the dirt. Barone says those kinds of players are becoming extinct in today's offenses, whereas guys like Thomas are cherished. That's why the Broncos modified their expectations and saved a seat for Julius Thomas.

The big man arrived just in time.

49ers' unique quest; more storylines to watch in NFL divisional round

By Don Banks
SI.com
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Last weekend's entertaining wild-card round games served to separate the contenders from the pretenders, and now we get the NFL's Elite 8 squaring off in what many annually consider the best two days of action on the league's schedule. Here are eight of the best storylines as the high-stakes elimination games of the NFL divisional round take center stage:

1. Fighting their way back up the mountain: The defending NFC champion 49ers are the hottest team in the NFL, carrying a seven-game winning streak into their divisional-round matchup at Carolina. They lost at home to the Panthers 10-9 in Week 10, but Jim Harbaugh's team dropped only one more game after that and now has the services of go-to receiver Michael Crabtree back in the lineup and he's producing splendidly.

San Francisco this postseason is very quietly attempting a feat that has not been accomplished in the NFL in more than 40 years -- that's the last time a team lost a Super Bowl, then came back the next season and won it all. The 1971 Dolphins were crushed by Dallas in Super Bowl VI, but took care of their unfinished business in each of the next two years, beating Washington in Super Bowl VII and Minnesota in Super Bowl VIII.

The last NFC team to even make it to consecutive Super Bowls were the 1996-97 Packers, who won on their first try, but fell prey to Denver's upset the following year. In the AFC, the last team to make back-to-back Super Bowl runs was New England, which won rings in both 2003-04.

2. Feeling the heat in Denver: Nowhere is the pressure on this weekend like it is in the Mile High City. The Broncos are 13-3 and the AFC's No. 1 seed for a second consecutive year, and no team has earned that distinction two straight years without going to the Super Bowl at least once since the 2002-03 Eagles, who lost in the NFC title game both years, then finally made the Super Bowl as a No. 1 seed in 2004.

But that's obviously just part of the story for the Broncos, who lost so painfully to visiting Baltimore 38-35 in double overtime in last year's AFC divisional round. When you factor in that Denver broke the 2007 Patriots' league-scoring record with 606 points, and 37-year-old Peyton Manning re-wrote the NFL record book with 55 touchdown passes and 5,477 yards passing in what is sure to be another MVP-winning season, this year has a now-or-never feel to it in Denver. Will the stars ever be this well-aligned again for Manning?

But January, of course, has been the cruelest month throughout Manning's 15-year NFL career. He's just 9-11 in the postseason, with eight of those losses coming in his team's playoff opener. Manning is on a three-game playoff losing streak that started with the Colts' Super Bowl loss to the Saints in early 2010, and the other three teams remaining in the AFC playoff field are the three teams that Denver lost to this season: New England, Indianapolis and San Diego.

All those records and accomplishments are going to ring quite hollow for the Broncos if they can't put together a Super Bowl run after outpacing the rest of the league for most of this season. After all, Denver won at least one playoff game with Tim Tebow at quarterback in 2011. Did any of us ever dream Manning would be under pressure to live up to Tebow's standard as a Broncos' QB?

3. Something old, something new, at quarterback and head coach: This year's final eight playoff teams break down quite neatly on a couple of all-important fronts. At both quarterback and head coach, the playoff field is perfectly split between the veterans and the relative newcomers, which produces a blend of the very familiar and a breath of fresh air.

Consider the quarterbacks. The veteran crowd includes Super Bowl winners Tom Brady, Peyton Manning and Drew Brees, plus San Diego's Philip Rivers, who has taken the Chargers to the playoffs five times in his eight seasons as the team's full-time starter. That's a boatload of postseason experience, with most of it falling on the AFC side of the bracket.

But then there are the young guns. San Francisco's Colin Kaepernick is 3-1 thus far in his playoff career. Seattle's Russell Wilson and the Colts' Andrew Luck are both 1-1 entering play this weekend, and Carolina's Cam Newton will be making his playoff debut Sunday at home against San Francisco. Newton and Kaepernick are in their third NFL seasons, while Luck and Wilson entered the league in the celebrated quarterback class of 2012. You have to figure we have a darn good shot of getting a Super Bowl QB matchup that pits youth versus experience.

And the same goes on the coaching front. There's some heavy hardware with Bill Belichick, John Fox, Pete Carroll and Sean Payton on one side of the spectrum -- with a combined 46 NFL seasons, seven Super Bowl trips, four rings and two NCAA national championships on their resumes as head coaches. And some coaches who are just starting to build their playoff legacies in the NFL. San Francisco's Jim Harbaugh leads the way in that pack, with three playoff trips and last year's Super Bowl run, and Indy's Chuck Pagano is 2-for-2 in playoff seasons in his brief Colts tenure. Carolina's third-year coach Ron Rivera, and San Diego's rookie coach Mike McCoy are first-timers in the postseason, at least as head coaches. All but Rivera, whose Panthers had a first-round bye, own at least one career playoff win.

4. Upset alert?: The NFL's 12-team playoff format is set up to give the top two seeds in each conference a huge advantage. Those clubs get to skip the first round to rest up and get healthy, with extra preparation time built in before a divisional-

round home game. So why doesn't it seem to amount to much of a boost in recent years?

On the surface, Denver, New England, Seattle and Carolina look like they're in good shape this weekend, although the Panthers are slight home underdogs to the defending NFC champion 49ers. But one or two of the league's elite teams are pretty good bets to fall, because the 2004 playoffs were the last time that all four divisional-round games were won by the home team -- or the two top seeds in each conference. That was Philadelphia and Atlanta in the NFC, and Pittsburgh and New England in the AFC.

From 2005 on, teams hosting in the divisional round are a so-so 18-14, with two or more home teams losing in five of the eight years. To break it down further, No. 1 seeds are just 7-9 in the divisional round since 2005, and No. 2 seeds are a much better 11-5 over the same span. That would seem to bode well for New England and Carolina, and give the shivers to fans in Denver and Seattle.

5. Taking a fresh look at an old foe: The Colts at Patriots game is the only non-rematch of the divisional round, and that's unfortunate for Indianapolis. Here's why: In New England's Bill Belichick era, the Patriots are 8-0 in the playoffs against opponents they didn't play in the regular season. Against teams they were rematched against, they're just 9-7, and 4-7 from 2005 on.

Last year, the Patriots in the playoffs drew two teams they had already faced in the 2012 season: They beat Houston (again) in the divisional round, and lost to Baltimore (again) in the AFC Championship game. But the Giants (2007), Ravens (2009) and Jets (2010) all are examples of teams that lost to New England in the regular season and then got their revenge by beating the Patriots in the playoffs.

While the Colts and Patriots have a rich history against each other in the postseason, their rivalry feels different with Peyton Manning now in Denver. Indy and New England met three times in the playoffs in a four-year span (2003-06), but that's seven years back now.

This much is worth a gamble: Whoever wins on Sunday is a lock to win the Super Bowl. Why? Because when the Patriots beat the Colts in the playoffs in 2003 and '04, they won the Super Bowl both years, and Indy did the same when it defeated New England in the 2006 playoffs.

6. Watch out for Cinderella: Are you liking that Chargers mojo about now? Yeah, me, too. San Diego has a number of things going for it, even beyond the resurgent game of quarterback Philip Rivers, who's as into this month's Super Bowl tournament as anyone still playing. For starters, Rivers and the Chargers have a history of knocking Peyton Manning out of the playoffs, having done it in both 2007 and '08, when Manning was with Colts teams that went 13-3 and 12-4, while San Diego was just 11-5 and 8-8, respectively. So this week's challenge at Denver isn't completely daunting, especially since the Chargers just traveled there and beat the Broncos in Week 15, handing them their only home loss of the season.

San Diego (9-7) was one of only two teams in the league to make the playoffs this season with fewer than 10 wins (8-7-1 Green Bay was the other), but recent NFL postseason history is filled with such teams making some legitimate noise. The 2011 Giants (9-7) won the Super Bowl, and the 8-8 Broncos that season made the AFC's final four with Tim Tebow at quarterback. In 2010, Seattle went 7-9 but still won a playoff game and survived into the divisional round. In 2009, the Jets made it all the way to the AFC title game despite a 9-7 regular season. In 2008, the 9-7 Cardinals made the Super Bowl out of the NFC, beating the 9-6-1 Eagles in the NFC title game. That same year, the 8-8 Chargers beat the 12-4 Colts, as previously mentioned.

And lastly, the Chargers are slotted as the AFC's sixth seed, a postseason positioning they've never had before. Maybe the novelty of it will work. Since the NFL expanded to 12 playoff teams in 1990 and started seeding the field, San Diego has been the top seed once, the second seed twice, the third seed twice, and the fourth seed three times. With only one Super Bowl trip during that span -- the 1994 team that lost to the 49ers -- the Chargers might as well try a new approach.

7. Defense doesn't always win championships, like they say, but it sure doesn't hurt to be playing some come January: This year's final eight in the NFL spells that out. Six of the eight clubs that will take the field this weekend rank in the league's top 10 in scoring defense, and San Diego ranks 11th (21.8).

The outlier? That would be No. 1-seeded Denver, which is all the way down the list at No. 22, allowing an average of almost 25 points in its 16 regular-season games. Better get the arm loose and let it fly, Peyton. Especially without injured outside linebacker Von Miller (torn ACL), the Broncos may have to win shootouts to win their way to Super Bowl 48 in New Jersey.

Where should the lowest-scoring game be this weekend? Charlotte's a logical guess, with Carolina ranking second overall in points allowed (15.1) and San Francisco third (17). The other NFC game figures to be on the low-scoring side as well, with Seattle's top-ranked defense (14.4) almost meeting its match in No. 4 New Orleans (19), which features the much-improved Saints defense coordinated by Rob Ryan.

The points will probably be more plentiful in Foxboro and Denver. The Colts (21) ranked ninth in points allowed and the Patriots (21.1) were 10th in the regular season. No. 11 San Diego and 22nd-ranked Denver has a chance to feature the busiest scoreboard of the weekend.

8. Saints seeking revenge: Between the memory of that 41-36 playoff loss in Seattle three years ago, and their 34-7 humiliation there in Week 13, nobody has more ready-made motivation to exorcise some demons this weekend than the Saints, who face off against the top-seeded Seahawks in the first game on Saturday. The Saints know what home-field advantage is all about in the comfort zone that is their Superdome, but they have gotten flattened twice in high-profile settings by the Seattle experience on gameday.

New Orleans head coach Sean Payton even took the unusual and somewhat unexplainable step of having the Seahawks logo painted onto the Saints practice field this week, as if that would convince his guys they were in the raucous environs of CenturyLink Field. Good luck with that. As Saints opponents know, you can't really reproduce the din and feel of the Superdome either, even if you plaster French Fleur-de-lis all over the practice facility.

The Saints are a dangerous team for the Seahawks, because Seattle has already beaten them twice in emotional, high-stakes games in which Pete Carroll's club probably couldn't have played much better. That might mean there's nowhere to go but down against New Orleans, and over-confidence could unwittingly sneak into Seattle's mindset. Especially with the Saints playing and narrowly winning a tough-minded game at Philadelphia last Saturday night, in the less-than-friendly atmosphere of Lincoln Financial Field.

NFL divisional round picks

By Don Banks
SI.com
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The divisional round of the NFL playoffs is where big dreams go to die. From 2005-12, the top seeds in each conference went a stunning 7-9 in their playoff openers, with so many clubs squandering the home-field advantage and hard-earned benefit of the first-round bye. In seven of those eight seasons, at least one top seed lost in the divisional round, with both No. 1's going down in flames in 2008 and '10. Only in 2009, when the Saints and Colts made the Super Bowl, did the trend not hold.

If anything, that track record adds even more pressure to Denver (13-3) than it does Seattle (13-3), given that AFC top seeds are just 3-5 in this round since 2005, and the Broncos were the No. 1 seed last year (at 13-3) when they lost that 38-35 double-overtime thriller against eventual Super Bowl champion Baltimore.

Denver quarterback Peyton Manning has some painful memories from being in this position. This is the fourth time he's led a No. 1 seed into the divisional round, and he's only 1-2 in those games, losing with the 2005 Colts against sixth-seeded Pittsburgh, and last year to the fourth-seeded Ravens.

This weekend, both the No. 1 Seahawks and Broncos are home against No. 6 seeds: the Saints and Chargers, teams they've already beaten this season. That probably makes the favorite's role all the tougher to bear in the playoffs.

Saturday, Jan. 11	
4:35 p.m. ET (FOX)	No. 6 New Orleans Saints (12-5) at No. 1 Seattle Seahawks (13-3)
 30	 27
Pete Carroll is right. The past isn't always prologue when it comes to the divisional round of the NFL playoffs. Just because Seattle was 27 points better than New Orleans in Week 13 at CenturyLink Field doesn't mean Saturday afternoon's rematch will follow the same basic script. Remember how Denver dismantled Baltimore on the road in December 2012, then lost to the Ravens at home in the playoffs? Remember the 2011 Giants winning at both Green Bay and San Francisco in the postseason, after losing to the Packers and 49ers in the regular season? The 2010 Packers, yet another recent Super Bowl champion, lost in the regular season at Chicago and Atlanta, then returned to those venues and won in the playoffs. That should give the Saints hope that what they face has been overcome plenty of times in	

recent history. I foresee New Orleans starting well and holding the lead for much of this game, but in the end, Russell Wilson and the Seattle offense will wake up just in time to mount a fourth-quarter comeback and not waste that No. 1 seed.

8:15 p.m. ET
(CBS)



27



17

No. 4 Indianapolis Colts (12-5) at No. 2 New England Patriots (12-4)

The Patriots in the Belichick-Brady era have been almost a sure-thing in the AFC divisional round when they earn one of the top two seeds and a first-round bye, going 6-1 in that situation, with only an upset loss to the Jets in 2010 marring their record. They've won those games by an average of almost 14 points. And don't forget, it was the Patriots' memorable and controversial "Snow Game" comeback overtime victory against Oakland in the 2001 AFC divisional round that launched the whole New England dynasty. Tuck rule, anyone? But the Colts should be riding high on the emotion of last week's miracle win over Kansas City and will put up a four-quarter fight in Foxboro, which is expecting mild temperatures and maybe some rain Saturday night. The Patriots defense won't be giving up any 28-point leads, so Indy's best shot is to keep it close throughout and give Andrew Luck the chance to find out if his fourth-quarter magic is better than Brady's fourth-quarter magic.

Sunday, Jan. 12

1:05 p.m. ET
(FOX)



20



16

No. 5 San Francisco 49ers (13-4) at No. 2 Carolina Panthers (12-4)

You wonder if the Panthers will be able to control their sky-high emotions and play their best in the crucible that is the playoff spotlight. Carolina hasn't been to the postseason since 2008, hasn't won a playoff game since '05 and hasn't treated the home crowd to a victory in January since the Super Bowl season of '03. How Panthers quarterback Cam Newton reacts to the pressure of his first career playoff game will likely set the tone for the rest of the team, and I could see him struggling early to find his rhythm and playmaking mojo. If that takes the Carolina crowd out of things in the first half, that's a big advantage for the 49ers, who have proven the

past two postseasons they can successfully take their act on the road, winning at Atlanta in last year's NFC title game and at Green Bay last week. This will be the most fiercely fought game of the weekend, but San Francisco's playoff experience will make the difference.

4:40 p.m. ET
(CBS)

No. 6 San Diego Chargers (10-7) at No. 1 Denver Broncos (13-3)

The top-seeded Broncos and Peyton Manning might have breezed through portions of the regular season, with their record-breaking offense hanging up the league's first 600-point-plus output, but there will be no coasting this month. The three teams besides Denver still alive in the AFC playoffs are the three teams that have beaten the Broncos this season: San Diego, Indianapolis and New England. And the only opponent to win in Denver is the one the Broncos must wrestle with right off the bat: the red-hot Chargers, winners of five in a row and the only club that won by more than three points in last weekend's first round. If the Broncos don't turn the ball over and give San Diego some easy scores, I can't see the wild-card Chargers scraping up enough points to beat them. But after last year's searing one-and-done divisional-round loss to Baltimore in Denver, it will be a pensive Broncos crowd on Sunday afternoon, one that could turn on the hometown team if San Diego gets out to an early lead. Time to find out if Denver has the mettle it lacked last year. Getting his first playoff win as a Bronco will prove to be the toughest step for Manning, but he'll take it any way it comes.

Peyton Manning, Denver Broncos pushing to shake playoff past

By Judy Battista
NFL.com
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- After the season ends each year, Peyton Manning takes his notebook to a meeting with his coaches. It is filled with his thoughts of the weaknesses he perceives in his game and the things he wants to work on in the upcoming offseason, the tweaks he thinks he must make to get better. The notes were there when Manning first came into the league, and they were there long after he was established as one of the game's best, after a championship and playoff losses, after Tony Dungy retired -- there was no meeting that year -- and after Manning moved to Denver. The tenor of the meetings in Indianapolis were always the same, say the people who were there: Never high or low because of the season's outcome, Manning was always business as usual.

Those notes are a monument to Manning's relentless preparation, but they are something else, too. They quite literally turn the page on a season, no matter how it ended, within days of its conclusion.

That ability -- to keep looking forward despite what has happened, even in what might have been the painful recent past -- is one of the reasons that Manning has had a long, successful career, believes Tom Moore, Manning's former offensive coordinator. The playoff record that seems to be the only cloud shading his time in the NFL thus far does not register for Manning, Moore thinks, as soon as that notebook closes on a season.

"Peyton deals in the positives," Moore said in an interview this week. "This is a new year. All the other stuff is history. You live for today. Any time you lose, it's a shock. Nobody wants to lose. One of Peyton's many great attributes -- he has a lot of them -- is to put things to bed. You move on. That's what Peyton does."

Perhaps. But as Manning prepared to participate in the playoffs for the 13th time in his 16-year career, even he admitted that the Broncos in 2013 were motivated in part by one of the most stunning losses he has suffered: the overtime defeat against the Baltimore Ravens in Denver in the divisional round last season. They talked about that loss when they reconvened to start the offseason program last April. It is why they ran extra sprints and did extra squats, why they participated in extra meetings, Manning said. And it is why Manning's postseason record continues to be a source of wonder, even after -- or perhaps because -- he constructed an extraordinary year at the age of 37.

Manning broke the single-season touchdown and passing yards records. That the Broncos have the AFC's top seed in the playoffs again is in large part because of

Manning's offensive production. It is all enough for many people to already consider him the greatest quarterback in history, no matter what else happens.

But what else has happened has been confounding.

Manning has led his team to more playoff appearances than any other quarterback in history, missing the playoffs just twice when healthy. But he has had more one-and-done appearances (eight) than any quarterback, too. That the Broncos are in exactly the same position they were in last season -- as a No. 1 seed at home facing an underdog on the upswing -- is lost on nobody. In divisional-round games after receiving a first-round bye, Manning is 1-4, the worst such record in NFL history.

All of those losses are assigned to Manning, but of course they were not all his fault, and there is no common thread winding through them. In some, he and Tom Brady engaged in epic aerial showdowns. In the 2005 playoffs, Colts kicker Mike Vanderjagt missed a 46-yard field-goal attempt that would have tied the Steelers in the divisional round. In the 2010 wild-card round, the Colts special teams gave up a big kickoff return and the defense could not hold off the Jets. Last season, with 41 seconds remaining in that divisional matchup, Rahim Moore allowed Jacoby Jones to get behind him for a 70-yard touchdown that sent the game to overtime.

Still, it is impossible not to consider Manning's personal ledger, the lone Super Bowl title, the one Super Bowl loss, the crushing disappointments that came before, in between, and after those.

Bill Polian, the former Colts general manager and president, is convinced that the pressure of the playoffs does not influence Manning. Moore describes Manning's preparation as a model of consistency, not more intensive for any particular game. No matchup has any more significance in Manning's preparation, which is, the way Moore makes it sound, part of an intellectual exercise in decoding an opponent, whether in September or January.

"I'm certain he does not think about it," Polian said. "Where he is focused is on the tactics of the game at hand. He is probably thinking that they're going to have to score a lot to beat the Chargers."

But the perception remains that Manning's meticulous preparation might have been his undoing all these years -- that rather than enlivening him, it has constricted him in the biggest moments, the expectation of greatness tightening around him as the stakes grew.

Manning has been increasingly reflective of late, particularly since his neck injury cost him the 2011 season. This week, he said he had always enjoyed preparing for elimination games, no matter how excruciating the outcomes. Last year, after the Ravens stunned the Broncos, Manning said he was not shocked. That was not the right word, he said. He was disappointed. But on he went, and now he is back to

that spot again, pushing back against the idea that what has happened before weighs on him now.

"I mean, if it's just miserable this whole time, then why are you really doing it?" Manning said. "I mean, there are other things you can do that might make you feel less miserable than if it's just an absolute grind. That is my approach. 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.' 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."

"It's easy to summarize, to take a whole bunch of football seasons and lump them together," Manning continued. "I personally don't believe in that theory, how it works. I think each season takes on its own identity and different things occurred along the way at different points of my career -- in anybody's career. This is the 2013 season, 2014 postseason, and it's its own chapter. We're looking forward to hopefully writing it for a number of more weeks."

And whatever happens -- against the Chargers on Sunday, or in the AFC Championship Game, or perhaps even in the Super Bowl -- there will eventually be a meeting, with the notes, the prologue for next season.

As the field narrows, here are 10 things to watch from the teams that are left to take part in the season's best weekend of football:

1) Will the Broncos or Seahawks fall prey to a recent and startling trend? Since 2005, sixth seeds are 5-2 against No. 1 seeds. The last time a No. 6 faced a No. 1 was during the 2010 playoffs, when both the sixth seeds (the Packers and Jets) beat the top seeds (the Falcons and Patriots) in their respective conferences. Both sixth seeds beat the No. 1s in the 2008 postseason, too. The trend is especially ominous for the Seahawks. The No. 1 seed in the NFC has been one-and-done in four of the past six playoffs.

2) Will the home teams hold up better than they did in the wild-card round, when three of them lost? According to NFL Media's research department, the divisional round of the playoffs has the most significant home-field advantage of any round of playoffs -- with the host squad winning 72.8 percent of games -- among the four major U.S. sports. In the NBA conference semifinals, home teams win 67.4 percent of the time, while home teams win just 59.8 percent of World Series games. The worst home-field advantage is the Stanley Cup Finals' mark of 58.6. Since 2010, four teams have won on the road in the NFL's divisional round -- with all three going on to win the Super Bowl (the 2012 Ravens, 2011 Giants and 2010 Packers).

3) Does the Saints' road victory in the wild-card round mean anything for their rematch in Seattle? The statistics are definitely against the Saints upsetting the Seahawks. New Orleans was trounced in Seattle back in Week 13 by the score of

34-7. Teams that lose a regular-season game by at least 27 points and play that same team on the road in the postseason are 2-9.

4) Will anybody throw over the middle in Seattle? Drew Brees (6-foot tall) and Russell Wilson (5-11) will tie for the shortest combined height of starting quarterbacks in the postseason since 1950. Not surprisingly, neither Brees nor Wilson throws much over the middle. It's the hardest throw for height-challenged quarterbacks to make, because their sightlines are limited by the towering linemen directly in front of them. Wilson throws down the middle just 14.57 percent of the time, the lowest percentage among quarterbacks with at least 100 attempts this season. That translates to 59 attempts, with four going for touchdowns and three getting picked off. Brees throws down the middle 19.91 percent of the time, below the league average of 23.8 percent. Brees' 129 attempts have yielded 10 touchdowns and three interceptions.

5) Can the Patriots contain the Colts' premier pass rusher on Saturday? Robert Mathis has 19.5 of the Colts' 42 sacks, or 46.4 percent -- the highest such mark of any player in the league. His strip-sack of Alex Smith in the third quarter of Saturday's wild-card showdown with the Chiefs was a critical moment in the Colts' comeback. Mathis has five sacks in 12 career games against the Patriots -- but no sacks in two playoff games. Tom Brady has been sacked 40 times this season.

6) Can Andrew Luck continue to elevate his game against the NFL's best teams? The Colts are 5-2 against playoff teams (7-3 against non-playoff teams), and Luck's completion percentage (62.1) was better than it was against non-playoff opponents (59.3). His passing yards were also greater (261.1 yards per game versus 243.7) and his touchdown-to-interception ratio was better (14:4 versus 13:8). That might explain how the Colts went 4-0 against the Broncos, Seahawks, 49ers and Chiefs this season, while those teams went 49-11 against the rest of the NFL.

7) How good are the defenses in Niners-Panthers? This game will feature two of the top three scoring defenses in the league. In their Week 10 matchup, Carolina and San Francisco combined for 401 total yards, the fewest in any game this season. The 49ers' 151 total yards was a season low and Colin Kaepernick's 91 yards was his career low as a starter. But Kaepernick, of course, turns it on in the playoffs, passing and rushing for significantly more yards than he does in the regular season: He averages 47.4 more passing yards per contest and 57.4 more rushing yards.

8) Can the Carolina defense handle Michael Crabtree? Pass defense is considered the relatively weak link of the Panthers' D (their pass defense is ranked sixth in the league, compared with second for the overall, scoring and run defense). The 49ers, meanwhile, are 6-0 this season when Crabtree plays; in his past four playoff games, he has averaged seven receptions for 102.5 yards. He's also scored three touchdowns.

9) Will the Chargers change the historical trend when they face the Broncos for the third time this season? There have been 83 instances of teams playing three times in a season, with the third matchup coming in the playoffs. In those games, the home team is 39-25 in the third meeting. And when the team that won the second game goes on the road for the third, as the Chargers are doing, that team is 3-9.

10) Can Philip Rivers take advantage of Denver's 27th-ranked pass defense? Rivers might not be able to throw much if the Chargers try to run the ball to control the clock. But when Rivers does take to the skies, he could air it out, as he was much more successful on deeper throws this year, connecting on 18 of 42 attempts of at least 21 yards in the air, than last year, when he was 18 of 55. His yards per attempt mark on such throws was 14.7 compared with 10.6 last year, and he had seven touchdowns and three interceptions this season compared with four touchdowns and four interceptions last season.

Peyton Manning concedes the end of NFL career is near

By Chris Wesseling
NFL.com
January 9, 2014

Although Peyton Manning's contract with the Denver Broncos carries through the end of the 2016 season, the quarterback has reached the "year to year" stage of his career at age 37.

There's no concern that Manning will walk away from the game after a record-breaking campaign. The greatest regular-season quarterback in NFL history does concede that retirement is visible on the distant horizon, however.

"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 said Wednesday, via the Broncos' official website. "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."

Broncos owner Pat Bowlen has already gotten more than he expected from his investment. With the organization in win-now mode, might Manning walk off into the sunset with a Lombardi Trophy as executive V.P. of football operations John Elway did in 1998?

Back in August, Manning made it clear that going out on top is "really not" a priority. As long as he enjoys the preparation and can remain effective, he's going to continue playing.

No other quarterback ever has been more effective than Manning in 2013. He just stated that he still savors the preparation. There's a chance he could break his own single-season passing records next season while leapfrogging Brett Favre for a host of career marks.

If Manning earns his second Super Bowl victory in February, he will be seeking his third next season. Where it goes from there is anyone's guess.

Divisional Round Weekend preview: Chargers-Broncos

By Marc Sessler
NFL.com
January 9, 2014

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

The backstory

In two games against the Denver Broncos, the offense of the San Diego Chargers has held the ball for 76 minutes and 52 seconds, an average of 38-plus minutes per game.

San Diego's obsessive, clock-chewing approach kept the Chargers close in a 28-20 loss to Denver in Week 10 and propelled them to a 27-20 victory over the Broncos in Week 15. Expect to see more of the same Sunday.

We all know about the record breaking, jaw-dropping antics of Denver's Peyton Manning-led attack. Logic suggests the Broncos can't be stopped, but what the Chargers did in their Thursday night win over Denver served as the blueprint for a potential playoff stunner.

The goal is clear: Keeping Manning off the field. The Chargers are the only team to hold Peyton's Broncos to under 400 yards -- and they did it twice this season.

Two of Denver's three-lowest scoring outputs also came against San Diego, and Chargers defensive coordinator John Pagano is 6-5 against Manning since joining the team in 2002.

No way this high-octane Broncos outfit doesn't solve their past issues against the Bolts and burn down the house, right? Impossible to imagine Manning going one and done for a ninth time in his career ... right?

Wrong.

Under pressure

Denver's run defense: The Broncos have scored more points and touchdowns this season than any team in history. Manning, meanwhile, has shattered a boatload of records -- but Denver's defense has issues.

The Broncos are allowing a whopping 24.9 points per game. Only one team in NFL history -- the 2011 Giants -- won the Super Bowl with a leakier defense (at 25 points per game).

Stopping Ryan Matthews and Danny Woodhead on the ground is a concern for the Broncos after the Chargers ran for 177 yards back in Week 15. Denver's tightened against the run down the stretch -- allowing fewer than 100 yards in three of its past four games -- but two of those matchups came against the hapless Texans and Raiders.

The Chargers are a different beast, averaging 39 carries per game since Week 13. They blistered Cincinnati on Sunday with 40 totes for 196 yards in a game that saw Philip Rivers throw just six passes in the first half.

Everything San Diego's done over the past five games tells us that approach won't change.

Matchup to watch

Broncos receivers vs. Chargers secondary:

This Chargers secondary is tasked with shutting down the first team in NFL history to field five players with 10-plus touchdowns.

No team in the league scores points in bunches like the Broncos. San Diego did a fine job shutting down Denver's run game in two meetings, but Manning ripped them for 313 yards in the first game and 277 in the second.

Chargers safety Eric Weddle is an asset, but I'm less confident in cornerbacks Shareece Wright and Richard Marshall. Against a passing attack that can bury a team in a single quarter, San Diego has its hands full.

Mind-blowing stats

In games after receiving a first-round bye, Peyton Manning is 1-4, the worst record for a QB since 1978, the start of wild-card play. ... The Chargers offense had the fewest three-and-out drives in the NFL this year with 23. Manning's Broncos were second with 31. ... There has never been a Super Bowl-winning quarterback who led the league in passing yards that same season.

Prediction

The Chargers are a well-coached team, but I can't go against Manning and the Broncos here:

Denver Broncos 27, San Diego Chargers 24 (OT)

Terrell Davis misses Hall of Fame finalists cut again

By Dan Hanzus
NFL.com
January 9, 2014

At his peak, Terrell Davis was the best running back on the planet.

Unfortunately for Davis, he didn't stay on that peak long enough to hold the attention of Pro Football Hall of Fame voters.

The former Denver Broncos star was not among the 15 modern-era finalists announced Thursday night on NFL Network's "Pro Football Hall of Fame: The Final 15." It marks the seventh consecutive year Davis was a top-25 finalist who didn't survive the next cutdown.

Davis exploded on the scene with the Denver Broncos in 1995, beginning a four-year stretch of dominance that included an NFL MVP, two Super Bowl rings, a Super Bowl MVP and a 2,000-yard rushing season in 1998. He suffered a knee injury the next season, however, and never got all the way back. He hung around for two more seasons and was out of football by his 30th birthday.

"To me, he's Gale Sayers. He was a comet," NFL Media columnist Michael Silver said during the "Final 15" announcement show. "He was a brilliant player whose career was cut short by a knee injury."

Rod Woodson believes Davis deserves enshrinement based on what he called "the Gale Sayers rule." Sayers was another brilliant back whose career was cut short by a knee injury. The former Chicago Bears star was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1977.

"When TD played, there was only a couple of running backs that we had to game plan for," said Woodson, who was inducted into Canton in 2009. "There were only two, and I played for 17 years. That was Barry Sanders and TD. Without the injury, his numbers would have been outstanding."

Davis' greatness cannot be denied, but we see where the voters are coming from. It's hard to vote Davis in when there are dozens of other deserving players who were stars in the league for a decade or more. (Andre Reed's head may explode if he were to witness TD slipping on a gold jacket.)

Which isn't meant to marginalize what Davis was able to do before the injury. He was amazing. But durability obviously matters to Hall voters.

That's one trait Davis didn't have.

Walter Jones leads list of Hall of Fame finalists

By Gregg Rosenthal
NFL.com
January 9, 2014

Fifteen men are one huge step closer to becoming members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame's Class of 2014.

The modern-era finalists were announced Thursday night on NFL Network's "Pro Football Hall of Fame: The Final 15." Twenty-five semifinalists were announced in November, so ten men did not make it through this cutdown. Two senior nominees, punter Ray Guy and defensive end Claude Humphrey, were selected as finalists in August by the Hall of Fame's Senior Selection Committee.

Here's the complete list of modern-era finalists:

Morten Andersen
Jerome Bettis
Derrick Brooks
Tim Brown
Edward DeBartolo
Tony Dungy
Kevin Greene
Charles Haley
Marvin Harrison
Walter Jones
John Lynch
Andre Reed
Will Shields
Michael Strahan
Aeneas Williams

Jones is one of the greatest left tackles in NFL history, and looks like a lock to make it on his first try. Strahan is another strong bet to make it to Canton. Harrison should make it in his first year of eligibility, while Derrick Brooks and Dungy are other compelling first-year finalists that have a solid chance to get in. (It's a great year for former Buccaneers, with John Lynch also making the cut.)

The bigger news here unfortunately surrounds the men that didn't make the list. Former Denver Broncos running back Terrell Davis again is not a finalist. Voters continue to punish him for his short, brilliant peak. Former NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue also didn't make the cut. He is getting further away from enshrinement as the years go on, rather than closer. Tagliabue's candidacy was once a hotly debated topic, but now he's not getting a lot of support.

Former San Francisco 49ers running back Roger Craig is another player that isn't getting any closer to enshrinement. Once a finalist, he's been knocked out at the semifinalist stage for the last four years. Don Coryell, Steve Atwater, Joe Jacoby, Jimmy Johnson, Karl Mecklenburg, Steve Wisniewski and George Young also didn't make the list.

The new class will be announced Saturday, Feb. 1, as part of the "3rd Annual NFL Honors" special at Radio City Music Hall in New York that will air at 8 p.m. ET/PT on Fox.

3 keys for Chargers offense vs. Broncos

By Kirk Kenney
San Diego Tribune
January 9, 2014

Mathews needs to be the workhorse

Life sure is easier when running back Ryan Mathews is carrying the ball play after play. The Chargers are 6-0 this season when Mathews rushes at least 20 times. He carried 29 times for 127 yards and a touchdown in the Chargers' 27-20 win in Denver last month.

Crucial for Mathews is how his injured left ankle holds up. Precautions have been taken for the third straight week to hold him out of midweek practices.

"My mindset is I'm playing," Mathews said on Wednesday.

Danny Woodhead and Ronnie Brown have shouldered the rushing load well, but Mathews has made the difference.

Get off to a good start

The Chargers offense sputtered in the first half of a 28-20 loss to the Broncos when the teams met in November at Qualcomm Stadium. The Bolts didn't score in the first quarter and were limited to two Nick Novak field goals in the second period. By halftime, Denver had a 21-6 lead. Peyton Manning tacked on a touchdown in the third quarter and that was that.

A couple of meaningful drives early will prevent Denver from taking control of the game. It also will quiet the crowd at Sports Authority Field. It's nice to be able to hear yourself think — and speak. This could be especially meaningful if center Nick Hardwick (concussion) is not cleared to play. Backup center Rich Ohrnberger performed admirably in the win over Cincinnati. Ohrnberger, for one, would appreciate it if the crowd is muted.

Finish drives, preferably with a touchdown

Both games against the Broncos this season were statistically similar in time of possession and turnovers, two indicators of success. The Bolts had the ball for 38:49 in the victory and 38:03 in the loss. The Chargers did not have a turnover in either game while Denver gave the ball away once in each game.

As far as controlling the ball, it's good anytime you can keep it out of Manning's hands. But what good is a sustained drive if you don't reach the end zone with it?

The best example came in the loss to Denver when the Chargers consumed 9:20 of the clock in the second quarter, only to stall at the 9-yard line and settle for a 26-yard field goal by Novak. At least they came away with some points, but trading field goals for touchdowns never seems to work out.

After a discussion of all the keys to success, Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers boiled it down to the simplest of terms: "Offensively, find a way to score more points than the defense allows... Don't worry about, 'Is the D struggling or the O struggling?' ... If they give up 35, then we better score 36."

On that, everyone can agree.

3 keys for Chargers' defense vs. Broncos

By Kirk Kenney
San Diego Tribune
January 9, 2014

Find a way to mess with Manning

There is a picture of Denver quarterback Peyton Manning in which he is indoors soaking one foot in a whirlpool with an iPad on his lap to study plays while wearing his helmet to listen to practice taking place outside. He is the ultimate multi-tasker.

For all the preparation Manning does, however, the Chargers were able to disrupt him last month at Sports Authority Field. He still completed 27 of 41 passes for 289 yards and two touchdowns. But that's well off the averages that enabled Manning to set NFL single-season yardage and touchdown records this season.

Tight coverage on Manning's receivers — linebacker Thomas Keiser even produced an interception — played a part in making Manning mortal. So did the pressure the Chargers got at the line. Safeties Marcus Gilchrist and Eric Weddle had a sack and batted ball, respectively.

Do that again. And then some.

Keep an eye on Welker

The Chargers forced Denver to go three-and-out five times in last month's victory. The thought ran through one's mind, however: Would things have been different if Broncos receiver Wes Welker was in the lineup?

On Dec. 8, Welker suffered his second concussion in three weeks. He was sidelined for the final three regular-season games. He was cleared to play last week and adds another dimension to the Broncos offense.

Welker has 73 receptions on the year for 778 yards and 10 touchdowns. He had just three catches when the teams played in San Diego. But Welker's a sneaky little guy, bringing to the Broncos what Danny Woodhead brings to the Chargers.

"Anytime you get a guy of Wes' caliber back, it's to our advantage," Denver offensive coordinator Adam Gase said.

Welker has a knack for getting open, finding a seam in the defense, making a play and picking up a first down. He's also one reason Denver has been so successful in the red zone. He just has a way of getting open. The Chargers need to be mindful of that.

Adjust to the adjustments

Denver is going to do something differently than it did last month. Don't know what it is yet, but Gase realizes they have to do something to offset how Chargers defensive coordinator John Pagano's defense dominated.

"He does a good job of mixing his pressures," said Gase. "He brings everybody. Just the front movement, sometimes you think you're getting pressure and then all of the sudden everybody drops out.

"He does a really good job of making sure that you're on it and you're constantly challenged throughout the game."

There will be some new wrinkle for the Broncos offense, of that one can be certain. It will be crucial for the Chargers to recognize how the Broncos offense is going about it's business and adapt and overcome.

This is chess, not checkers.

McCoy and Manning, friendly rivals

By Tom Krasovic
San Diego Tribune
January 9, 2014

When Peyton Manning visited the Broncos as a free agent in March 2012, he asked Mike McCoy and Denver's top defensive coach what the future would hold if the team had a good season. Would McCoy, Denver's offensive coordinator, leave the Broncos if given a chance to be a head coach? McCoy was blunt. He told Manning that if an opportunity arose, he would explore it.

Manning's questioning of McCoy, first reported by Sports Illustrated's Peter King, is interesting on two counts. One, Manning seemed to hold McCoy in high regard even before working with him. Two, the quarterback may have wondered whether McCoy's insider knowledge someday would be used against him and the Broncos.

"No, I think it was Peyton being Peyton," McCoy said this week. "Peyton's got a plan for everything. He's got a million questions every week, whether it's a game plan, whether it's an offseason program, whether it's a trip on the road. He's very thorough in what he does."

Sunday in Denver, McCoy's Chargers will face Manning's Broncos in a Round 2 playoff game.

Two men who as Broncos comrades saw more of each other than they did their own families, are now pitted in a zero-sum game. Manning can win only if McCoy loses, and McCoy can win only if Manning loses.

That's how it often works in the NFL industry. And when career gain trumps male bonding, there's only congratulations.

"I think he's happy that I am here, I think, for myself," McCoy said. "He was happy I got the opportunity. And I owe him a lot. He helped me get to where I am today."

Manning got along just fine without him. Working with offensive coordinator Adam Gase, a McCoy protégé now linked to head-coach openings, Manning directed the Broncos to an NFL scoring record for a season, and another AFC West title that brought them a Round 1 bye.

Whatever knowledge of Manning that McCoy possessed, meantime, didn't seem to help the Chargers when the teams met in Game 9, as Denver opened up a 28-6 lead in San Diego by midway through the third quarter.

From then, however, the Chargers have outplayed the Broncos. They ended up losing the November game, 28-20, and in the Game 14 rematch, they outplayed Denver like no other team had, dealing out season-lows in yards gained and points in the 27-20 victory.

Sunday, the winner will be one victory away from the Super Bowl.

If it's the Chargers, McCoy would celebrate on the same Denver field, in the same round of the playoffs, as another former Manning tutor, Jim Caldwell, last January.

Caldwell was Manning's quarterbacks coach for six years with the Colts and his head coach the final three years in Indianapolis.

The same year that Manning joined the Broncos, Caldwell joined the Ravens to coach quarterbacks. In a surprise move late in the season, Baltimore fired its offensive coordinator, Cam Cameron (a former Chargers assistant) and promoted Caldwell.

Caldwell's top pupil, Joe Flacco, went on to have a Super Bowl tournament for the ages: he threw 11 touchdown passes and no interceptions as Baltimore went 4-0. In the second game, Flacco outplayed Manning, who had a decent game but threw two interceptions.

Will McCoy's Chargers create Ravens Redux in Denver? Quarterback Philip Rivers is coming off an efficient performance in Round 1. Whatever the outcome, the players will be the parties most responsible, McCoy said.

"Players play. Coaches coach," he said. "There are 11 guys out there on the field, they've got to play. We could call out every play, or call out every defense, whatever it is. 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."

Mike McCoy comes full circle to Denver

By Michael Gehlken
San Diego Tribune
January 9, 2014

The name Mike McCoy began as an interview answer.

Tom Telesco was dressed in a suit and tie last January, giving a round-up of who, if hired as Chargers general manager, he'd consider for head coach. McCoy was a former quarterback, a current Broncos offensive coordinator, a regarded leader of men.

Telesco got the job. McCoy was hired.

A year later, he's led them.

The Chargers are in the Divisional Round, set to play the Broncos in Denver. The matchup brings their coach full circle. Of the eight NFL head coaches hired last January, McCoy is the only one whose first season is ongoing. If not for this game last year, it may have never begun.

"I hadn't even thought of this time last year," Telesco said. "That's good."

Telesco, hired one year ago today on Jan. 9, 2013, had mentioned McCoy as a head-coach candidate he'd like to interview.

One problem: He wasn't sure he could.

The Chargers had missed the only window in which McCoy, as an assistant on a playoff team, was eligible to be interviewed. He met with the Bears, Cardinals and Eagles during the Broncos' bye week while San Diego was occupied on its GM search.

The next time McCoy could be approached was after the Broncos were eliminated from the postseason, or as late as February if they made the Super Bowl. It so happens they played the Ravens in Denver during the Divisional Round.

Team President Dean Spanos remembers being at home, watching the game from his couch. It took place Jan. 12, 2013, a year before this Sunday's game. The Ravens appeared sure to lose, down a touchdown with less than a minute to go.

Then, wide receiver Jacoby Jones caught a deep 70-yard touchdown pass to tie the game.

"It was like, 'Holy moly,' Spanos said. "I called up (executive vice president) Ed McGuire. I called up Tom."

The Ravens won in double overtime. McCoy was suddenly available.

"Obviously, he was on the shortlist right off the bat," Telesco said. "It just worked out that, I believe, we had interviewed everyone else on the shortlist first. Then, obviously with Denver losing, we had the chance to get Mike in right after that."

He means right.

NFL agent Bob LaMonte represents McCoy and Telesco. He said in a phone interview Wednesday the Chargers filed permission to interview McCoy almost "instantaneously" after the end of the game.

The Cardinals had interest in McCoy after their bye-week interview with him.

But the next morning, it was the Chargers whose team was in Denver to pick up McCoy and shuttle him to the team facility.

"Smart organizations, when they find their man, they never let him go," LaMonte said. "Their proactivity has worked out pretty darn well. ... (McCoy and Telesco) are probably going to be around a long, long time together."

Three of the eight coaches hired last January made the playoffs.

The others, Chip Kelly (Eagles) and Andy Reid (Chiefs), were eliminated in Wild Card Weekend. McCoy's first season has outlasted theirs and one of the eight's tenure; Cleveland's Rob Chudzinski was let go this month.

Denver Broncos Obtain \$112M In New Financing For Sports Authority Field At Mile High

By Darren Heitner
Forbes.com
January 9, 2014

The iconic Mile High Stadium was replaced by Invesco Field at Mile High at the turn of the century. That relatively new stadium, which has remained the home of the NFL's Denver Broncos, became known as Sports Authority Field at Mile High when the Englewood, Colorado-based company purchased the ten years remaining on Invesco's naming rights deal in 2011. Thus, absent unforeseen changes in Sports Authority's relationship with the Broncos, the stadium will continue to bear the Sports Authority name until August 1, 2021.

While things remain quiet on the naming rights front, the stadium operator has been busy determining whether there are opportunities to clean up its debt. Original financing for the stadium now known as Sports Authority Field at Mile High was provided in early 2002 by four banks. One of those four banks was U.S. Bank, which today announced that it has closed a deal including \$112 million to refinance the home of the Denver Broncos.

"We are thrilled to bring this deal to fruition and provide Stadium Management with a significantly lower rate and better terms," said Hassan Salem, president of U.S. Bank in Colorado. Stadium Management is a reference to Stadium Management Company, LLC, which manages Sports Authority Field at Mile High and is a subsidiary of a company owned by Pat Bowlen, majority owner and Chief Executive Officer of the Denver Broncos. Salem continued, "we have been a partner of the Broncos for many years and are pleased to extend that relationship with this new financial agreement."

The owner of Sports Authority Field at Mile High is the Metropolitan Football Stadium District (MFSD), which was created for the specific purpose of planning, acquiring land and constructing a professional football stadium on behalf of the Denver metropolitan area. The stadium itself was originally financed with \$300 million in taxpayer dollars (in addition to \$100 million from private funding).

"Along with Stadium Management Company, the Denver Broncos are pleased to team up with U.S. Bank, a long-time partner, on the refinancing of Sports Authority Field at Mile High," said Denver Broncos President Joe Ellis. "The favorable interest rate and terms of this agreement with U.S. Bank presented a great opportunity for us. It provides additional operational flexibility, which allows for the continued reinvestment into the stadium now and in the future."

A Vice President of U.S. Bank was not willing to provide details of the rate and terms of the refinancing deal to FORBES.

Broncos Memorabilia Collectors Open Home For Big Sale

CBS4

January 9, 2014

LAKESWOOD, Colo. (CBS4)- One Lakewood couple is selling a lifetime collection of Denver Broncos merchandise.

Inside Bill and Barbara Cramer's home is the ultimate Broncos collection filled with everything from jackets, posters and autographed footballs.

"In life everybody gets comfortable with where they're at and what they have and I am surrounded by comfort with what we have here and what's in this room," said Bill.

Now the Cramers are ready to pass along their Broncos collectibles to other fans.

"I'm not a hoarder but I like my stuff," said Bill.

The couple's shared excitement over everything Broncos budded in the 1980s.

"We went on a Broncos cruise," said Barbara.

If it's got the Broncos brand, chances are you'll find it in the Cramer's basement.

Unfortunately their collection won't fit inside their new home so they're opening their doors to fans who are looking for a little bit of everything Broncos.

After the sale they'll be ready to watch their favorite team take down the San Diego Chargers on Sunday.

"And you know that Mr. Rivers, not Reggie Rivers, I want to see him go down," said Barbara.

Most of the Broncos gear is priced at \$300-\$500. One special item, John Elway Special Edition Coors Light Beer Cans are so rare that they're going for \$50,000.

Barbara and Bill will donate some of the money to a camping facility for people with disabilities.

The Broncos memorabilia sale is Friday and Saturday from 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. at the Cramer's home at 525 Meadowlark Drive in Lakewood.

Broncos are getting healthy for playoff run

By Mike Florio
ProFootballTalk.com
January 9, 2014

The Broncos have dealt with their fair share of injuries. As their postseason opener approaches, however, most of their injured players not on injured reserve look to be ready to go.

Defensive lineman Derek Wolfe, who hasn't played since November 24 due to an illness, remains out of practice. All other injured players fully participated in practice on Wednesday and Thursday.

The injured-but-practicing are cornerback Champ Bailey (shoulder), receiver Wes Welker (concussion), quarterback Peyton Manning (ankle), tight end Joel Dreessen (knee), safety Duke Ihenacho (concussion), tackle Winston Justice (finger), guard Chris Kuper (ankle), center Steve Vallos (concussion), and cornerback Kayvon Webster (thumb).

The Broncos host the Chargers on Sunday, one month to the day after losing to San Diego at home.

Broncos Hope for Third-Down Upswing

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Before the Broncos and Chargers met in Week 15, Denver had the league's best third-down offense. By the end of the season, San Diego did, and the divergent performances in the Chargers' 27-20 win Dec. 12 had much to do with the Broncos dropping to No. 2 in the league.

That game -- the first of three without wide receiver Wes Welker, sidelined because of a second concussion in four games -- saw the Broncos go 2-of-9 on third downs, their worst ratio of the season to that point. Ten days later, when Welker missed his second consecutive game, they struggled even more, going 2-of-11.

They stopped the bleeding in Oakland in Week 17, but by the time the fourth quarter of the season ended, the Broncos had converted just 18 of 48 third downs in Weeks 14-17, and only once finished a game above 40 percent. During that span, Welker was limited to one half of football. Clearly, he was missed.

"Big time," said wide receiver Eric Decker. "He's a guy that has done very well on third down -- and just any down it is. 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 of the opportunities we had."

Prior to Welker's second concussion, the Broncos converted 48.2 percent of their third downs. Their percentage was just 39.0 in the three-and-a-half games they played without him.

Meanwhile, the Chargers converted 31 of 55 third downs and never converted less than 50 percent in a game. That helped the Chargers finish with the second-highest third-down success ratio of any team in the last four years, and as the league leaders in time of possession, averaging 32 minutes, 59 seconds per game.

"That's why you have all the sustained drives," said Chargers head coach Mike McCoy. "That's critical in any game, to win the time of possession, and to nurture downs."

The Chargers have held a time-of-possession advantage in 14 of 17 games this season. They are 10-4 when they have an edge in that statistic, and 0-3 when they don't.

But the Chargers deviated from their third-down trend Sunday in Cincinnati, going 4-of-12 on third downs, a season-low 33.3 percent. That dropped them to 3-6 when

they convert less than 50 percent of their third-down opportunities, compared to 7-1 when they do.

The Bengals also prevented the Chargers from flourishing on third downs in spite of most of those plays being "third-and-makeable." The averaged distance needed was 3.83 yards, only one third down required 11 yards to gain, and seven of 12 third-down plays were snapped within three yards of the line to gain.

In Week 15, the difference wasn't about the yardage the Broncos needed on third downs; they needed to gain an average of 7.0 yards, while the Chargers needed 7.17 yards. Thus, the difference in conversion percentage (Denver 22.2 percent; San Diego 50.0 percent) didn't come down to one team being in "third-and-makeable" situations more than the other. The Chargers needed seven yards or less on nine of 12 third downs; the Broncos on seven of nine.

But the Chargers failed on two of the three third-down attempts where they needed nine or more yards, and four of seven when they needed at least seven. Over the course of the season, the Chargers converted 56.3 percent of their third downs when they needed eight yards or less -- but just 29.0 percent when needing nine or more yards.

Thus, the Broncos' defensive hopes on third down rest primarily on their performance on first and second.

"First down, they're getting three yards; second down, they're getting three yards, and they're giving themselves third-and-three, third-and-four, and it's manageable," said defensive tackle Terance Knighton. "When you've got somebody like (Antonio) Gates and (Danny) Woodhead, those guys are capable of getting three or four yards every play.

"So we've just got to limit (Ryan) Mathews on first and second down and not give them any cheap yards or anything like that, and force them into third-and-long. That's when it's easier to get after the quarterback."

And that's when it's easier to get stops of any kind, which will be crucial to preventing the Chargers from the repeated drawn-out drives they mounted on Dec. 12.

Defensive Shuffling Working for Denver

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- When training camp began, it would have taken a fanciful imagination to conceive of a starting defensive alignment in January like the one the Broncos now have.

Some of the changes have come via injuries. Others have been a result of players moving up and earning more playing time. But if the Broncos open in their base defensive package Sunday, they'll likely do so with just two players playing at the same spot that they handled during the heat of the early days of training camp.

And beyond the starting lineup, expected contributors like linebacker Stewart Bradley and safety Quinton Carter were both placed on injured reserve in the preseason. Injuries and shuffling were crucial factors in the Broncos' use of a league-leading 484 personnel groupings on defense this year.

Multi-week injuries to Carter, Bradley, linebacker Von Miller, safety Rahim Moore and defensive linemen Kevin Vickerson and Derek Wolfe could have crushed the Broncos' defense. Their starters have combined to miss 28 games this season, a number that jumps to 44 when factoring in Bradley, who started in the preseason loss at Seattle when he hurt his wrist.

But these were just the beginning of the changes.

Some veterans have different roles now. Wesley Woodyard has returned to the role he had earlier in his career, working primarily in nickel packages, with preseason pickup Paris Lenon working at middle linebacker in the base defense. Champ Bailey now works at the slot cornerback in nickel and dime packages after missing 11 of 14 games because of a sprained foot; that helps keep his repetitions in relative check. Quentin Jammer and Michael Huff, long-time NFL starters, have adjusted to being part of a rotation in the secondary.

Responsibilities change for various reasons, but the goal remains the same, which has kept Denver's defenders on point.

"It's tough but I'm still leading my guys out there on the field," Woodyard said Monday. "My teammates still look to me for guidance and leadership and that's something that's going to never go away. I'm going to still be the same Wesley Woodyard when I walk through these doors."

Woodyard has not started since the Week 13 win at Kansas City. Lenon was bumped up to the middle linebacker role in the base defense seven days later against Tennessee, and the two have platooned based on package. It's a similar

role to the one Woodyard had for much of 2011, before he had every-down responsibilities in 2012 in the wake of D.J. Williams' suspension.

Lenon brings "that experience and that wisdom and that physicality," Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio said last week. But Woodyard still has the captain's "C" on his jersey. So does Bailey, whose role change was the result of a combination of factors, including his injury and the stellar performances of cornerbacks Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie and Chris Harris Jr.

"It was definitely not how I scripted out in the preseason but injuries do that and it is what it is," Bailey said "I'm moving forward. I'm happy about the role I'm in now. I think I'm effective there so whatever helps us get over that hump and win this first game."

While Bailey's new role reduces his playing time, it also gives him more responsibilities before the snap in setting the defense and the potential for bigger plays on the inside once the ball is snapped.

"I think I'm more in the mix. I'm definitely mixing it up in the run and the pass," Bailey said. "There are a lot of benefits to being in there. Being outside you're always searching for the call, you're trying to make sure you're getting lined up right. There are a lot of challenges to being outside, but being inside I kind of get a feel for everything before it happens."

Bailey, like Huff and Jammer, is in a role he's never handled before. For some 30-something veterans, a reduced workload could lead to frustration that bubbles up and causes locker-room tension. That is not the case with the Broncos.

"We're fortunate that we have guys here that understand that winning the game is most important," said Del Rio. "Understanding what they need to get done for us on Sunday is what's most important. Sometimes you have to put personal ambitions aside and think more in terms of the team and less in terms of your individual self."

Added Woodyard: "We just continue to play for one another and that's a big thing. Whoever is on the field, we just try to play for one another and live through one another and that's pretty much all it boils down to."

Lynch One Step Closer to Canton

By Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- A former hard-hitting Broncos and Buccaneers safety is now one step closer to adding Hall of Famer to his impressive resume.

Thursday night, safety John Lynch was announced as one of 15 modern-era finalists for the Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 2014.

It marks the first time he has made it this far in the process.

The Class of 2014 will be named on the eve of Super Bowl XLVIII -- Saturday, February 1.

The inductees will come from the 17 total finalists -- which also includes the two recommended candidates of the Hall of Fame's Seniors Committee, punter Ray Guy and defensive end Claude Humphrey.

Although there is no set number of enshrinees for any Hall of Fame Class, the Pro Football Hall of Fame's current ground rules stipulate that between four and seven new members will be selected each year. No more than five modern-era nominees can be elected in a given year and a class of six or seven enshrinees can only be achieved if one or both senior nominees are elected.

Below is a closer look at Lynch's credentials.

JOHN LYNCH

Lynch spent the majority of his career with a different team -- the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. But Lynch played in Denver in the 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 seasons before retiring prior to the start of the 2008 campaign.

In his career, the hard-hitting safety registered nine seasons in which he logged 90 more more tackles.

The third-round pick out of Stanford played 15 seasons, earning nine Pro Bowl berths. He snared 26 interceptions, notched 13 sacks, forced 16 fumbles and recovered nine more in his career.

A first-time Hall-of-Fame finalist, Lynch started at least 14 games in 11 separate seasons, including six in which he started all 16.

Former Broncos safety Steve Atwater, running back Terrell Davis and linebacker Karl Mecklenburg were semifinalists for the Class of 2014, but did not make it to the list of 15 modern-era finalists.

Looking for a Fast Start

By Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- In the regular season, the Broncos made it a point to start fast.

Denver outscored its opponents 130 to 64 in the first quarter, and that 66-point advantage was second only to the team's fourth-quarter advantage of 83 points throughout the year.

Don't expect that gameplan to change in the postseason.

"Our philosophy really doesn't change, no matter what kind of game it is, whether it'd be the first game of the season, the 14th, or a playoff game," Offensive Coordinator Adam Gase said. "We're going to stick with what we've been doing and just continue to try to have success as early as we can, get our guys into a rhythm and let the game play out from there."

A fast start could be especially important against the San Diego Chargers team the Broncos will face on Sunday.

The last time the division rivals squared off, the Chargers nearly doubled Denver's time-of-possession en route to a 27-20 win.

So getting up early against a ball-control offense could help the Broncos' cause.

"We kind of headed that direction the second time we played them, where we got the quick seven and then we stalled in the red area and took three instead," Gase recalled. "It would have been nice to get 14 right there and to see what kind of pressure we would have put on them because we would have had a little better lead there. But obviously, anytime you can get up on a team that is a ball-control team, it puts a little more pressure on them to have to possibly do something they don't like to do."

Preparing for Pagano

Last week in the Wild Card Round of the AFC playoffs, the Chargers defense rattled Bengals quarterback Andy Dalton throughout a 27-10 San Diego win.

Dalton was sacked three times, hit five times and intercepted twice. The Chargers defense added six passes defensed and a forced fumble to their impressive stat line.

Gase said it's tough preparing against a San Diego unit led by Defensive Coordinator John Pagano.

"He does a good job of mixing his pressures – who is coming. He brings everybody," Gase said. "And then just the front movement. Sometimes you think you're getting pressure and then all of a sudden everybody drops out. He does a really good job of making sure that you're on it and then you constantly are challenged throughout the game."

The last time the Broncos and Chargers squared off, the San Diego defense hit quarterback Peyton Manning twice and sacked him once.

Gase said it will be important to be prepared to go against a defense that mixes up its pass rushes so often.

"Pagano does a great job as far as using the guys that he has – with [linebacker Melvin] Ingram back, obviously that causes a different dimension as far as a problem," Gase said. "He does a great job of mixing it up. It is not an easy scheme to play against and he does a very good job of keeping you off balance."

Moreno Playing With Passion

By Brandon Moree
DenverBroncos.com
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – Running back Knowshon Moreno is quick to his feet after each tackle, quick to nod emphatically, quick throw a celebratory point.

In San Diego he crawled, helmetless, to dramatize a tough first-down run. In Kansas City, tears streamed down his face as the National Anthem rang out.

You may have noticed – he’s an emotional player.

“I’ve always been that way – high school and in college,” he said Thursday. “I guess that’s just my thing, you know? I play with my emotions on my sleeve and just go out there and have fun doing it.”

He views game day as a reward for all the work in the offseason and during every week of the season, so he makes the most of it when he is out there. This season has been especially rewarding for Moreno, as he remained healthy for the entire regular season and played in all 16 games – something he hadn’t done since his rookie campaign.

And he’s made the most of those game days. This season he became the first player in Broncos history to have more than 1,000 rushing yards and 500 receiving yards.

Now he’s looking to carry that success into the postseason, which should be just as, if not more, emotional than the regular season was.

Moreno said that both sides of his family have that sort of passion – a family of athletes “always up for a competition.”

“It’s interesting with him. He’ll spark it up anytime. You never know when it’s coming,” Offensive Coordinator Adam Gase said of Moreno’s emotions. “But his energy level is great to be around. You can see a lot of the other guys feed off that.”

Gase added that Moreno never goes “too far overboard” and the fifth-year back knows where his peak is. That self-control is important because trying to reign in Moreno’s emotions might be too much to ask of his teammates.

“It’s not possible,” Demaryius Thomas laughed. “Just let him do what he wants to do because he comes off, he’s fired up after every play, he jumps up fast, he’s talking trash, he’s always looking at the other sideline, so you just let Knowshon be himself.”

Importance of Playoffs Clear to Bailey

By Mike Morris
DenverBroncos.com
January 9, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Champ Bailey is well aware of just how meaningful every single postseason opportunity is through the course of an NFL career.

During the first 12 seasons of the cornerback's decorated 15-year career, Bailey made the Pro Bowl 10 times – yet found himself sitting at home during the postseason in all but three of those initial 12 seasons.

Fast-forward three years and, as Bailey prepares to embark on a third-consecutive postseason campaign – a run unprecedented during his career – he's developed a consciousness of how precious playoff football is by virtue of many other seasons his teams poured in so much work, only to be left out of the mix at the end of the regular season.

It's an awareness that Bailey pointed out younger players in the league may not have until they've experienced the sting of missing the postseason themselves.

"Until they go through a couple of losing seasons I don't think – they're not going to understand until that happens," Bailey said.

He was quick to add, however, that the young contingent of Broncos who have only known making the playoffs during their careers aren't any less hungry for success.

"But I think they do understand that they've got a game this week and we've got to play our butts off to win it," Bailey said. "That's all we care about right now."

Sunday's AFC Divisional Round playoff matchup against the Chargers marks another one of those opportunities for the Broncos – and for Bailey, who returned to action in the Broncos' Week 16 win over Houston after missing much of the regular season with a foot injury.

Since his return, Bailey has lined up at the slot-corner position in back-to-back games where the Broncos limited their opponent to less than 200 yards passing. And while Bailey has spent much of his career lining up on the outside, he's embraced the opportunity to play inside – noting that he feels even more involved in the defense with his new role.

"I'm more involved. I think I'm more in the mix - I'm definitely mixing it up in the run and the pass. There are a lot of benefits to being in there," Bailey said. "Being outside, you're always searching for the call, you're trying to make sure you're getting lined up right. There are a lot of challenges to being outside, but being inside I kind of get a feel for everything before it happens."

No matter where Bailey lines up on the field, his veteran leadership and on-field capabilities are welcomed by Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio.

"He'll be ready to help us however we call on him," Del Rio said. "Good football player and he's been playing the last couple of weeks and kind of emerging as a guy that once again can be counted on to do great things for us. I think he's been a tremendous player throughout his career and we're glad that he's back and healthy and involved and ready to roll."

Bailey's return at the end of the season also marked the first stretch of 2013 that a healthy Bailey had been able to play alongside cornerbacks Chris Harris Jr. and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie – something that Del Rio noted could benefit the Broncos' ability to bring pressure from the defensive front seven.

"Anytime you have cover people, you can do more in terms of being aggressive and playing man," he said. "That's what we do. We'll put a good plan together and go after them."

"We're counting on Champ. We're counting on everybody on our roster to do their part, be prepared, understand what it takes to do their part, play fast, play well together and have fun," he added.

It's the type of unified defensive effort that the Broncos will look to put together in order to slow down a Chargers team that has won five consecutive games. And while he didn't play in Denver's 27-20 loss to the Chargers in December, nor the Broncos' 28-20 win at San Diego in Week 10, the efficient manner in which the Chargers offense has functioned during the winning streak has jumped out to Bailey as he has watched them play.

"One thing I have noticed, and I think everybody has noticed, they limit the number of passes because their run game is so effective," Bailey said. "When you run the ball that effectively, you get a lot of third-and-shorts and a lot of clock just running. So you don't have to do as much in the passing game. They're taking advantage of it the old-school way. It's been effective up to this point, so I don't see them stopping."

The Chargers effectively achieved that in their win over the Broncos in Week 15, gaining 177 yards on the ground – a loss that Bailey said could be considered a wake-up call, but that he noted ultimately serves as a reminder for how well the Broncos must play on Sunday to ensure a different outcome.

"You could look at it that way, but we know going into this game they're capable of beating us," he said. "We've got to bring our A-game to win, period. I don't think anybody is going to overlook this team."

One thing remains certain: there is no taking this for granted, not for a 15-year veteran readying himself for another run at the postseason.

"These opportunities like this don't come around that often," he said. "This will be my third year in a row in the playoffs, which is rare for a lot of teams. I feel good about where we are right now. I'm just looking forward to this game."