

Kiszla: Peyton Manning gets a beer, while Broncos fans bury a ghost

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
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Peyton Manning needs a beer. How 'bout you, Denver? Winning the Super Bowl can wait. Let's raise a toast to burying a ghost.

"What's weighing on my mind is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth. That's priority one," Manning said Sunday, after the Broncos beat San Diego 24-17.

For the first time in 365 nights, a city in love with the Broncos got a truly sound night's sleep. The year-long nightmare is over.

The Broncos did more than win a playoff game. They buried a ghost. For 365 days, ever since an overtime loss in the postseason stunned the Broncos, the city and its NFL team had an uneasy sense of unfinished business. When Denver players and coaches huddled in the locker room and shouted "Finish!" not a single additional word of explanation was required.

But there comes a time when it takes more than a rallying cry. That time was in the fourth quarter against San Diego, with 3 minutes, 6 seconds showing on the scoreboard clock and a stadium packed with 76,969 hearts, all beating with angst. What had been a comfortable 17-point Denver lead had been reduced to seven points. The Broncos faced third down, needing 17 yards to move the chains, from their own 20.

As Denver defensive tackle Terrance Knighton stood on the sideline, he didn't have to guess what nervous fans were thinking. He felt it.

"I think it was on everybody's mind in the whole stadium," Knighton said.

It was time to kill a ghost. This was the time for Manning to answer the critics who incessantly harped on his career 9-11 record in the playoffs. This was the moment for Denver coach John Fox to prove that when it was time to be bold in the playoffs, he wouldn't go conservative.

Manning took the snap. The pocket began to collapse around him. He stepped forward, in a space no bigger than a coat closet, and fired a pass as Julius Thomas ran downfield and broke back to the sideline near Denver's bench. The timing between quarterback and his tight end, the spiral of the pass and the tap dance of the receiver's feet next to the out-of-bounds stripe all had to be perfect.

And you know what? What happened next was as flawless a smile that conquers fear. It was as perfect as a cold beer at the end of a long day. Manning hitting Thomas for 21 yards and a first down was the play that finally allowed this team and this town to exhale for the first time in 365 days.

"Julius and I have spent a lot of time working on those particular routes. After practice, in practice," Manning said. "To me, that is one of the most rewarding parts of football. When you put that work in off to the side or after practice and it pays off in a game, it really makes it feel like it was worth it."

A playoff game the Broncos controlled from the beginning came down to a very nervous end.

Up next: Tom Brady and New England in the AFC championship game. Winner goes to the Super Bowl. If there's one quarterback of Manning's generation who has his number, it's Brady.

More unfinished business. Time to go to work.

An hour after the victory, a throng of cheering Broncomaniacs lined the tunnel that players and coaches use to depart the stadium. Fox sat behind the wheel of a black BMW jammed with happy family members. A fan cradling an antique Orange Crush seat cushion held together with duct tape approached the Beemer and rapped his knuckles on Fox's window.

"I just wanted to shake the coach's hand," said Jeff Clark, a season-ticket holder for 43 years. "I come to every home game. And I never waver in my faith. Yeah, we've been through some heartbreak together. But we're smiling now."

There's unfinished business. Drive on. And don't look back.

Paige: No knee-jerk calls this time

By Woody Paige
The Denver Post
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With 31 seconds left in the fourth quarter, Peyton Manning kneeled to run out the clock. At virtually the same time in the same stadium in a postseason game exactly a year earlier, Manning went down to one knee too.

When Peyton and I stood at his locker far from the maddening crowd Sunday evening, I pointed out the parallel universe of quantum events.

"Rather ironic," the Broncos quarterback said. "Different circumstances, though."

On Jan. 12, 2013, the Baltimore Ravens had just tied the score on a miracle heave with about a half minute to go, and coach John Fox ordered Manning to shut down the offense at the Broncos' 20 to get to overtime. The Broncos would lose by three in double overtime.

On Jan. 12, 2014, the Broncos had just made a first down at the Chargers' 32. Fox didn't have to issue a directive. Manning took a knee, and the game was over. The Broncos won by seven.

Hearts in Denver were not wounded by bended knee this game.

The Broncos play on. The Broncos won a postseason game for the first time since Jan. 8, 2012, when Tim Tebow sent the Pittsburgh Steelers home in a wild-card game. Manning his own self won a playoff game for the first time since 2009.

First down. Two to go.

It was third down, though, late in the game against the charging Chargers that made the difference in the two outcomes.

Last year the Broncos couldn't covert a third-and-7, going conservative with a running play. Baltimore was allowed to get the ball again. This year the Broncos converted a third-and-17 and a third-and-6, both times with pass plays, and San Diego couldn't get the ball back.

"I felt like that game last year forced us to address those types of situations all season long," Manning said. Both throws from Manning went to tight end Julius Thomas, who didn't even play in the Ravens' playoff game. They were "certainly two huge third-down conversions, which were the difference in the ball game," Manning said.

The first in particular.

With 3:06 remaining, a 5-yard penalty, a 2-yard loss on a rush and an incomplete pass put the Chargers in position to get the ball back.

In a position to tie.

Oh, no, here they go again.

Manning was surrounded in the pocket, stepped up and just as he was about to be swamped, lofted the ball to Thomas for a 21-yard gain. "It was a great call by Adam (Gase, offensive coordinator), a great catch by Julius," Manning said.

With 2:12 to go, Manning leaned on Thomas once more for 9 yards and another first down on third down.

The 76,969 Bronco backers, who were anxious and nervous, erupted.

Last year — when, oddly enough, current Chargers coach Mike McCoy was the offensive coordinator — the Broncos went uber-conservative against the Ravens, trying to run the football to seal the game with the best passer in the history of the NFL.

This time, McCoy was on the other side, and he could only watch and suffer as Gase, his former subordinate, did what he hadn't.

Of the critical third-and-17 failure by the Chargers to stop Manning, McCoy relied on an old movie line. "It was a lack of communication on our part."

Fox was asked if he was more aggressive than a year ago with the game on the line.

"I'm not going to bite on that, other than I think you kind of adjust to your football team as you go," Fox said. "Our guys have proven to be pretty efficient."

He praised Manning, who has taken a ton of bites from the world of football about his playoff record (now 10-11) and his eight one-and-done postseasons.

The single-season NFL passing record holder didn't put up awesome statistics because the Broncos used the Chargers' time-consuming plan and rushed 34 times for 133 yards. He completed 25-of-36 passes for 230 yards and two touchdowns. Another pass should have been caught, but bounced off Eric Decker's chest and was intercepted at the end of the first half. "If we had scored there and at the beginning of the third quarter (missed field goal), it might have been easier," Manning said.

But, unlike a year ago at the same time and place, Manning's knee on grass signaled the start of a celebration that echoed across the Rockies.

Wes Welker returns just in time for Broncos after concussion

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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To protect his brain that had been knocked silly earlier this season, Wes Welker took on a look straight out of the Jetsons. He wore an oversized concussion helmet Sunday that dwarfed his head, which is otherwise proportioned nicely for a 5-foot-8, 185-pound slot receiver.

"I wouldn't say it's a concussion helmet," Welker said, his muscular arms laced with raw abrasions from shoulder to forearm after the Broncos' victory. "It's the next size up. A few players in here wear one. It's something they had me wear for safety."

Welker also wore a colorful mouthpiece. Concussion experts say wearing the right mouthpiece can be vital in reducing the impact of a head blow.

In his first game back in five weeks, Welker's performance was mixed. He made six catches, including a 3-yard touchdown reception which was big at the time, giving the Broncos a 14-0 lead, and became even bigger when the Broncos hung on for a 24-17 victory. He also drew a 23-yard pass interference penalty in the fourth quarter that keyed another Broncos touchdown drive that put them up 24-7.

But Welker also dropped a well-thrown, 25-yard pass down the left seam from Peyton Manning that would have given the Broncos a first-and-goal from near the goal line. Instead of going up 21-0, the Broncos had to settle for a field goal and a 17-0 lead.

But for a first game back, not bad.

"It felt all right," Welker said. "I'll be going over that one play down the middle all night tonight. But it's good to be back out there competing again."

Manning pointed out it was the first time since Nov. 10 and the first of three games against the Chargers that he had his Fantastic Four set of receivers — a group that also includes Julius Thomas, Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker — for a full game.

"It was good to have Wes back," Manning said.

Next up for the Broncos: Welker's former team, the New England Patriots. Never mind personal grudge matches. This will be in the AFC championship game Sunday at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

"It will be a good game," Welker said in his usual understated manner.

Manning, Broncos get past Chargers; set up AFC title game vs. Patriots

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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Think of all that can make a person feel good inside.

Love. A pancake block. Laughter. Joy of victory. Money in the pocket.

But to an expansive Broncos fan base that has season-ticket holders from all 50 states, nothing felt so good as the freedom of exhale.

Breathe again, people. The Broncos did not blow it in the playoffs. To the contrary, they beat San Diego, 24-17, in a second-round AFC playoff game on a windy but mostly temperate Sunday afternoon before a raucous sellout crowd at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

The Broncos had to nervously hang on. They needed two clutch — clutch! — third-down converting completions by Peyton Manning to tight end Julius Thomas in the final minutes to ice it, including a third-and-17 while under pressure with 3:07 remaining.

But bring on Tom Brady, Bill Belichick and the New England Patriots.

The Baltimore playoff debacle is, if never forgotten, at least more than 365 days in the past. The defeat of the Chargers was validation for Manning, forgiveness for Rahim Moore, hope of even better days ahead.

"There were a lot of teams that had disappointing losses last year," said Manning, who finished 25 of 36 for 230 yards, two touchdowns and an interception that bounced off his receiver's pads. "Atlanta and Washington and everybody said in that locker let's get back next year — it just doesn't happen. It's hard to get back."

At that point, Manning stopped to smile at his young son Marshall, who yelled out from the corner of the press room while in the care of granddaddy Archie. But back to the Broncos getting here with a 13-3 regular season record that again earned the No. 1 playoff seed.

"I told the team last night you need to be commended for getting back to this point," Manning said. "It's hard to explain all the stuff we've been through all season. So to get to this point was really hard work and to win this game was a lot hard work."

And now it's Manning and the Broncos against Brady and the Patriots in the AFC championship game. Please, this is too big to rely on the cliché gimmick of Manning-Brady XV Sunday in Denver.

This will be Manning and Brady for the right to play in Super Bowl XLVIII.

"Tom Brady has been an outstanding quarterback for such a long time but the game next week is the Broncos versus the Patriots," Manning said. "I know there's going to be some individual matchups that get headlines but it will be a battle between good teams. Teams that have been through a lot."

The AFC championship appearance will be the Broncos' first since they were led by Jake Plummer in the 2005 season. Plummer served as the Broncos honorary captain for their game Sunday. After posting a 39-15 record as a Broncos starter, the Snake came through again as Denver won the toss.

Speaking of quarterback won-loss records, Manning was under pressure to do something about the 9-11 career postseason mark he brought into this game. Does he get too uptight? Does he over prepare?

No and no. Look deeper inside his postseason results on a game-by-game basis and the discovery would be there is no blanket analysis that can be applied to something so diverse.

Manning was exquisite Sunday, and he would have been fantastic if not for some key drops by his teammates.

Manning let the Broncos' running game establish itself. He also threw two touchdown passes to put the Broncos up 14-0 halftime.

It was clear the Broncos entered the game determined to physically push the Chargers around. In the first two meetings between teams, the Chargers dominated time of possession, holding the ball for nearly 77 minutes combined to roughly 43 minutes for the Broncos.

In particular, the Chargers roughed up the Broncos' front during their previous meeting in December. The Chargers had 177 yards rushing to just 18 yards by the Broncos.

It was different this time.

"We knew after last time people were thinking they could just have their way," said Broncos linebacker Danny Trevathan. "We wanted to show the world what we could do. We heard what people were saying."

Although the Broncos were leading 17-0 entering the fourth quarter, they missed several chances to put the Chargers away. And then, after Broncos starting cornerback Chris Harris left with knee and ankle injuries, San Diego quarterback Philip Rivers threw two 16-yard touchdown passes to Keenan Allen and the Chargers converted a recovered onside kick into a field goal to narrow the score to 24-17 with 3:53 remaining.

But Manning kept making clutch completions to not only put away the Chargers, but bury the memories of the loss to Baltimore from last season. Bring on Tom Brady and the Patriots.

Ronnie Hillman, Chris Kuper, Joel Dreessen inactive vs. San Diego Chargers

By Mike Klis
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The Broncos seven inactive players for their game Sunday against San Diego: Running back Ronnie Hillman, quarterback Zac Dysert, cornerback Tony Carter, guard Chris Kuper, tight end Joel Dreessen, defensive end Derek Wolfe and defensive tackle Sione Fua.

Added to the active roster were running back C.J. Anderson, receiver Wes Welker and cornerback Kayvon Webster.

For San Diego, running back Ryan Mathews is active. But right guard Jeromey Clary and defensive tackle Sean Lissemore, who helped the Chargers dominate play upfront in their previous game here in December, are inactive.

C.J. Anderson, Kayvon Webster active

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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The Broncos are activating running back C.J. Anderson today and making him their No. 3 running back ahead of Ronnie Hillman for their game today against San Diego. Hillman is inactive.

The No. 3 back doesn't usually get many carries but Anderson's presence may mean the Broncos want to be more physical than they were the last time these teams met in December, when the Chargers steamrolled Denver in rushing, 177 yards to 18.

The Broncos are also activating rookie cornerback Kayvon Webster for the first time since he suffered a broken thumb in the game last month against the Chargers. Webster will back up Champ Bailey in the nickel position and play special teams.

Bill Belichick ready for Broncos (or Chargers)

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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His second-round AFC playoff win already recorded, New England coach Bill Belichick addressed his media today. He was asked if he would watch the Broncos play the San Diego Chargers today, the winner of which plays Belichick's Patriots next Sunday.

If the Broncos win, the Pats will travel to Denver. If the Chargers win, the Pats stay home.

"We've already broken down the Denver and San Diego games to this point, their last sequence of games, the ones we think are most relevant, for our preparations," Belichick said. "And we'll start putting then pen to the paper and summarizing what we've seen and getting the scouting report ready and maybe putting together some game plan ideas.

"We'll definitely watch the game. I'll watch it. One good thing is that you get to sit there and watch Denver play San Diego and watch both teams go. Those are two good teams right there. Then once it's over, obviously we'll put one of them in the file for next year and use the other one, we'll get back to work on the other one. We've done preparations on both teams on a preliminary basis. Now we'll start to get a little further into it but eventually we'll whittle it down to one. We'll work on both teams."

Out of character? Broncos run over Chargers with physical attack

By Terry Frei
The Denver Post
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The Broncos' approach Sunday seemed almost uncharacteristic. But it also was physical and efficient playoff football, especially if the emphasis was up front.

In the 24-17 victory over the Chargers that advanced Denver to the AFC championship game, Denver ran the ball effectively, if unspectacularly, with Knowshon Moreno and Montee Ball combining for 134 yards. Peyton Manning, who wasn't sacked, threw for "only" 230 yards and two touchdowns, but came up with two key completions to Julius Thomas to prolong the final clock-killing drive after the Chargers had closed to within seven.

And the Denver defense, especially early when taking control of the game, pressured Philip Rivers and played the run well enough to help prevent a stylistic replay of San Diego's regular-season victory in Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

"We didn't know what the elements were going to be like," said right guard Louis Vasquez, coming off an All-Pro regular season. "It (the running game) was what we were emphasizing all week because of that, and we put it on ourselves up front to control the line of scrimmage. I feel like we did it the majority of the game, and the end result speaks for itself.

"When we're on the field, we're keeping the ball out of the opposing team's hands, and anytime we can do that, it's a plus."

The last drive ate up the final 3:51 of the game, and Denver ended up dominating the time of possession, 35:27 to 24:33. All along, it has been conceded that the way to beat Denver is to control the ball and keep Manning off the field, so the Chargers didn't make a brilliant discovery as much as they had shown it was possible to pull off in Denver. This time, it was the Broncos controlling the ball — most important, on the final drive.

"It's one of those deals where you know they have a little life left," Vasquez said. "To convert on that, it takes it all away. That's the best feeling for an offensive line, to take the last little bit of hope and heart and steal the game."

The additional satisfaction for Vasquez was in beating the team he played for before signing with the Broncos as an unrestricted free agent in the offseason.

"Bittersweet," he said. "I like those guys. They were great teammates for the four years I was there. You don't get this chance very often, so we need to take full advantage of it."

The right tackle next to Vasquez, both on the field and in the home dressing room, was Orlando Franklin. "We did a great job running the ball and Peyton made some

great throws," Franklin said. "It was a team effort and we wouldn't have won without all three phases."

Franklin joked that he wasn't certain the Broncos would rely more on the running game. "I don't really know too much of the game plan," he said. "You go in there and whatever Peyton calls, you want to run. I did notice that we did run the ball a little more today, and the credit goes to the rest of the guys on the offensive line, we were able to make it work. The running backs were making the right reads, so we were able to hold on to the ball for a long time."

The Chargers rushed for only 65 yards this time and Denver sacked Rivers four times, three in the first half. Defensive end Jeremy Mincey — who joined the Broncos late during the season after his release by Jacksonville — made one of them. "The secondary did a good job of making the quarterback hold the ball," Mincey said. "But the defensive line came ready today. We're a close-knit group and we came focused and we came ready. Guys were making plays we're supposed to make."

John Fox, Broncos waiting to rev up rhetoric for Patriots matchup

By Mike Chambers
The Denver Post
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The field was being groomed during Peyton Manning's news conference Sunday evening. A tractor pulling a massive vacuum preceded the sprinklers moistening the grass at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

As the lights dimmed from the Broncos' 24-17 divisional playoff victory over San Diego, the groundskeeper and seemingly everyone else in Denver began looking ahead, to the AFC championship game Sunday against the visiting New England Patriots.

That is, everyone except most of the Broncos players and staff. Most preferred to celebrate their victory and worry about New England come Monday. The Patriots own one of the three victories over the Broncos, having rallied from a 24-0 deficit to win, 34-31, in overtime on Nov. 24.

It was one of Denver's three losses, and the one that hurt the most. Having taken a 24-7 fourth-quarter lead against San Diego and narrowly avoiding another monumental playoff collapse, the Broncos preferred to glow in the moment.

"I'm not addressing the Patriots right now. I'm enjoying my victory against the Chargers," Broncos defensive end Shaun Phillips said, loud and clear.

The Patriots-Broncos winner will represent the AFC in the Feb. 2 Super Bowl at East Rutherford, N.J.

"There's going to be plenty of tears (for the losing team)," said wide receiver Wes Welker, the former Patriots star. "We're just going out there and execute the way we can execute and, you know, come away with the win. We're definitely looking forward to it."

The Broncos' unwillingness to talk specifically about the Patriots might be orders from above. Said coach John Fox: "I think I'm going to enjoy this one first. It hasn't sunk in. We'll dig into that tomorrow. We'll enjoy (the win) tonight. We're very honored and pleased to be in that position."

For many Broncos, this will be their first conference championship game. Among those players is wide receiver Eric Decker. "It's fun to go on to the next step and just stay alive," he said. "There are four teams left and to be one of them is pretty special."

Manning threw for 230 yards Sunday to surpass Joe Montana and Brett Favre for most passing yards in postseason history. He is now No. two all-time, with 5,909 yards, trailing only the Patriots' Tom Brady who has 6,147.

Manning said the rematch with Brady was not up for discussion.

"We're going to address that (publicly) on Wednesday," Manning said. "But, we'll enjoy this one. You're supposed to enjoy these wins. We'll start working on the Patriots tomorrow."

Sunday's AFC title game is scheduled for 1:05 p.m. in Denver.

"It's prime-time football," said Broncos linebacker Wesley Woodyard, one of the few who chose to identify the challenge. "They're one of the best teams and so are we. We're excited to play these guys."

Added defensive end Robert Ayers: "We're going to have a lot for Brady. We're looking forward to it. He's going to bring his A game (and) we're going to bring ours. It's going to be a tough match. Regardless of what happened last time, if we don't bring our A game we're going to lose."

Broncos fan beaten by Chargers fans after playoff game, assault taped

By Ryan Parker
The Denver Post
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Several San Diego Chargers fans beat a man wearing a Broncos jersey, in San Diego, Sunday night after the second-round AFC playoff game, shown in a video posted on the Internet.

The 18-second clip was posted to YouTube around 7:30 p.m. and showed people in Chargers gear kicking, punching and stomping a man wearing a Broncos jersey.

The info box for the video states the Broncos fan showed up to the area in the Highlands of San Diego and was beaten for doing so.

Police can be seen in the video trying to stop the attack.

A dispatcher for the National City Police Department said arrests were made, but did not have additional information.

Saunders: CBS's Phil Simms captures Broncos' moment

By Dusty Saunders
The Denver Post
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With 5:43 remaining in the tense Chargers-Broncos game, San Diego trailed 24-14, then recovered an onside kick.

CBS's Phil Simms noted, "This changes everything," one of the many logical statements he made during the broadcast.

Soon after, the Chargers went on to score a field goal, reducing the Broncos' lead to 24-17 with 3:53 remaining. And Broncos Nation collectively shuddered while recalling the disaster of a year ago when Denver blew a late lead and lost in double overtime to Baltimore in the divisional round.

In the final two minutes, lead announcer Jim Nantz noted that Peyton Manning's efficient third-down pass for a first down that essentially sealed the victory came against a battered San Diego secondary playing second-stringers.

The CBS duo will return to Denver next weekend for the Manning-Tom Brady tussle to cover the Broncos for the eighth time this season.

NFL playoff notes. In case you hadn't noticed, Fox Sports has a new No. 2 NFL broadcasting team — John Lynch, Ken Burkhardt and Erin Andrews.

The trio, which began the season as the fourth Fox team, is now second to Troy Aikman, Joe Buck and Pam Oliver. The Lynch trio covered Seattle's divisional playoff win Saturday over New Orleans.

While it would be stretching the point to say Lynch was as awesome in the booth as the Seahawks' Marshawn Lynch was on the field, the former Broncos safety provided steady, concise analysis. Lynch and Burkhardt made their 2013 debut as a duo last summer during a locally produced Broncos preseason game aired on KUSA-Channel 9.

Andrews, of course, is no stranger to television, dividing her time between the worlds of sports and glamour. She is now a major personality on cable's Fox Sports 1 network.

- Dan Dierdorf ended his 30-year NFL broadcasting career Saturday night providing analysis on the Patriots-Colts divisional playoff in Foxboro, Mass.

His experience paid off as he noted early that the ground game replaced Brady as the heart of the Patriots' offense.

Dierdorf, in a recent interview, said last year's divisional playoff game in Denver when the Broncos lost in double overtime to the Ravens "was one of the two most memorable games in my career."

He added, "I hope my finale is as exciting."

Obviously, it wasn't.

- In last week's column about NFL broadcasters, I omitted an appraisal of the work of ESPN's Mike Tirico and Jon Gruden on "Monday Night Football."

Tirico is a knowledgeable, hardworking pro equally at home in a football broadcasting booth or at a courtside table during basketball competition. Gruden, for my taste, is "too positive" on a regular basis during his over-the-top coverage, often going overboard in praising NFL talent.

Example: Too often when a running back slices through the line for a long gain, Gruden often tells viewers about the magnificent run, while not noting the defense was out of position or missed numerous tackles.

- Who am I? Brent Musburger, noted for his awkward broadcasting moments, outdid himself during his opening of the BCS championship game, announcing: "Good evening and welcome everybody. I'm Kirk Herbstreit, along with Brent Musburger ..."

To his credit, Musburger turned in a better game performance than he did in 2013, when he gushed constantly about the relationship between Alabama quarterback AJ Mc-Carron and his glamorous model girlfriend, Katherine Webb, who received an overabundance of camera coverage while sitting in the stands.

Ratings roulette. Florida State's victory over Auburn in the BCS championship on ESPN produced 26.0 million viewers — the third-highest audience ratings ever for a cable production.

Predictably, the first- and second-most-watched programs were BCS finales — 27.3 million in 2011 when Auburn beat Oregon, and 26.3 million in 2013 when Alabama defeated Notre Dame.

San Diego Chargers play poorly in playoff loss to Denver Broncos

By Irv Moss
The Denver Post
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San Diego came into the postseason viewed as a dangerous underdog and lived up to that billing with an upset at Cincinnati the previous weekend. But the Chargers left Sports Authority Field at Mile High on Sunday as an afterthought.

They knew their performance in a 24-17 playoff loss to the Broncos didn't measure up. Though they made a late push, the Chargers never had the ball with a chance to tie or take the lead from midway through the second quarter.

"We just didn't get it done," coach Mike McCoy offered as an all-encompassing answer to the many questions that were aimed his way. San Diego had only five first downs through three quarters. Quarterback Philip Rivers called timeouts in frustration to avoid penalties because the offense wasn't lined up correctly. The Chargers' defensive linemen had five encroachment penalties, several helping to keep Broncos drives alive.

"We didn't have the right personnel in the game for the play that was called," Chargers tight end Antonio Gates said of the wasted timeouts. "We didn't realize it until we broke the huddle."

For three quarters, the Chargers bumbled along, looking totally inept.

"We got it rolling pretty good at the end," Rivers said in an attempt to find something positive. "We didn't play very good in the first half. I firmly believe that if we could have gotten one more chance, we would have tied that thing up."

Rivers, who called the windy weather less-than-ideal conditions, credited Denver's defense for his team's troubles.

"There were some new wrinkles, but there was nothing that surprised us," he said. "They just outexecuted us in the first half."

McCoy played conservatively, trying to run the ball and use up the clock, but the Chargers were stymied for three quarters. They scored all of their points in the fourth quarter. They were bolstered by a successful onside kick, but after pulling within seven points, they couldn't get the ball back.

"No excuses. We just got beat," said McCoy, the Broncos' offensive coordinator in 2012. "We got beat in all three phases at times in the game. We fought to the bitter end, but it wasn't good enough to win."

Broncos fans glad to get playoff win, forget about last year's loss

By Sadie Gurman
The Denver Post
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Phew.

Jessica Hansen finally can breathe again. It was touch and go there for a minute as she took in every last gut-wrenching moment of what ultimately was a 24-17 victory by her beloved Broncos in Sunday's nail-biter of a playoff game against the San Diego Chargers.

Like every other Broncos fan among the 76,969 that packed Sports Authority Field at Mile High, Hansen finally exhaled. Then cheered.

"I'm feeling so, so, so excited," Hansen, of Brush, said after the game, her voice hoarse from yelling. "And so, so, so relieved. It's absolutely relief. This is one more step."

The victory meant salvation for fans still grieving last year's playoff loss to the Baltimore Ravens, scenes of which weighed heavily on their minds. The Chargers scored 17 points in the fourth quarter, and it looked like, for a moment, that history might repeat itself.

"This is the Ravens again! This is worse," one fan shouted.

His neighbor in the seat below him threw up his hands and stormed off, unable to watch anymore.

Even before the game Hansen and her husband, Kevin, were feeling angst.

"I don't exactly know how to put it into words," she said. "It's the most exciting and scary feeling. You don't want to be walking out of the stadium like we did last year."

As fellow tailgater Chris Rawlings explained: "This is the most important game they've ever played. Because of the Chargers — because it's Philip Rivers — if we lost this game, we could never recover out of it."

Few would admit it, but they were worried. They wondered: What about the wind, which was so cold and fast it whipped cheerleaders' hair and sent hundreds of orange balloons into the sky a little too soon? Would the Broncos' defense hold up? How would they play without Von Miller?

Rawlings was confident, he assured. But he wore his game-day Broncos boxers, just in case.

In the parking lot, Broncos "official superfan" Ralph Williams reminded fans to have faith.

"If we have this many people believing the same thing is going to happen, it will," he said as he gazed at the parking lot full of tailgaters in orange and blue, which included a man shirtless beyond orange paint who said, "I have no doubt in my mind we will win this game."

Fans' trepidation wore, though.

"Anytime we can draw the first blood, that puts them on the hot seat," said John Croissant, of Windsor, whose eyes stayed glued on a set of big-screen TVs as he watched the game in the warmth of a lower level.

Jesse Frank, of Aurora, wouldn't have left his seat except to go to the men's room, where he and a growing line of others screamed and hooted at the TV as they waited. The fans started to think they had it made. But then, they weren't so sure.

Heads kept warm by horse hats fell into orange-gloved hands.

Even Trennah Nantkes, 9, could barely control her nerves. So when the Broncos' finally clinched the game, "it was a relief that I didn't have to be nervous anymore," she said.

But as fans skipped and galloped and high-fived and screamed and chest-bumped their way out of the stadium, they tried not to get cocky.

"You gotta beat the best to be the best, and New England is the best," Matt Bury, of Denver, explained between shrieks and yelps as fans all around him watched the Broncos nervously hang on. "Plus, we've got to go to work tomorrow."

Chris Harris, Broncos cornerback, to undergo MRI exam for injuries

The Denver Post
January 12, 2014

There is fear Broncos cornerback Chris Harris has suffered a serious knee injury.

One of Denver's top defensive players, Harris left the game in the third quarter with ankle and knee injuries and did not return. Although X-rays were negative, Harris will undergo an MRI exam on his knee Monday morning. It's almost certain Harris won't play in the AFC championship game next week against Tom Brady and the New England Patriots.

Harris was replaced by veteran Quentin Jammer, and the former Charger was tested by former teammate Philip Rivers.

"I played like (crud)," Jammer said. "It wasn't anything physical. It was mental. I was sitting on routes I shouldn't have been sitting on."

In Jammer's defense, he hasn't played much this year. The Broncos kept cornerback Champ Bailey in the slot and had Jammer play outside along with Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie.

The Broncos could also use Kayvon Webster and Tony Carter against New England.

Lesson learned. In trying to protect a seven-point lead late in the game, the Broncos did not run the ball on third-and-long. On third-and-17, deep in their own end, Peyton Manning passed ... to a wide-open Julius Thomas near the Broncos' sideline for a 21-yard gain.

"It was the perfect call," Manning said, giving all the credit to offensive coordinator Adam Gase.

"It was a lack of communication on our part," said San Diego coach and former Broncos offensive coordinator Mike McCoy.

Two plays later, it was third-and-6 with 2:12 left. Again, Manning hit Thomas for a first down.

"We didn't want to punt the ball back to them and give them an opportunity," Thomas said. "We knew that we needed to go out there and do what we needed to do so we could end the game in a victory formation. There's no better feeling for an offense than to go out there and kneel to win the game."

Manning said of his second-year tight end, the former Portland State basketball star: "Julius was huge all game. He's been huge all season. ... Julius and I have spent a lot of time working on those particular routes — after practice, in practice."

Decker punt returns. The Broncos took punt return duty away from Trindon Holliday and gave it to receiver Eric Decker. Holliday remained the kickoff returner.

"Just a little bit of a changeup," Broncos coach John Fox said. "Eric's a little bit of a rangier body, covers a little bit more ground."

Decker was working on a sensational 47-yard punt return, breaking three tackles along the way when he tripped himself up in the open field.

"I guess it was that invisible fence again that got me," said Decker, who also tripped in the open field after a long reception at San Diego last year. "I got a little excited and tripped myself, and I wish I could have that play back."

Game-day roster moves. The Broncos' seven inactive players: Ronnie Hillman, quarterback Zac Dysert, Carter, guard Chris Kuper, tight end Joel Dreessen, defensive end Derek Wolfe and defensive tackle Sione Fua.

Allen hot in Denver. Chargers wide receiver Keenan Allen had two touchdown catches in the San Diego regular-season win in Denver, and two more — both for 16 yards — Sunday. "I just think we came out flat and not how we wanted to," he said. "We couldn't capitalize in third downs coming out of the first half. We tried to make a turnaround, but it was obviously too little, too late."

Footnotes. Britton Colquitt didn't have a single punt for Denver. He did hold for Matt Prater's three extra points and two field-goal attempts, so he at least officially got in the game. ... Late in the third quarter, Prater had a 47-yard field-goal attempt hang up in the wind and float to the left. No good. It would have given Denver a 20-0 lead. ... The Chargers lost linebacker Manti Te'o to a concussion in the first half

Broncos vs. Patriots playoff tickets go on sale Monday in Denver

The Denver Post
January 12, 2014

After the Broncos got past the Chargers on Sunday in an AFC divisional playoff game in Denver, Peyton Manning and crew advanced to the AFC Championship game next Sunday.

The Broncos will host Tom Brady and the New England Patriots on Sunday at 1 p.m. (MT) in Denver. And tickets go on sale right away Monday at 10 a.m.

Tickets will be available at all Ticketmaster locations by calling 1-800-745-3000 or by visiting ticketmaster.com. Tickets will be available only to those with a billing address in the Rocky Mountain states, including Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming, Nebraska, Montana, South Dakota and Western Kansas.

Ticket prices top out at \$600, with club seats going from \$300-600. Reserved seat tickets will cost from \$90-\$300. And there is a limit of four tickets per household.

Hochman: Lil' Phily Rivers has season sacked in playoff loss to Broncos

By Benjamin Hochman
The Denver Post
January 12, 2014

Lil' Phily Rivers threw up his hands in disgust to call timeout, and then kicked the turf in such a child-like manner it looked like mommy needed to put him in timeout.

Instantly, the Broncos' Robert Ayers mocked the quarterback, imitating the kick, followed by a faux waddle toward the sideline.

"I found it funny that he was crying and whining," Ayers said, "so I just took the opportunity to tease him."

The Broncos defense believed. And the Broncos defense, swarming with swagger, overwhelmed the Chargers for most of the playoff victory Sunday.

Confident? Nah, this was cocky.

Sure, San Diego came in here a month ago and instigated a stampede upon these guys. And sure, many of Denver starters on defense aren't even starters, instead backups thrust into new roles due to injuries and underachievement. But give defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio a game ball for cooking up schemes for sacks and savagery.

I mean, for three quarters, it was 1977 all over again.

At that point, San Diego didn't have any points. The Chargers had tallied just 44 passing yards, 54 yards on the ground and five first downs. It took an injury to cornerback Chris Harris, who nabbed the starting job from a then-injured Champ Bailey, for Rivers to finally find himself, throwing to rookie Keenan Allen to pick on the aging cornerback Quentin Jammer.

I've always contended that as long as Denver's defense just hung in a game, Denver could win the AFC due to its offense. Well, in the biggest game of the season, the defense changed the game.

They went after Rivers early, preventing him from puncturing the defense with short zips. Denver sacked Rivers twice on the first drive, and the Chargers realized they couldn't come to Denver and take their time chewing up first downs and eating up the clock like it was smothered in tasty green chili.

Denver finished with four sacks on Rivers, who a few times demonstrated his anger with flailing and flapping arms.

"First I have to say he's a great quarterback — but yes, it's pretty funny when a grown man is throwing a temper tantrum," said Denver defensive tackle Malik Jackson. "That's good to see that we're out there frustrating him enough that he's thrown off his game."

"In these last two games, me and Philip had some words said to each other. Nothing crazy, just a strong professional dislike for each other. The sacks felt great, to actually talk to him when he was on his back, to hear what he had to say (at that moment). It was a good feeling. ... We've got a chip on our shoulder, and we're going to take it out on people."

The chip is understandable. When you think of the 2013 Broncos, you think of offense. America thinks of offense. Understandably so, for this might be the best offense in the history of offense. But in the past three games now, Denver has allowed fewer than 20 points in each game.

What happened?

"We woke up - we were asleep before," safety Mike Adams said with a smirk. "We came together and realized - in the playoffs, you've got to have good defense. If you don't play good defense, you won't get too far. And we didn't want to put everything on Peyton Manning's shoulders. Our defensive guys, we have pride, so we wanted to do our job and make it easier for him."

New England is coming to town next weekend. And even though Denver has a bunch of no-names on defense, this is a better group than blew the game in Foxboro in November.

Welker's return helps Broncos beat Chargers 24-17

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
January 13, 2014

DENVER (AP) — Wes Welker isn't looking back at his unhappy homecoming in Foxborough in November or his six seasons with Tom Brady in New England as he prepares for the Patriots' visit to Denver next Sunday.

"It's the AFC championship game, there's going to be plenty of juice," Welker said after catching a touchdown pass from Peyton Manning in Denver's 24-17 win over the San Diego Chargers on Sunday.

Welker had six receptions in his return from a concussion that had sidelined him for a month, and he wore an oversized safety helmet that drew comparisons to Dark Helmet from "Spaceballs" and The Great Gazoo from the Flintstones.

"I've been practicing with it the last few weeks, so I got used to it," Welker said. "It does kind of look like the Jetsons out there."

Welker's return helped the Broncos flip their time-of-possession deficit against the Chargers, who had held the ball for more than 38 minutes in both of their regular season meetings, including a 27-20 win in Denver in December.

The Broncos (14-3) will host the Patriots (13-4), who beat them 34-31 in overtime on Nov. 24 in New England.

Welker was trying to make a fair catch of a punt in the wind but didn't call off his blockers in time and the ball hit teammate Tony Carter. The Patriots recovered and kicked the game-winning field goal.

The Patriots beat Indianapolis 43-22 to advance to their third straight conference championship. The Broncos are back for the first time in eight years.

Five things that helped the Broncos avoid another Mile High meltdown like their crushing loss to Baltimore in last year's playoffs:

THIRD-DOWN THEATRICALS: The last time these teams played, the Chargers converted 6 of 12 third downs and controlled the clock for 38 minutes while the Broncos sorely missed Welker and were just 2 for 9 on third downs.

This time, Denver was 9 for 13 — the 69 percent the highest of any team in this year's postseason — and the Chargers were just 4 of 12.

The Broncos' biggest conversions were the three they had on their final drive, including a 21-yard catch by Julius Thomas on third-and-17 from their own 20, which allowed them to salt away the win. That's something they weren't able to do in their crushing 38-35 loss in double-overtime to the Ravens exactly a year earlier.

"I felt like that game last year forced us to address those types of situations all season long," Manning said. "We've worked on it in training camp, we've worked on it in the season. ... It was nice that all that hard work paid off for us."

MANNING'S MAGIC: Manning drew five different defenders into committing neutral zone infractions with a cadence that had the Chargers flustered.

"They were doing a hard count, but that's not an excuse for us jumping offside," San Diego linebacker Melvin Ingram said. "We need to be more disciplined than that."

"Yeah, that's giving a very good quarterback a lot of freebies," Chargers coach Mike McCoy said.

The penalties helped Manning give the Broncos a 17-0 lead on his way to snapping a personal three-game losing streak in the postseason, where he improved to 10-11 with his first win since leading Indianapolis over the Jets 30-17 in the AFC championship game on Jan. 24, 2010.

GRIND IT OUT: All four teams that are still alive in the playoffs can thank their ground games. Knowshon Moreno gained 82 yards on 23 carries and Montee Ball added 52 yards on 10 runs. This, after the Broncos managed just 18 yards on 11 carries against the Chargers in their loss to San Diego last month.

"It was just working out so well for us today that we wanted to stick with it," Thomas said. "Our running backs did a great job of running the ball and earning tough yards."

SLOW-STARTING CHARGERS: The Broncos shut down Philip Rivers until cornerback Chris Harris Jr., who played more snaps than any of Denver's defenders during the regular season, went out with knee and ankle injuries early in the second half.

Rivers finally found the end zone with a 16-yard toss to Keenan Allen early in the fourth quarter, then found him again for a 49-yard gain on fourth-and-5 from his own 25-yard line with seven minutes left and the Chargers trailing 24-7.

The Broncos held on, but mostly because Manning & Co. kept Rivers on the sideline after the Chargers cut the lead to 24-17.

"I know one thing: we can't be complacent where we are," Champ Bailey said. "We have to be a much better team because we have a much better quarterback and team coming in here next week."

SPECIAL TEAMS: The Broncos overcame some big blunders on special teams. Eric Decker, who also flubbed a fourth-quarter onside kick that San Diego recovered, tripped at the 30-yard line on what would have been a 77-yard punt return touchdown.

"I guess it was just that invisible fence again that got me," said Decker, who tripped over the 45-yard line on his way to an 85-yard score against San Diego last season. "Got a little excited, tripped myself and wish I could have that play back."

Trindon Holliday's 105-yard kickoff return for a touchdown was negated by Omar Bolden's block in the back on a defender that wasn't going to make the play.

Holliday, however, secured the pooch kick with 3:51 left that led to Denver's game-sealing drive.

Manning, Broncos top Chargers, make AFC title game

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
January 12, 2014

DENVER (AP) — Peyton Manning welcomed Wes Welker back into the lineup with a touchdown toss and the Denver Broncos narrowly avoided a repeat of their playoff slip from last year, advancing to the AFC championship game with a 24-17 win over the San Diego Chargers on Sunday.

The Broncos (14-3) took a 17-0 lead into the fourth quarter. Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers then capitalized on an injury to cornerback Chris Harris Jr. to stage a comeback reminiscent of Baltimore's shocking win at Denver exactly a year earlier.

This time, however, Manning rescued the Broncos from the brink of another crushing collapse and sent them into the title game for the first time in eight seasons.

They'll host the New England Patriots (13-4) on Sunday.

Get ready for Brady vs. Manning once more.

In the most recent matchup of QBs with Hall of Fame credentials, Tom Brady and the Patriots rallied past Manning and the visiting Broncos 34-31 in overtime on Nov. 24.

"It's the Broncos versus the Patriots and certainly Tom and I have played against each other a lot," Manning said after beating San Diego. "But when you get to the AFC championship, it's about two good teams that have been through a lot to get there."

Manning ended a personal three-game postseason skid in winning for the first time since leading Indianapolis over the Jets 30-17 in the AFC championship game on Jan. 24, 2010.

Manning completed 25 of 36 passes for 230 yards and two TDs, numbers that weren't quite up to the standards he set during a record-breaking regular season when he established new benchmarks with 55 TD throws and 5,447 yards through the air.

But it was windy and the Broncos were intent on establishing the run and controlling the clock. San Diego had Manning and his high-octane offense cooling their cleats on the sideline for more than 38 minutes in both of their meetings during the regular season, when both teams won on the road.

Denver had the ball for 35 minutes, 27 seconds in this game, to San Diego's 24:33.

After gaining just 18 yards on the ground against San Diego last month, the Broncos ran for 133 yards, including 82 by Knowshon Moreno, whose 3-yard TD run put them ahead 24-7 with 8:12 left.

After that, things got interesting.

Quentin Jammer, who gave up San Diego's first TD, a 16-yarder to Keenen Allen early in the fourth quarter, surrendered a 49-yard catch by Allen on fourth-and-5 from the San Diego 25 with seven minutes left.

That led to Allen's second TD, also from 16 yards out, that pulled the Chargers to 24-14 with 5:43 left.

Eric Decker then made his third big blunder of the day, flubbing the onside kick, which San Diego recovered.

Nick Novak's 30-yard field goal with 3:53 pulled the Chargers (10-8) to within a touchdown.

Novak followed with a pooch kick, and Trindon Holliday secured the ball at the Denver 27 with 3:51 left. Manning converted two third-down throws to tight end Julius Thomas, the first one a nifty 21-yarder on third-and-17 from his 20 and then a third-and-6 from his 45-yard line.

Then, on third-and-1, Moreno burst up the middle for 5 yards with a minute left and the offensive linemen high-fived each other.

All Manning had to do at that point was take a knee — just like he did last year at the end of regulation after Jacoby Jones had hauled in Joe Flacco's 70-yard desperation throw with 31 seconds left to tie the game.

In that game, coach John Fox ordered Manning to take a knee even though he had three timeouts left so he could take his chances in overtime. And the Broncos lost 38-35 in double overtime.

Those boos were replaced by cheers in this game, the scowls by smiles.

Allen finished with six catches for 142 yards as the Chargers lost for the first time in six weeks.

The Broncos took a 14-0 halftime lead that could have easily been 21-0 if not for blunders by Decker, who tripped with no defender near him at the San Diego 30-yard line after a 47-yard punt return.

Then, on third-and-goal from the 4, Manning hit him with a perfect pass as he cut across the back of the end zone, but it bounced off his chest and into the arms of linebacker Donald Butler with 30 seconds left.

Manning threw up his arms in disbelief after his first red zone interception of the season — following 39 red-zone TDs.

Thomas also had a turnover, but it wasn't that costly as Novak slipped and his foot hit the ground on a 53-yard field goal try that was short and wide left.

The Chargers were the only opponent to win in Denver all season, prevailing 27-20 exactly a month earlier when the Broncos were missing Welker (concussion) and went 2 for 9 on third down.

Welker finished with six catches for 38 yards, although he dropped his first pass and also couldn't hold onto another 27-yarder at the goal line.

Manning led a 14-play, 86-yard drive that chewed up 7 minutes on Denver's first drive. He capped it with a 2-yard strike to Demaryius Thomas, then hit Welker from 3 yards out in the second quarter to make it 14-0.

This was the 109th meeting between the original AFL rivals but the first in the postseason.

Chargers rally late, fall 24-17 to Broncos

By Pat Graham
Associated Press
January 12, 2014

DENVER (AP) — Philip Rivers fidgeted on the sideline, rocking back and forth as he anxiously watched his defense try to somehow, some way get Peyton Manning off the field late in the game.

One more opportunity with the ball, that's all Rivers wanted.

Because, "if we got it one more time, I believe deep down we would've tied that thing up," the San Diego quarterback said.

Only, it didn't happen.

Peyton Manning wasn't about to allow another meltdown to occur at Mile High. He ran down the clock — converting a key third-and-17 — and took a final knee to help the Denver Broncos advance to the AFC championship game by holding off the Chargers 24-17 on a windy Sunday.

The Broncos (14-3) will host Tom Brady and the New England Patriots next Sunday.

San Diego (10-8) was trying to stun the top-seeded Broncos, much as Baltimore did last season when the Ravens bounced Manning and Denver from the playoffs with a late rally.

This time, Manning secured the win by converting a long third-down play. That play was a big blow to San Diego.

It kept Rivers on the sideline, folding and unfolding his arms, wishing and wishing, his defense could find a way to get him and the offense back the ball.

"We knew we weren't going to be stopped," said receiver Keenan Allen who caught six passes for 142 yards and two TDs. "We just got it going."

Not early, though. The Chargers took a while to warm up in the cooler weather.

Trailing 24-7 early in the fourth quarter, the Chargers began to open up the offense and made things interesting down the stretch.

First, Allen hauled in a 16-yard TD pass from Rivers. Then, San Diego recovered the onside kick, driving deep into Denver territory before settling for a short field goal to make it a one-possession game.

Rather than attempt another onside kick, the Chargers decided to rely on their defense to stop Manning.

For a moment, it looked as if the plan might actually work. They had Denver facing a third-and-17 at the 20. But Manning hit Julius Thomas for a 21-yard gain.

Two first downs later and Manning was taking a knee to close out the game and the Chargers' season.

"We didn't get it done. No excuses," San Diego first-year coach Mike McCoy said. "We didn't get it done."

Once again, the Chargers tried to rely on their ground game to grind out a win. But with Ryan Mathews hobbled by a tender ankle, San Diego couldn't get anything going.

And Rivers struggled through the air, too, completing 7 of 12 passes for 44 yards through three quarters. But then Rivers found his rhythm in the final quarter, finishing the game 18 of 27 for 217 yards and two touchdowns.

Did he wish he would've thrown it more earlier in the game?

"It's always easier after the fact," said Rivers, whose team had won five straight entering the game. "You wonder, 'What if we spread it out a little more?'"

"That could've turned into a 31-7 or a something worse game. There's no consolation for losing, but we got going pretty good. They knew."

They certainly did. The last thing Denver wanted to see was Rivers back on the field. Especially with memories of Baltimore still fresh from a year ago.

Manning took care of business and ended a personal three-game postseason skid.

"We're extremely disappointed. We're hurting," Eric Weddle said. "You work every day, every hour every minute for a chance at the ultimate goal — the Super Bowl. And then to have that goal not attained? It's hard to deal with."

The Chargers struggled against not only Manning's arm, but his cadence. They were called five times for neutral zone infractions.

"Giving a very good quarterback a lot of freebies," McCoy said. "We got beat by a better football team today."

Asked if Chargers offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt interviewing for head coaching positions played a role in the stagnant offense, McCoy quickly responded: "I'll stop you right there: Not one bit,"

"He tried to put the best plan together with the rest of the staff, like they've done every day of the week from the very first day we've been together," added McCoy, who went through a similar situation last season when he was offensive coordinator of the Broncos. "His No. 1 focus was trying to find a way to win this game."

Notes: Chargers linebacker Manti Te'o and safety Marcus Gilchrist both left the game with a concussion. ... P Mike Scifres hurt his back in the first half trying to make a tackle. He gingerly punted in the third quarter. ... Rivers fell to 6-3 in Denver. ... San Diego controlled time of possession in both regular season games against the Broncos, but on Sunday only had the ball for 24 minutes.

Column: The NFL sets up a Sunday to remember

By Time Dahlberg
Associated Press
January 13, 2014

Peyton Manning and Tom Brady one more time with the Super Bowl on the line would have been good enough all by itself.

But in the embarrassment of riches that is the NFL this season, we get more. Much more.

Two young superstar quarterbacks in the making squaring off in Seattle. Wes Welker against the team that wanted him no longer, and Anquan Boldin taking his new team on another championship run. A sideshow with Pete Carroll and Jim Harbaugh that might be worth the price of admission by itself.

And a Super Bowl that will be a winner even if it's played on a sheet of ice.

If this was the NBA, David Stern would have been accused of having the fix in. But it's just more of the same for the NFL, where the story lines and matchups are so good that it's almost a foregone conclusion next Sunday's TV ratings will blow past anything seen before for conference title games that are always big.

About the only thing missing is a scrappy team of underdogs fighting for a berth in the Super Bowl, but there's no reason to quibble. Not with the brawny quartet of teams that all went into the weekend as favorites and all survived to play another day.

The bookies in Vegas are laying odds — as they have all season long — that the Seattle Seahawks will play the Denver Broncos in the Super Bowl. But even they wouldn't be terribly surprised if it was New England against the San Francisco 49ers or any combination in between.

"It's a lot like playground basketball," Harbaugh said. "Winners stay and play, losers go home. And we want to keep playing."

That the 49ers are still playing is little surprise, even if they had to beat a team on the road they had lost to at home during the season. But beat the Carolina Panthers they did, winning their second straight playoff game away from home and seeming to take great delight in doing so.

If any team is a reflection of their coach it's the 49ers, who will play a third straight NFC title game under Harbaugh. Colin Kaepernick even got into the act, mocking

Cam Newton's Superman pose after scoring a third-quarter touchdown, then adding his own signature bicep kiss to top things off.

"Just a little shoutout," Kaepernick said.

Forget that the 49ers were outclassed their last two trips to Seattle, losing by a combined margin of 71-16. It's doubtful they'll be intimidated by the rain or a raucous crowd that sends tremors through the earth (Saturday's foot stomping win over New Orleans was recorded as a small earthquake) in a game that figures to be both bruising and bitterly contested.

John Fox won't be intimidated either, despite having to go up against Bill Belichick and memories of a tough November loss to the Patriots to get to the title game. Fox seems the odd man out against the outsized coaching personalities left in the playoffs, but don't forget that he's the only coach who has won a playoff game with Tim Tebow under center.

Now he's got Manning, who made up for the Broncos' early exit last postseason against Baltimore with a couple of clutch third-down throws late in the fourth quarter just as Denver seemed to be once again in full meltdown mode. Manning also had the quote of the game when asked if it was weighing on his mind that he is nearing the end of his career and may not have many playoff chances left.

"What weighed on my mind is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth after this win. Priority No. 1," a visibly relieved Manning said. "That was an intense game."

The game was barely over when Manning was asked for the first of what will be at least 562 times this week about his matchup with Brady, who has won 10 of the 14 games they've played against each other. Manning gave his usual our team against theirs answer, but this time he wasn't just blowing smoke. Not after the Patriots scored 42 points to whip Indianapolis without Brady throwing even one touchdown pass as the Patriots took their all too familiar place in the AFC title game, and not when the Broncos are doing some running of their own.

Still, it figures to be all Manning against Brady, even if the best story of the postseason may be the one no one outside of the Boston area wants to hear. If there was ever a coach you love to hate it's Belichick, but the ever grumpy guy under the hoodie has done a remarkable job in a year most expected New England to struggle.

With Welker gone and no tight ends left for Brady to throw to, Belichick was forced to reinvent the team on the fly. He did so by turning them into a run first team behind big LeGarrette Blount, who scored four touchdowns against the Colts and could be the breakout star of these playoffs.

The Super Bowl that will be played in three weeks at the Meadowlands has been the talk of football all season, and with good reason. It's the first cold weather game to be played outdoors, and it could either be a spectacle or a debacle.

Two teams will get there eventually. But not before the NFL gives us one final Sunday to enjoy a pair of games so good they could be the ones we really remember.

Brady-Manning, 49ers-Seahawks spice up title games

By Dennis Waszak Jr.
Associated Press
January 13, 2014

Familiar foes. Rivalry showdowns.

Talk about a couple of juicy title-game tussles.

It's Peyton Manning vs. Tom Brady — Round 15 — in the AFC championship game next Sunday, while the San Francisco 49ers square off against the Seattle Seahawks in the NFC title bout.

Yep, here we go again. With a Super Bowl trip on the line.

"It's the Broncos versus the Patriots and certainly Tom and I have played against each other a lot," Manning said, "but when you get to the AFC championship, it's about two good teams that have been through a lot to get there."

Manning helped lead Denver past the San Diego Chargers 24-17 on Sunday, setting up another meeting with Brady and New England, which beat Indianapolis 43-22 on Saturday night. The Broncos (14-3) opened as 6½-point favorites for the game at Denver.

"That's two of the greats," Denver wide receiver Eric Decker said. "It's going to be talked about a lot throughout the week."

Manning and Brady have squared off 14 times throughout their careers, with the Patriots quarterback holding a 10-4 edge in the head-to-head matchup, including a 34-31 overtime victory in November. They each have a win against the other in the AFC championship game: Brady in the 2003 playoffs and Manning in the 2006 postseason with Indianapolis.

And the winner went on to win the Super Bowl each time.

But, it's not necessarily the same old story this time around. Both the Broncos and Patriots have been winning with balanced offenses, relying not only on the strong arms of their record-breaking quarterbacks but also on their running games.

Manning was 25 of 36 for 230 yards and two TDs, but the Broncos controlled the clock on the ground. After gaining just 18 yards against San Diego last month, the Broncos ran for 133 yards, including 82 by Knowshon Moreno, whose 3-yard TD run put them ahead 24-7 with 8:12 left.

The Chargers rallied to get within a score late, but Manning completed a pair of key third-down passes in the final minutes to prevent San Diego from getting a final chance.

"They're a great team, they had a big win (Saturday) night," Manning said of the Patriots. "We're going to enjoy this one tonight, start to work on them tomorrow and I know it'll be a heck of a game."

At Foxborough, Mass., LeGarrette Blount carried the Patriots (13-4) to their third straight AFC title game with four touchdown runs against the Colts. Stevan Ridley added two rushing scores, giving New England six TDs — and none by Brady.

"The way our defense is getting the ball for us and, really, what we've done the last three or four weeks (with) the running game has just been awesome," Brady said. "Hopefully, we can do it next week, too."

In the NFC, the 49ers and Seahawks are all set to play in the latest chapter in one of the NFL's budding — and bitter — rivalries.

The Seahawks (14-3) opened as 3-point favorites for the game at Seattle against 49ers (14-4), who defeated the Carolina Panthers 23-10 on Sunday.

On Saturday, Marshawn Lynch ran for a franchise playoff-record 140 yards and two touchdowns and Seattle's defense flustered Drew Brees and New Orleans in a 23-15 victory. The top-seeded Seahawks advanced to the NFC title game for the second time, and first since the 2005 playoffs.

"We haven't done anything yet," quarterback Russell Wilson said. "That's our goal. We have 60 minutes of football left."

San Francisco, which lost last year to Baltimore, is looking for a return trip to the Super Bowl. And lots of hard hits and plenty of jawing might be expected in this latest matchup with the Seahawks.

"I think we're the two teams everyone was looking at from the beginning," 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick said. "It's going to be a knockdown, drag-out game."

Count on it.

The previous few games between the NFC West rivals have been full of contempt, with shoving, pushing and arguing spicing things up. Even the coaches don't care for each other.

Seahawks coach Pete Carroll and 49ers coach Jim Harbaugh have been rivals dating to their days as opponents in the old Pac-10. In 2009, after Harbaugh's Stanford team ran up the score on Carroll's Southern California squad in a 55-21 rout, the two met at midfield and an annoyed Carroll barked, "What's your deal?"

That's carried over to the NFL — and it might get ramped up again during the week.

"We're healthy, we're a great team and we're willing to do whatever it takes to get that ring," 49ers running back Frank Gore said. "We're playing great ball."

Good thing, since the 49ers have committed seven turnovers and been outscored 71-16 in their past two trips to Seattle, including a 29-3 Week 2 loss in September.

"We're a different team than we were the first time we played them up there," Kaepernick insisted.

The 49ers will get a chance to prove that next weekend.

At Seattle, Steven Hauschka kicked three field goals in blustery conditions, and Lynch capped the victory with a 31-yard scoring run with 2:40 left that Carroll celebrated by jumping into offensive line coach Tom Cable's arms.

"It feels awesome," fullback Michael Robinson said, "but this doesn't mean anything if we don't win next week."

Title-game tussles: Brady-Manning, 49ers-Seahawks

By Dennis Waszak Jr.
Associated Press
January 12, 2014

Well, well. We meet again.

Peyton Manning vs. Tom Brady in the AFC championship game. The San Francisco 49ers vs. the Seattle Seahawks in the NFC title bout.

It'll be a Sunday of rivalry showdowns next weekend, with familiar foes a win away from the Super Bowl.

Manning helped lead the Denver Broncos past the San Diego Chargers 24-17 on Sunday, setting up another meeting with Brady and the New England Patriots.

The Broncos opened as 6½-point favorites for the game at Denver.

"It's the Broncos versus the Patriots and certainly Tom and I have played against each other a lot," Manning said, "but when you get to the AFC championship, it's about two good teams that have been through a lot to get there."

In the NFC, the 49ers and Seahawks are all set to play for the NFC championship in the latest chapter in one of the NFL's budding — and bitter — rivalries.

The Seahawks (14-3) opened as 3-point favorites for the game at Seattle.

The Broncos (14-3) controlled the game against the Chargers (10-8) for 3½ quarters before Philip Rivers capitalized on an injury to cornerback Chris Harris Jr. to stage a comeback reminiscent of Baltimore's shocking win at Denver exactly a year earlier.

But this time, Manning rescued the Broncos from the brink of another crushing collapse and sent them into the title game for the first time in eight seasons.

Manning and Brady have squared off 14 times throughout their careers, with the Patriots quarterback holding a 10-4 edge in the head-to-head matchup — including a 34-31 overtime victory in November.

"They're a great team, they had a big win last night," Manning said. "We're going to enjoy this one tonight, start to work on them tomorrow and I know it'll be a heck of a game."

Manning was 25 of 36 for 230 yards and two TDs, but the Broncos controlled the clock by largely sticking to the ground game. After gaining just 18 yards against San Diego last month, the Broncos ran for 133 yards, including 82 by Knowshon Moreno, whose 3-yard TD run put them ahead 24-7 with 8:12 left.

The Chargers rallied to get within a score late, but Manning completed a pair of key third-down passes in the final minutes to prevent San Diego from getting a final chance.

At Foxborough, Mass., LeGarrette Blount carried the Patriots (13-4) to their third straight AFC title game with four touchdown runs in a 43-22 victory over the Indianapolis Colts on Saturday night.

"It's just a great achievement," Brady said. "People have counted us out at times this year, but I think we've got a locker room full of believers."

It's easy to see why after they forced Andrew Luck into throwing four interceptions and ran for six scores against the Colts.

"We just had to keep our foot on the gas pedal," Blount said, "and make sure that they didn't do to us what they did to Kansas City."

Last weekend, the Colts (12-6) pulled off a stunning 45-44 victory over the Chiefs in which they overcame a 38-10 third-quarter deficit in the wild-card game for the second-biggest comeback victory in NFL playoff history.

This time, there was no such come-from-behind performance for Luck and the Colts.

At Charlotte, N.C., Colin Kaepernick threw a touchdown pass and ran for another score and the 49ers defeated the Carolina Panthers 23-10 on Sunday.

San Francisco, which lost last year to Baltimore, is looking for a return trip to the Super Bowl. And lots of hard hits and plenty of jawing might be expected in this latest matchup with the Seahawks.

"I think we're the two teams everyone was looking at from the beginning," Kaepernick said. "It's going to be a knockdown, drag-out game."

The 49ers have committed seven turnovers and been outscored 71-16 in their past two trips to Seattle, including a 29-3 Week 2 loss in September.

"We're a different team than we were the first time we played them up there," Kaepernick insisted.

The 49ers (14-4) will get a chance to prove that next weekend after Kaepernick completed 15 of 28 passes for 196 yards Sunday, avenging his worst statistical

performance of the season two months ago against the Panthers. He was held to 91 yards passing and 16 yards rushing in the first meeting with Carolina, a 10-9 loss at Candlestick Park.

On Saturday, Marshawn Lynch ran for a franchise playoff-record 140 yards and two touchdowns and Seattle's defense flustered Drew Brees and New Orleans in a 23-15 victory. The top-seeded Seahawks advanced to the NFC title game for the second time, and first since the 2005 playoffs.

"We haven't done anything yet," quarterback Russell Wilson said. "That's our goal. We have 60 minutes of football left."

Against a familiar foe.

Seahawks coach Pete Carroll and 49ers coach Jim Harbaugh have been rivals dating to their days as opponents in the old Pac-10 conference.

In 2009, after Harbaugh's Stanford team ran up the score on Carroll's Southern California squad in a 55-21 rout, the two met at midfield and an annoyed Carroll barked, "What's your deal?"

They've carried that over to the NFL — and it might get ramped up again during the week with a Super Bowl appearance on the line.

"We're healthy, we're a great team and we're willing to do whatever it takes to get that ring," Gore said. "We're playing great ball."

The 49ers held Cam Newton in check, intercepting him twice and sacking him five times while stopping the Panthers (12-5) twice on the 1-yard line in the first half.

At Seattle, Steven Hauschka kicked three field goals in blustery conditions, and Lynch capped the victory with a 31-yard scoring run with 2:40 left that Carroll celebrated by jumping into offensive line coach Tom Cable's arms.

"It feels awesome," fullback Michael Robinson said, "but this doesn't mean anything if we don't win next week."

Chargers LB Manti Te'o out with a concussion

Associated Press
January 12, 2014

DENVER (AP) — San Diego linebacker Manti Te'o suffered a concussion late in the first half and won't return to Sunday's AFC divisional playoff game against the Denver Broncos.

Punter Mike Scifres was also shaken up late in the first half. He gingerly punted in the third quarter despite an aching back.

The Broncos lost cornerback Chris Harris Jr. for the game in the third quarter with a knee and ankle injury. Former San Diego defensive back Quentin Jammer took his place in the field.

Te'o was hurt trying to tackle running back Knowshon Moreno near the goal line. The rookie linebacker was helped to the sideline and then headed into the locker room for evaluation.

Scifres was banged up trying to make a tackle on Eric Decker's long punt return. Scifres stayed down for several minutes before being helped to the bench.

Right now future no concern for Manning

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning may have a long list of things he's worried about, a selection of items that now includes the New England Patriots in the AFC Championship Game, but a medical exam following whatever becomes of the Broncos season is not one of them.

Manning was asked following the Broncos' 24-17 victory over the San Diego Chargers Sunday if a medical exam following the season, which according to a report from ESPN's Chris Mortensen will determine if Manning plays in 2014, was weighing on his mind.

"It's really not, what's weighing on my mind is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth," Manning said. "That's priority number one. It was an intense game, up and down, a lot of emotions. Even the Patriots is (too far) ahead. And that question is way far ahead. I am not there."

Manning said this past week that "certainly, the light is at the end of the tunnel for me, no question" so that fueled at least some discussion about his playing future. Much like last season when Manning underwent a medical exam before the new league year began, he will undergo a medical exam on his surgically-repaired neck. If doctors give Manning the thumbs up, he will play in 2014. If not, then he would not play next season.

Manning has always said if the doctors told him, even during his recovery following spinal fusion surgery, he shouldn't play, that he would walk away from the game knowing "it's been a good run." The Broncos privately say they have no indications Manning would not receive a go-ahead to play next season and as it stands now expect him to be behind center in 2014.

Manning finished the regular season with 5,477 passing yards and 55 touchdowns, both single-season records. Manning finished 25-of-36 passing for 230 yards to go with two touchdowns and one interception in Sunday's win and said following the game he's only worried about his next game.

"This team has been a one-week-at-a-time season," Manning said. "For all we've been through -- losing our coach, losing a lot of different guys to injury, that approach has served us well and I think we need to keep that approach from here on out."

Broncos fear significant injury for Harris Jr.

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- Denver Broncos cornerback Chris Harris Jr. will have an MRI exam Monday morning on his injured knee and ankle, and privately some team officials are not optimistic about what they will hear from the medical staff.

Both injuries will be examined, but there was more concern late Sunday night about his knee. Harris Jr. left Sunday's 24-17 victory against the San Diego Chargers in the third quarter and did not return.

The Broncos led 17-0 when Harris Jr. departed and Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers targeted Harris Jr.'s replacement -- Quentin Jammer -- often down the stretch as San Diego scored all 17 of its points in the fourth quarter.

"I have to be better," Jammer said following the game. "There were some technique things I need to clean up."

Harris Jr. has been the Broncos' most consistent defensive back and because of his versatility he plays in all of the team's packages. Harris Jr. played 1,042 snaps on defense in the regular season, the most of any Broncos player on that side of the ball. He was one of just two players -- linebacker Danny Trevathan was the other -- to even top 900 snaps in the regular season.

The Broncos will have to adjust plenty of things against the New England Patriots with Harris Jr. not expected to be available. The Broncos could leave Jammer in the base defense and keep Champ Bailey in the slot as the nickel cornerback.

They could move Bailey back outside if they think he's ready after three games since his return to the lineup from a left foot injury that kept him out of 11 games this season. And the Broncos could simply use rookie Kayvon Webster, who is playing with a cast on his surgically-repaired right thumb, more as well.

This time Broncos closed the deal

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- This time the knee wasn't a question mark.

No, this time the knee was an exclamation point. It was the final piece of punctuation on a chapter the Broncos had waited a year to close.

When quarterback Peyton Manning knelt in victory formation on the last play of a 24-17 winover the San Diego Chargers in Sports Authority Field at Mile High Sunday, you could say a hard-nosed January wind off the Continental Divide was simply an entire region's sigh of relief.

"Absolutely, we have been in a position like this before, except this time we found a way to get it done," Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey said. " ... Until the clock says zero, you don't have the win. This time we had the win, we kept our foot on the pedal."

It had been 365 days, 12 calendar pages and endless hours of what-if hand-wringing by many of the same people in many of the same seats, since Manning took a knee in a playoff game. A year since he took a knee with 31 seconds to play, two timeouts in hand, in a game the Baltimore Ravens had just tied at 31 on a remember-when bomb from Joe Flacco to Jacoby Jones.

You know the rest of the story. Manning threw a late interception, the Ravens kicked a field goal to win in double overtime on the way to an eventual Super Bowl title and the kneel down is replayed in family rooms across the Front Range.

On Sunday, with the Broncos holding a 24-17 lead, a growing nervousness swept over a home crowd that had watched a 17-0 lead evaporate in the fourth quarter. With 3 minutes, 6 seconds to play, the Broncos were indeed a little wobbly, facing a third-and-17 from their own 20-yard line and the weight of history resting on their shoulders, looking to drag them down.

"Aw man, third-and-17, tough position to be in as a team," Broncos tight end Julius Thomasaid.

"We've been working on situations all year long ... that game last year forced us to address different kinds of situations all season long, training camp, during the season and Coach [John] Fox has called for situations," Manning said. " ... All that hard work paid off for us in that situation."

As he had for the entire afternoon, offensive coordinator Adam Gase had the Broncos in a three-wide receiver look with Thomas in the right slot. When the Chargers didn't walk a linebacker out on Thomas, Manning got the coverage he

expected. At the snap Thomas moved through the flat, toward the sideline, and the Chargers did not get a defender there to help.

"It was a lack of communication on our part," Chargers coach Mike McCoy said.

Manning stepped up to avoid a Chargers rush that was closing in and dropped a perfect throw into Thomas' hands as he approached the right sideline. Thomas got both feet down, right in front of his teammates, and effectively ended a Chargers rally -- closing the book on last season's heartbreak.

"[Third-and-17] certainly a no-brainer there what you had to do," Manning said. "... Great play call by Adam, really was a big-time play call, got them in the right look and a good catch by Julius."

"Had a good look, Peyton threw a great pass, was able to get both feet in," Thomas said. "Just really gave us the opportunity to keep the offense on the field."

Three plays later Manning hit Thomas again, this time to convert a third-and-6 for good measure. In the end the Broncos didn't leave it to chance, didn't put their fate in somebody else's hot hand. This time they got the first down they needed, and then some. This time they kept the ball for the game's final 3:51.

They didn't give it back to a quarterback who had that look in his eye -- Philip Rivers threw for 173 yards in the fourth quarter after throwing for 44 yards in the first three quarters combined. They didn't allow a chance for a miracle, didn't leave room for another can-you-believe-that, heart crusher they would have to live with for at least another year.

No, this time the Broncos handled their business and closed the deal.

"Philip got hot there in the second half and I did not want to give him the ball back there at the end," Manning said. "There was some real want-to on offense to stay on the field that last series ... We'll enjoy this one, you're supposed to enjoy these wins. They're hard to come by."

In the end, there were plenty of football reasons the Broncos won and moved on to the AFC Championship Game, plenty of plays that meant at least something along the way.

They had dragged a year's worth of baggage from a drama-filled season, a year's worth of second-guesses and why-didn't-you-just questions into the stadium Sunday. For some, their record-setting 606-point season had simply been labeled as an extended preseason because of last January's loss.

But the Broncos -- with that third-and-17, with that closing 3:51 of work -- can leave all that behind now. People should see a difference in the days ahead because of it, whether the Broncos will admit it or not.

"I really think the team needs to be commended for even getting to this point," Manning said. "A lot of teams had disappointing losses last year, Atlanta, Washington, everybody says in that locker room: 'Hey let's get back next year.' It just doesn't happen, it's hard to get back ... I told the team [Saturday] night, you need to be commended for getting back to this point. I mean we've been through more this year, it's hard to explain all the stuff we've been through ... We're proud and happy to be to this point and certainly want to keep it going."

Rapid Reaction: Denver Broncos

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- A few thoughts on the Denver Broncos 24-17 win over the San Diego Chargers:

What it means: A 365-day wait, with all of the questions and the collective angst from their faithful in tow, is over. The Broncos faced a pile of pressure from within and from the outside Sunday to repair what went wrong in the double-overtime loss to the Baltimore Ravens last Jan. 12. Sunday's win gave the Broncos their first postseason victory since a wild-card win over the Pittsburgh Steelers following the 2011 season. It gave the team their first AFC Championship Game appearance since the 2005 season and a rather hearty serving of relief after a third-and-17 conversion just before the two-minute warning. They will play better next week with the pressure off.

Stock watch: There was a point this season when rookie running back Montee Ball had lost three fumbles -- he lost his third of the season Nov. 24 against the Patriots -- and the Broncos were considering dialing back his workload. But Ball promised then he could fix the problem and has kept his word. He hasn't fumbled since and the Broncos gave him premium carries Sunday. He showed the balance and the vision in traffic the Broncos saw when they drafted him. Ball had 52 yards on 10 carries by the time the third quarter drew to a close. Folks will see more of Ball moving forward as the Broncos would like to split the carries between him and Knowshon Moreno as evenly as possible.

Eye on Harris Jr.: Before Broncos cornerback Chris Harris Jr. left Sunday's game with knee and ankle injuries, the Broncos defense was easily having its best outing of the season. The Broncos had frustrated Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers and controlled the run game. However, after Harris left early in the second half, things turned slightly, including a touchdown throw from Rivers to Keenan Allen with 12:59 left in the game with Quentin Jammer in coverage. Jammer was in for Harris Jr. The injury will be significant if Harris Jr. is unable to play next week. He has been their most consistent defensive back and he plays in every situation.

Wind-swept trouble: Broncos offensive coordinator Adam Gase always said wind has a far bigger impact on the Broncos' offense than cold, rain or anything else. And on a blustery day -- with wind gusts in the 40-mile-an-hour range -- it had an impact at times on the Broncos' high-flying ways. Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning was efficient and the Denver offense moved the ball at will on multiple drives. But facing into the wind the Broncos also struggled at times and looked out of sorts. Toss in a few drops, an ill-timed penalty or two and a missed field goal, and the road got decidedly more bumpy for the Broncos in the second half. If they are going to be the last team standing, the Broncos will have to have a definitive

answer against a healthy, physical opponent, when they can't work their passing game at warp speed.

What's next: Manning versus Brady yet again. The New England Patriots will come to Denver for Sunday's AFC Championship Game. To make it to a Super Bowl, Manning will have to solve coach Bill Belichick's defensive riddle, and the Broncos will have to slow the Patriots' powerful run game.

Broncos, Manning made health plan

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- We're always told to never, ever assume, because of what that does to you and me.

But in and around the Denver Broncos, the working assumption with quarterback Peyton Manning is that, in a public forum, where microphones and cameras are in attendance, he never says anything -- not one syllable -- he didn't mean to say.

So Manning did at least raise an eyebrow or two locally this past week when he answered a question about whether he could still find a way to "enjoy" a postseason game 16 years into his career in light of the playoff disappointments he's had along the way.

And he answered with: "Well, I think it depends what attitude you want to approach it with. I mean, if it's just miserable this whole time then why are you really doing it? 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.' 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. 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 was the "light at the end of the tunnel," part that caused at least some pause as some wondered if it was a signal, a prediction. Look, Manning is 37 years old, he's had four neck surgeries, he missed the entire 2011 season in what was decidedly an uncertain postoperative return. Nobody in his/her right mind believes his career in Denver will be an extended stay.

It's just that in his second season with the Broncos, Manning did things even he never did before, finishing with 5,477 passing yards and 55 touchdowns -- both NFL single-season records. He's 26-6 in regular-season starts with Denver, with two division titles and whatever becomes of this postseason still on the docket. He's spent fewer than 24 months in the city and folks are already talking about what it would take for him to go into the team's Ring of Fame.

But as ESPN's Chris Mortensen reported Sunday, Manning's status for 2014 will not depend on whether this playoff run ends with him enjoying a Super Bowl win or dealing with a playoff loss. It will depend on what a medical exam on Manning's

surgically repaired neck shows in the coming weeks and months.

If doctors give Manning the thumbs up, he will play in 2014. If not, then he arrives at the end of his career, and we start the clock for Canton.

Manning has always said if the doctors told him, even during his recovery following spinal fusion surgery, he shouldn't play, that he would walk away from the game knowing, "it's been a good run."

And in all of his dealings with the Broncos, the team and the quarterback have put those medical opinions at the forefront. The coming exam will be much like one he had following the 2012 season that, when passed, kicked in some contractual clauses and guaranteed money in Manning's deal.

The Broncos also tweaked Manning's contract -- a five-year, \$96 million deal that runs through the 2016 season -- in May 2013 after the Broncos purchased insurance to cover the team in the event Manning did not play in the 2014 season due to an injury suffered during the 2013 season that wasn't related to his surgically repaired neck.

The Broncos had added the policy after Manning passed a postseason exam on his neck in early 2013. That 2013 exam kicked in a \$20 million guaranteed salary for 2013 and a \$20 million guaranteed salary for 2014, to go with some salary advances along the way. The insurance policy is for the 2014 season and covers the team for \$10 million of that salary if Manning does not play in 2014 because of a non-neck injury he suffered at some point in the 2013 season or postseason.

When the Broncos signed Manning in 2012, his \$20 million salaries in both 2013 and 2014 were guaranteed, but 2014 could be voided if Manning injures his neck in 2013. The insurance policy simply covered any non-neck injuries that would prevent him from playing in 2014, because his contract would still be in place in that scenario. It's all business and technicalities perhaps, but it does show the two sides have been up front and proactive on Manning's health from the start.

Manning dealt with ankle injuries this season and the Broncos cut his practice time -- having him sit out Wednesdays -- for a time. He has received his usual treatment from the team's training staff for his neck as well as treatment on his ankles throughout the season, including this past week.

He has worn a brace on his right ankle for much of the season, but overall Manning has not missed a start in his two seasons in Denver. But this is a player who has repeatedly said he wanted his health to "be an open book" for the team that signed him. He didn't want his contract to be a reason a team could or couldn't address other needs on the roster when his time with the team was over.

Many with the Broncos, both Manning's teammates and team officials, have privately expressed their belief in recent weeks that, despite the amount of time and effort it takes Manning to prepare himself physically each week to play (to go

with his renowned mental preparation), he would return in 2014. Many with the team have believed Manning would play three or four seasons with the Broncos if he stayed healthy and engaged along the way.

But just like doctors gave the thumbs up before Manning originally signed in those frenzied weeks in March 2012, they'll have a lot to say about 2014.

And that's just the way Manning, and the Broncos, planned it.

Quick Take: Patriots at Broncos

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- Three things to know about the Denver Broncos' matchup against the San Diego Chargers in the AFC Championship Game at 3:05 p.m. ET Sunday at Sports Authority Field at Mile High:

1. Once more with feeling: Commence hyping, but it's Peyton Manning vs. Tom Brady again, with a Super Bowl trip on the line. And no matter how much Manning tries to deflect in the coming days -- and he will try with all of his conversation-directing might -- most folks will want to make Sunday's affair another high-profile chapter in the Manning-Brady saga that has played out over the course of two Hall-of-Fame careers. It will be the 15th time the two have faced each other and the fifth time in the postseason. And while Brady has a decided advantage -- 10-4 -- they are 1-1 against each other in previous AFC Championship Games. It will also be a meeting of the only two quarterbacks in league history to have thrown at least 50 touchdown passes in a season.
2. Don't sleep on the ground (attacks): While the pregame hoopla will center on the two quarterbacks, the two offenses' running games may really decide the issue. The Patriots, especially over the past month of the regular season, have shown their run-game chops and they simply overwhelmed the Indianapolis Colts in the divisional round Saturday night. The Broncos then pounded out 133 yards against the Chargers on Sunday. Denver rushed for 280 yards against New England in Foxborough, Mass., in the Patriots' 34-31 Nov. 24 overtime win. Whichever defense holds up against that burly approach just may earn a Super Bowl trip.
3. Cover up: When Broncos cornerback Chris Harris Jr. left Sunday's game early in the second half with knee and ankle injuries, what had been a dominant defensive performance for the Broncos got a little dicier down the stretch. Harris is their do-it-all guy in coverage and plays in all of the team's defensive packages. San Diego quarterback Philip Rivers went after Harris's replacement -- Quentin Jammer -- plenty after the change, and had success. The Broncos will have to consider what they do if Harris does not play against the Patriots. They could stick with Jammer or try rookie Kayvon Webster on the outside against Brady. Or they could move Champ Bailey back outside. Bailey has played in the nickel, as the slot cornerback, since his return to the lineup in mid-December.

AFC Playoffs Q&A: A super matchup

By Jeffri Chadiha
ESPN.com
January 13, 2014

DENVER -- Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning knew the question was coming before he ever walked to the podium for his postgame news conference on Sunday night.

His team had just earned a 24-17 AFC divisional playoff win over San Diego, but the quarterback wasn't ready to talk about meeting Tom Brady and the New England Patriots in next Sunday's AFC Championship Game. This win, as Manning noted, had been too meaningful, an indication of how hard the Broncos had fought to be this close to the Super Bowl. So when a reporter asked Manning what was weighing on his mind, Manning couldn't resist the opportunity. "What's weighing on my mind," Manning said, "is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth."

It was a well-timed line, one that drew plenty of laughter. It also was a sign of how relieved Manning had to be in the wake of this victory. It seemed as if the Broncos were capable of melting down for the second straight year in the playoffs as the final 15 minutes of this game played out with a Chargers rally. Instead, the Broncos made the plays they had to make to secure the win. In the process, they let the entire football-watching world know that this team has grown up plenty over the past year.

What Manning understood is that there will be ample time to talk about the Patriots. That game will be hyped all week because that's what happens whenever and wherever Manning and Brady collide. Next Sunday's game will be Round 15, with three of those meetings coming in the playoffs. Brady has won two of those contests, but each quarterback has claimed a victory in the AFC title game (Brady in 2003, Manning in 2006). Brady actually owns a significant advantage in overall head-to-head meetings, as his record is 10-4 when Peyton is on the other sideline.

But none of that really matters today. Along with being a matchup of future Hall of Fame quarterbacks, this also is a meeting of teams that have battled through plenty of adversity all year.

"Tom Brady has been an outstanding quarterback for such a long time but next week's game is the Broncos versus the Patriots," Manning said. "I know there will be some individual matchups that will get headlines but it will be a battle between two good teams."

It also will be a matchup that will generate plenty of questions over the coming week. Here are the 10 most important:

1. Which team has the emotional advantage? As much as New England has faced adversity throughout this entire season -- from former tight end Aaron Hernandez being charged with murder to numerous injuries to Pro Bowl players -- the Broncos have endured more.

They've lost their own fair share of star players for the season (including outside linebacker Von Miller and left tackle Ryan Clady) while also watching Pro Bowl cornerback Champ Bailey hobble through the worst year of his career with a lingering foot injury. Their head coach, John Fox, was sidelined for a month after he underwent heart surgery. Even though they'd never admit, they've also had to remember how painful last season was, when they were upset at home in a divisional playoff loss to Baltimore.

The Patriots certainly have proved themselves to be a resilient bunch. But the Broncos have shown repeatedly that they will not lose their focus, regardless of the circumstances. This is a team that seems to have grown closer and tougher over the past 12 months and that will be something that works in Denver's favor next Sunday.

2. Should the Patriots stick with a run-heavy offense? The scariest thing about the Patriots' success in their 43-22 win over the Colts -- when they had 46 rushing attempts and 234 yards and only 27 passes -- wasn't just the numbers they generated. It was their willingness to change things up at a time of the year that normally belongs to Brady.

For most of the past few seasons, head coach Bill Belichick has asked Brady to carry his offense with a prolific air attack. Against Indianapolis, Belichick reverted to a strategy that hadn't been seen in New England since Corey Dillon was toting the rock. LeGarrette Blount was the star (with 166 rushing yards and four touchdowns) but there was also genius in the play calling of offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels. It certainly helped that the Patriots were facing an opponent that ranked 26th in the NFL in rush defense, but McDaniels also remained committed to the run when it wasn't yielding huge gains in the first half. That balance -- as well as the Patriots' holding the ball for 35 minutes -- was effective in a game that turned into a blowout. It will be even more vital this coming Sunday.

3. How crucial will Denver's running game be on Sunday? The Broncos have set all sorts of records -- with Manning setting NFL marks for passing yards and passing touchdowns in a single season -- but more balance is what will take them to the Super Bowl.

Rookie Montee Ball has become a more effective option in the second half of the season and Knowshon Moreno is coming off the best season of his career (with 1,586 total yards and 13 touchdowns). Moreno also enjoyed his best game as a professional in the last meeting against New England. He gained 224 yards and, more notably, carried the ball 37 times. That game was the first indication all season that Denver was willing to add some smashmouth elements to this prolific

offense. The Broncos will need to do it again in this contest, as New England will be looking to dominate the time of possession for a second straight game.

4. Who the hell is Jamie Collins? Blount may have been the star of New England 's win over Indianapolis, but Collins clearly deserved his own recognition. The rookie linebacker produced a sack, an interception and solid coverage on Colts tight end Coby Fleener for most of the contest. All this after he was asked to replace Brandon Spikes, who surprisingly was put on injured reserve in a move that reportedly had more to do with Belichick losing patience with his former starter than any real health problems.

Regardless of how he got the job, Collins provided plenty of evidence to explain why New England used a second-round pick on him in last year's draft. He's blossomed in the second half of this season and his versatility -- he played defensive back, linebacker and defensive end at Southern Mississippi -- makes him an ideal defender in Belichick's system. His emergence also takes ample pressure off a unit that lost its two best players (nose tackle Vince Wilfork and linebacker Jerod Mayo) to season-ending injuries. Collins is exactly the kind of three-down player New England needs against the Broncos, particularly if he can handle Pro Bowl tight end Julius Thomas.

5. What happens to Denver's secondary if Chris Harris isn't healthy? The Broncos probably don't want to think about that possibility right now. Harris has been the team's best cornerback all season and his absence was huge late in Denver's win over San Diego. The Broncos were up 17-0 when Harris left the contest with an unspecified injury to his ankle and knee late in the third quarter.

After that point, San Diego scored 17 points in the fourth quarter, with Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers and rookie wide receiver Keenan Allen inflicting the most damage. Rivers threw for 173 of his 217 yards in that period. Allen had five receptions for 123 yards and two touchdowns after posting one catch through the first three quarters. You can bet the Patriots will pay close attention to those numbers. The Broncos' secondary already had been plagued by Bailey's lingering foot problems and a penchant for giving up big plays. If Harris can't play -- or is limited -- the Broncos will struggle to keep Brady from carving them up as he did in the second half of that first meeting.

6. How will the Patriots' championship game experience matter in this contest? It has some value. New England may be traveling to Denver, but the Patriots are also appearing in their third consecutive AFC Championship Game. Denver hasn't been this deep into the playoffs since the 2005 season and Bailey is the only current Broncos player who was a part of that bunch.

Granted, it helps to have Manning, Wes Welker and cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, all of whom had Super Bowl experience before they arrived in Denver. But the bulk of the Broncos' roster has no idea what the pressure feels like once you reach this level. There's a reason why many veterans believe it's harder to get to the Super Bowl than it is to win it. Even with home-field advantage, it wouldn't

be surprising to see Denver start this game tight. The Broncos have been picked to be in this position all season. The pressure, from this vantage point, is all on them.

7. Can Denver's pass rush continue to dominate? The most surprising revelation in Sunday's game was that Denver effectively pressured Rivers despite not having Miller on the field. The Broncos had two sacks on San Diego's first possession of the game and ended the contest with four total.

The significance of those numbers can't be underscored enough for two reasons. The first is that Miller is one of the best pass-rushers in football and his big plays were huge in the first meeting between these teams. The second is that such pressure is going to be critical to protecting that banged-up secondary. The Broncos don't have to put Brady on the ground consistently. However, they will need to make him feel their presence every time he drops back to pass.

8. What's the most important matchup in this game? New England's defensive backs versus the Broncos' receivers. Denver's offense has been dominant all season, but this is the first time since early November that all four of Manning's top targets -- Julius Thomas and wide receivers Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker and Wes Welker -- have been on the field together. Welker's presence was especially significant Sunday, as he missed Denver's last three regular-season games while nursing a concussion.

It's no secret what this group can do, but the Patriots' secondary offers some interesting matchups. Pro Bowl cornerback Aqib Talib has the size and speed to handle the 6-foot-3, 229-pound Thomas (who caught just four passes in that first game), but the real key for New England is the play of second-year cornerback Alfonzo Dennard. Though he's been hampered by injuries and off-the-field issues over the past year, he's also talented enough to shadow Decker or Welker.

Dennard had two interceptions in New England's win over Indianapolis, the first of which set up the Patriots' first touchdown. With him back at full strength -- and the improved health of other banged-up defensive backs like Devin McCourty, Steve Gregory and Kyle Arrington -- New England has some options to counter Denver's aerial attack. The edge goes to the Broncos on talent alone, but the Patriots know they can win some battles against this unit.

9. How much can we learn from the first meeting between these teams? Not much. New England may have dealt the Broncos their most baffling defeat of this season -- a 34-31 overtime loss -- but that game was so bizarre that it's impossible to draw many parallels to this AFC title game.

First off, Miller -- who scored on a 60-yard fumble return and forced another fumble that led to a second touchdown -- is lost for the season with a torn ACL. He played a huge role in the Broncos jumping out to a 24-0 halftime lead in that contest. The chance of Denver imploding in the second half for a second straight time also isn't likely. The Broncos committed three of their four turnovers in the final three periods, including one that involved defensive back Tony Carter inadvertently

touching a New England punt in overtime that Patriots defensive back Nate Ebner recovered to set up the game-winning field goal.

Denver may have led the NFL in lost fumbles (16), but that was one of those games where the ball was bouncing all over the place. After what happened in that contest, ball security is the last thing that will be an issue here.

10. Who will be in the Super Bowl? Denver has been the popular pick all season, so let's stick with that today. Even if the Broncos won't admit it, they exorcised a major demon with Sunday's win. Last year's divisional playoff loss to Baltimore was the kind of defeat that can haunt a franchise for years and now it's officially gone.

The way the Broncos played San Diego -- dominating the Chargers through the first three quarters and then securing the victory with some clutch passing late -- proved that Denver can do whatever is necessary to win at this stage of the season. The Broncos are both focused and motivated and their hunger will be the difference in the latest chapter of Manning-Brady. This one is going to belong to Peyton.

Peyton Manning to weigh results

ESPN.com
January 12, 2014

Peyton Manning's future beyond this season will be determined by the results of an offseason exam on his surgically repaired neck, sources familiar with the star quarterback's mindset told ESPN Senior NFL Insider Chris Mortensen.

Despite setting NFL single-season records for passing yards and touchdowns in 2013 with the Denver Broncos, Manning will undergo the physical exam in March, as mandated by his contract, the sources told Mortensen.

If the exam reveals that his neck is stable, Manning plans to return to the Broncos in 2014, regardless of how Denver fares this postseason, according to sources.

But if there is an increased risk of injury, Manning will be forced to decide whether to retire, sources said.

The 37-year-old Manning raised speculation about his future this past week when he said, "The light is at the end of the tunnel for me, no question." The four-time league MVP made the comment leading up to Denver's 24-17 win against the San Diego Chargers in Sunday's AFC divisional playoff game.

But neither a Super Bowl victory nor another playoff disappointment will impact Manning's decision on whether to play in 2014, sources told Mortensen.

Manning and the Broncos are a year removed from last January's crushing playoff loss to the Baltimore Ravens, who rallied for an improbable overtime upset in Denver. But the Broncos went 13-3 this season largely in part to the record-setting play of Manning, who passed for 5,477 yards and 55 touchdowns.

It marked yet another step in a remarkable recovery by Manning, who underwent fusion surgery on his neck that weakened his throwing arm. He missed the entire 2011 season and was released by the Indianapolis Colts before signing a five-year, \$96 million deal with Denver in 2012.

Keys to victory: Broncos 24, Chargers 17

By ESPN Stats & Information
ESPN.com
January 12, 2014

What were the keys to the Denver Broncos' beating the San Diego Chargers 24-17 to advance to the AFC Championship Game against the New England Patriots?

Manning comes through when pressured

The Chargers put Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning under duress only twice in the game. The first time, Manning threw a touchdown pass to Wes Welker with six minutes left in the second quarter.

The second time came with the Broncos facing a third-and-17 with three minutes remaining. Manning completed a pass for 21 yards to Julius Thomas, allowing the Broncos to extend the drive and clinch the win.

Manning lures the Chargers into mistakes

The Chargers' defense committed five neutral-zone infraction penalties, the most by any team in any game this season.

That total was nearly as many as the number of penalties of that nature that the Broncos drew in the regular season (seven), fourth most in the NFL.

Broncos keep their offense on the field

The Broncos were able to sustain drives in this game and keep the Chargers off the field by going 9-of-13 on third down.

Their 26:48 time of possession through three quarters was longer than they had the ball in either of their regular-season meetings with the Chargers.

Chargers' offense: a case of too little, too late

The Chargers rallied late (helped by an onside kick recovery) to make this a close game, but were unable to complete the comeback.

San Diego's problem was that it did little through the game's first three quarters.

The Chargers' 79 total yards were their fewest through three quarters since Week 11 of 2003, also against the Broncos.

Philip Rivers' 44 pass yards through three quarters were his second fewest through three quarters in any start in his career (including playoffs).

The Chargers finished with 13 first downs and 259 yards of offense, both of which were season lows.

Broncos able to finish

In last year's AFC divisional playoffs, the Broncos had a chance to run out the clock against the Ravens, leading by seven with 3:12 remaining. They ran the ball five times, then had to punt. The Ravens were able to tie the game on their next possession.

This season, the Broncos led by seven with 3:53 left, but used a combination of the run and pass (six runs, four passes) to finish the game.

Stat of the Day

This will be the fourth meeting between Peyton Manning and Tom Brady as opposing starting quarterbacks in the postseason. The Elias Sports Bureau notes that is tied for the most since the 1950 season. Brett Favre and Steve Young also met four times in the postseason, as did Terry Bradshaw and Ken Stabler.

Getting to know the Broncos, again

By Field Yates
ESPNBoston.com
January 13, 2014

As the saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

In this case, the teams have changed, but many of the primary faces involved remain the same.

The New England Patriots, led by Bill Belichick and Tom Brady, will head to another AFC Championship Game appearance, set to take on a Peyton Manning-led team.

The Denver Broncos and Patriots met during the regular season in one of the signature contests of the season. After kicking themselves with a string of turnovers in the first quarter -- leading to an early 24-0 deficit -- the Patriots crawled back with an exceptional second-half effort, eventually winning late in overtime on a 31-yard field goal from Stephen Gostkowski.

Because of that game, the national exposure the Broncos have generated this season and the Denver players that many were previously familiar with, this already is a well-known team.

However, here's our closer look at the Broncos, which will highlight different players from those in our first "Getting to know the Broncos" post.

Record: 14-3 (AFC West champs, No. 1 seed in the AFC)

Head coach: John Fox (third season)

Offensive coordinator: Adam Gase

Defensive coordinator: Jack Del Rio

THREE MORE PLAYERS TO KNOW, OFFENSE

1. RB Knowshon Moreno. Thought by many to be a possible cut before the season, Moreno has not only stuck around on the roster, he's been a leading back for Denver. While the team has a pair of youngsters in Montee Ball and Ronnie Hillman, second- and third-round picks, respectively, Moreno is the most dependable and well-rounded of the group, excelling in pass protection, a critical component for playing with Manning. He had a career day against the Patriots in November, with 224 rushing yards on 37 carries, including a touchdown.

2. G Louis Vasquez. The Broncos worked hard to fill a major need this past

offseason in free agency, paying big for the former Charger to land him as an interior offensive line building block. The results have been overwhelmingly positive, as Vasquez' strong 2013 resulted in his first All-Pro selection. He's helped keep Manning upright while also springing holes for Moreno, Ball and Hillman.

3. LT Chris Clark. The Broncos have dealt with their share of injury issues this season, including the loss of left tackle Ryan Clady, an All-Pro type talent when healthy. The team turned to Winston Justice first in Clady's absence, but Clark has taken over of late. That's a new look for the Patriots, who saw Justice back in November. The 28-year-old veteran has been with Denver since the 2010 season.

THREE MORE PLAYERS TO KNOW, DEFENSE

1. DE Shaun Phillips. With Von Miller out for the year due to a torn ACL, Phillips has become the Broncos' top pass-rushing option. He delivered with 10 sacks during the regular season to go along with a pair of forced fumbles, one of which came against the Patriots. The 32-year-old isn't quite the athlete that made him a dynamic rusher in San Diego for many seasons, but he remains an effective edge player that the Patriots will have to keep their eyes on this Sunday.

2. CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie. Another free agent added this past offseason, DRC had a strong year for Denver, as he's been tabbed a Pro Bowl alternate. He was tied for the team lead with three interceptions, one of which he returned 75 yards for a touchdown. The former Eagle and Cardinal is an exceptionally reactive athlete who can hang with perimeter receivers. He had a pass breakup in the first meeting between the teams.

3. DT Sylvester Williams. The Broncos' top pick in this past year's draft, Williams has come on of late. He finished the regular season with just 19 tackles, but 12 of those came in the final three games, while he also added his two sacks during that stretch. The Broncos yielded the sixth-fewest rushing yards per game this season, but given how the Patriots have run the ball of late, Williams is likely to be involved in major action this Sunday. He'll be put to the test by Logan Mankins and the rest of the Patriots' interior offensive line.

OTHER NOTES: Kicker Matt Prater was named to the Pro Bowl for Denver, and he set a record for the longest field goal in NFL history with a 64-yarder in Denver earlier this season. ... The last time these teams faced, Fox was not on the sidelines following a bye week health scare that led to heart surgery. Del Rio served as the interim head coach in Fox's place. ... The Broncos had the second-best third-down offense in the NFL during the regular season, converting on 46 percent of their attempts. ... The Broncos have three options among their punt returners: receivers

Wes Welker and Eric Decker and specialist Trindon Holliday, though Holliday has had ball security issues this season.

Quick Take: Patriots at Broncos

By Mike Reiss

ESPNBoston.com

January 12, 2014

Three thoughts on New England Patriots vs. the Denver Broncos in the AFC Championship Game at 3 p.m. Sunday at Sports Authority Field at Mile High:

1. Just as Bill Belichick predicted: In a postgame meeting with receiver Wes Welker after the Patriots' 34-31 victory over the Broncos on Nov. 24., Welker relayed what was discussed. "He came over and he was like, 'Good job, we'll see you all again, I'm sure.'" Nice call, Bill. From start to finish, the Broncos and Patriots were the AFC's best, most consistent teams this season. And we never get tired of another Peyton Manning-Tom Brady duel. So it seems fitting, from this viewpoint, that these teams will meet to decide the AFC champion.

2. Broncos didn't get a heavy dose of Blount: The Patriots' offense has almost reinvented itself over the past three games into more of a ground-and-pound attack, with 6-foot, 250-pound bruiser LeGarrette Blount leading the team's three-man committee at running back and turning in two record-setting performances. Guard Logan Mankins said after Saturday's victory over the Colts: "Right now, I don't know if we're a better running team than a passing team, but the running is working. So why go away from something that's working?" Blount played just two offensive snaps against the Broncos on Nov. 24, in part because the Patriots fell behind 17-0 in the first quarter and became more one-dimensional toward the pass. From an instant analysis perspective, this is the key for the Patriots this week. If they can play the game on their terms and get Blount going, I think they have matchup advantages against a suspect defense that could be exploited and ultimately result in a win. If they are forced into a spread game like they were Nov. 24, the chances of victory decrease significantly.

3. In a sub defense game, secondary is as strong as it has been: In the Nov. 24 game between the teams, the Patriots were in a sub defense (five or six defensive backs) for all 90 snaps (including penalties). That's usually the way it goes when playing a Manning-led team and Manning was content to hand the ball off against the lighter box (280 rushing yards, 48 carries). That chess match figures to be in play once again. For the Patriots, they are as healthy and as deep as they have been all season in the secondary, which is ideal in this type of X's-and-O's chess match. Aqib Talib and Alfonzo Dennard are locked in as the top cornerbacks, with Devin McCourty and Steve Gregory the starting safeties. Nickel back Kyle Arrington

played a solid game in the slot against Welker on Nov. 24 and the Patriots also have impressive rookie Logan Ryan.

Manning keeps Broncos' playoff win in perspective

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
January 12, 2014

DENVER – Archie Manning scooped up his grandson and tried to quiet him.

But Marshall Manning wouldn't be shushed. He could see his father, only a few yards away, and he was calling out to him.

Peyton Manning, meanwhile, was trying to regale a room full of reporters about a third-and-17 pass to Julius Thomas, trying to put some perspective on the Broncos' 24-17 divisional playoff win over the San Diego Chargers.

None of that, of course, mattered to Marshall. He just wanted his daddy.

It was the most human of moments for Peyton Manning on the night of his biggest win as a Denver Bronco. It had been nearly four years since Manning had quarterbacked his team to a postseason win, since leading the Indianapolis Colts to an AFC Championship Game win against the New York Jets on Jan. 24, 2010. His Colts would lose in the Super Bowl two weeks later.

Manning's Colts lost in the wild-card round the next season, his final game with Indianapolis before spinal fusion surgery would force him to miss the entire 2011 season. Manning lost his first playoff game with the Broncos, too, a stunning 38-35 double-overtime loss to Baltimore in the divisional round a year ago.

That Baltimore loss shaped the 2013 season for Manning and the Broncos, serving as motivation to return to the playoffs, but also fueled the perception that for all his regular-season greatness, Manning was destined to fail in big games.

As Philip Rivers led the Chargers to within a touchdown of tying Sunday's game late in the fourth quarter, who outside of Denver wasn't just waiting for Manning to fail? Then, on third-and-17, Manning delivered the biggest pass of the season. He danced around in the pocket, took a big step forward and heaved a pass toward the right sideline.

Thomas, the young tight end who earlier in the game had lost a fumble and received some harsh words from Manning after a false start, reached up high to grab the pass.

Left foot down. Right toes down.

Catch. Clutch.

Manning would hit Thomas again moments later for another third-down conversion.

"That was impressive. There were some big third downs on that drive," Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey said. "That doesn't happen a lot in four-minute football. It's hard to get first downs."

Manning's day certainly wasn't perfect. He threw for 230 yards, as well as two touchdowns, but he also threw an interception in the end zone just before halftime and managed to lead only one scoring drive – for just a field goal – in the third quarter.

But it was enough to set up yet another game against Tom Brady and the New England Patriots – their first postseason meeting since the 2006 AFC Championship Game. The Patriots are 2-0 against the Broncos since Manning arrived last season, including an overtime win in Foxborough, Mass., in November.

"The game next week is Broncos versus Patriots. I know there will be some individual matchups that will get headlines, but it will be a battle between two good teams," Manning said. "Teams that have been through a lot, that have overcome a lot to get to this point, and that's where my focus will be – trying to help the Broncos get a win against the Patriots."

Indeed, Manning deflected any talk about what might happen beyond this postseason, on if he will return next season, at age 38, for the third year of the five-year contract he signed with the Broncos.

"What's weighing on my mind is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth after this win," Manning said. "I've really been, this team has been a one-week-at-a-time season. For all we've been through, losing our coach and losing different guys to injuries, that approach has served us well. I think we need to keep that approach from here on out."

Broncos outlast Chargers, set up Manning-Brady showdown

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
January 12, 2014

DENVER — Exactly a year after last season's stunning playoff loss, the Denver Broncos and quarterback Peyton Manning on Sunday made amends with a 24-17 AFC divisional round playoff victory against the San Diego Chargers.

It won't erase all of the sting of the double-overtime loss to Baltimore, but it will allow Manning to at least temporarily shake his reputation that he fails to play well in January. With the win, Manning improved his postseason record to 10-11.

To get to his third Super Bowl — and his first with the Broncos — he'll have to beat his rival, Tom Brady, and the New England Patriots Sunday at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

"We're the two best teams in the AFC," Broncos defensive end Shaun Phillips said. "What more can you ask for? You want the two best teams going head to head."

The Broncos lost to the Patriots in overtime in November, but Denver now has some experience with revenge.

The Chargers came here a month ago and soundly beat the Broncos 27-20, a game in which quarterback Philip Rivers controlled the clock and frustrated the Broncos defense with a string of long drives as the Chargers rushed for 177 yards.

The Broncos won Sunday by stealing that script from the Chargers.

Denver rushed for 133 yards, including 77 yards in the first half. The Broncos had only 18 rushing yards in their last game against the Chargers. Running back Knowshon Moreno's two-yard touchdown run midway through the fourth quarter gave the Broncos a 24-7 lead and ignited a wild celebration from a sold-out crowd that appeared to be growing antsy.

But Rivers, 6-2 in his previous eight starts in Denver, hit rookie receiver Keenan Allen for two big plays on the next drive — a deep completion on fourth-down and a 16-yard touchdown, both completions coming against Denver reserve cornerback Quentin Jammer, the longtime Charger who replaced injured starter Chris Harris. The Chargers added a field goal later in the fourth quarter after recovering an onside kick.

But Manning ended the Chargers' furious comeback attempt with a pair of third-down completions to tight end Julius Thomas to move past midfield with two

minutes remaining — the first, on a third-and-17 was perhaps Manning's most important pass of the season.

"You know you're going to have to hold the ball just to give guys a chance to get down the field. It was the perfect call versus the perfect coverage," Manning said.

Moreno picked up another first down for the Broncos, and as the Chargers took a timeout to try to quell the drive, Manning stormed to the sideline and aggressively slapped hands with head coach John Fox.

It surely wasn't lost on Manning that the Broncos failed to sustain a drive late in the fourth quarter of their playoff loss to Baltimore last year, giving Joe Flacco enough time to launch a game-tying touchdown.

"I feel like that game last year forced us to address those types of situations all season long," Manning said.

Manning, who will likely win his fifth NFL MVP award for his record-setting regular season, was masterful through the first 29 minutes of the first half as he led the Broncos to a 14-0 lead thanks to a pair of touchdown passes to Demaryius Thomas and Wes Welker, who made his return after missing the final three regular season games with a concussion.

The Broncos blew a chance to add another score just before halftime when Manning was intercepted in the back of the end zone by Chargers linebacker Donald Butler.

Denver held Rivers to just 20 passing yards in the first half, and just a net total of 1 passing yards thanks to three sacks. The Broncos sacked Rivers again in the fourth quarter.

"We just wanted to prove we could play at an elite level," Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton said, admitting that his group has grown tired of hearing all week about the Chargers offense.

For the Chargers, the loss ends a magical five-game winning streak that included a road win against No. 3 seed Cincinnati in a wild card playoff game last week.

"The character of our football team showed up as time went along," San Diego head coach Mike McCoy said. "It got very similar to the way the season went. The players kept on fighting until the bitter end. It wasn't good enough to win."

Bell: Clock is ticking for both Manning and Brady ahead of AFC Championship Game

By Jarrett Bell
USA TODAY Sports
January 12, 2014

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. -- The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Tom Brady is back in the AFC Championship Game, four quarters away from yet another Super Bowl.

While CBS executives can salivate over the imminent ratings bonanza assured with the next chapter of arguably the greatest quarterback rivalry in NFL history, this is not good news for Peyton Manning.

Brady should be the last man Manning wants to see on the other sideline at Mile High on Sunday.

In 14 head-to-head matchups against Manning, Brady has won 10 times – most recently a thrilling comeback in November when the Patriots rallied from a 24-point deficit.

In three previous playoff matches against Manning, Brady's up 2-1.

Now comes the eighth conference title game for the New England Patriots quarterback. Aligned with his wily coach, Bill Belichick, he usually wins those high-stakes games, too.

Yet if you've paid attention to the twists and turns of this dramatic NFL campaign, you can't be blamed for thinking it was not going to happen this season for Brady.

There was so much adversity – injuries and the sensational murder charges facing former tight end Aaron Hernandez. And with six wins by three points or less, the Patriots' close calls underscore their work-in-progress vulnerability.

But here they are, led by Brady.

"I know people have counted us out at times during this year, but I think we have a locker room full of believers," Brady said after Saturday night's smackdown of the Indianapolis Colts, 43-22, in the AFC divisional round. "Hopefully, we can go out and play our best next week."

It's tough not to believe in Brady, even though he's surrounded by a cast that has proven almost nothing when it comes to winning championships.

That's still the standard for the Patriots – championships.

There will be a lot of discussion this week about Manning's quest to win a second Super Bowl ring and all of his setbacks along the way.

But Brady has that same type of pressure, despite owning three Super Bowl rings.

The Patriots haven't won a Super Bowl in nearly nine years. This is what still drives Brady, and the fact that they have come close – losing in Super Bowl XLII after posting a perfect regular season in 2007, and again in Super Bowl XLVI – does not make the drought any easier to handle.

As is the case for Manning, the clock is ticking for Brady. He's 36.

Sure, Brady wants to play into his 40s. But it's football. There are no guarantees.

It has been arguably the most challenging season of his 14-year career. The stats tell us that, too.

Brady completed 60.5% of his passes during the regular season, his lowest rate in a full season since 2003. He hasn't thrown for as few touchdowns (25) in a full season since 2006. His passer rating (87.3) is his lowest since 2003, and his yardage (4,343) was his lowest since 2010.

On Saturday night, the Patriots scored 43 points – yet Brady didn't throw for a single touchdown.

But he is still here, because his team has essentially learned, like Brady, to roll with the punches.

It's not like this is the first time the Patriots have had to deal with injuries.

"The main thing is just to try to figure out what you need to do as an offense to still be productive," Brady said last week. "You can lose a tight end or a receiver or running back at any point in any game, and no one really feels sorry for you at that point. You just got to figure out a way to get as many yards and score as many points as you can."

New England rolled with the rushing attack on Saturday night. The Patriots logged a season-high 46 rushing attempts for 234 yards, the second-most in a playoff game in franchise history. They scored a team-record six rushing TDs, including four from LeGarrette Blount, a 250-pound mix of power and speed.

Brady made several third-down completions to help build an early cushion, and his biggest throw of the night – a 53-yard heave to Danny Amendola – came off a play-action fake. But with the rushing attack humming, he was content to hand the ball off while throwing for a modest 198 yards.

That formula has been in the works all season, and has seemingly become even stronger at the perfect time. In the Week 17 regular-season finale against Buffalo, the Patriots rushed for 267 yards.

"It's really been a strength of ours all season – the way our running backs have played and the way our offensive line performs," Brady said. "You get in these conditions and like we did against Buffalo when the elements played a part...to have that running game be as efficient as we've been has been great."

This powerful running game looms as a huge advantage for Brady. He'll take it.

In the playoffs, it is not about style points. It's about winning. And Brady knows how that feels better than most.

Report cards: Broncos not great, good enough vs. Bolts

Nate Davis
USA TODAY Sports
January 12, 2014

The Denver Broncos held off a second-half surge from the San Diego Chargers in Saturday's 24-17 win to advance to the AFC Championship Game. Below are grades for each team.

Denver grades

Broncos run offense: Knowshon Moreno and Montee Ball did exactly what Peyton Manning wanted, keeping the offense in phase with steady gains. The tailback duo combined for 134 yards (on 33 carries), a major reason Denver enjoyed an 11-minute time of possession advantage. Grade: B+

Broncos pass offense: No aerial pyrotechnics on this day as Manning guided a conservative, almost plodding attack. But it worked. The presumptive MVP's 230 yards and two TD passes were pedestrian by his lofty standards (his longest completion only went for 21 yards). Still, Denver racked up 26 first downs and played keep-away, turning the table on a Chargers team that employed a similar strategy when it won in this same stadium last month. Wes Welker caught six passes after a five-week hiatus following a second concussion. TE Julius Thomas struggled with a fumble and a drop before converting two huge third downs on Denver's clock-killing drive to end the game. The offensive line was stellar, surrendering zero sacks and just one hit on Manning. Grade: B+

Broncos run defense: Denver never let San Diego's runners get in gear, limited them to 65 yards on 18 carries and ultimately rendered the Bolts one-dimensional. Grade: A-

Broncos pass defense: They put on a show in the first half, limiting Philip Rivers to 20 passing yards while sacking him three times for 19 yards worth of losses. Yes, the Chargers had 1 net passing yard at halftime, and none of their wideouts had a catch through two quarters. Despite missing Von Miller, the Broncos did sack Rivers four times overall and forced the not-so-mobile vet from the pocket on other occasions. But San Diego picked up the pace after halftime and made a game of it as Rivers and Keenan Allen consistently attacked former San Diego corner Quentin Jammer, who was pressed into a starting role after Chris Harris went down. Grade: B

Broncos special teams: Denver never punted, a pretty good indication of how the Broncos played. Trindon Holliday and Eric Decker made some nifty returns, though Decker slipped on a 47-yard punt run-back, which probably should've produced a

touchdown. Matt Prater missed just his second field goal of the season but was his usual reliable self on kickoffs. Grade: B

San Diego grades

Chargers run offense: Unproductive, yes, but Ryan Mathews' debilitating ankle injury was a big reason for that. At least he tried to help his team. Danny Woodhead also got banged up late in the game. Grade: C-

Chargers pass offense: If San Diego had managed just one nice drive in the first three quarters -- 180 of the Bolts' 259 yards came in the final period -- the outcome could have been significantly different. Allen caught six passes for 142 yards and both San Diego TDs, all of it coming in the second half. But Woodhead and TEs Antonio Gates and Ladarius Green, major assets to Rivers all season, contributed a collective seven receptions for 27 yards, not nearly good enough. The O-line did Rivers no favors, either. Grade: C

Chargers run defense: It bent too much and eventually broke. San Diego limited Denver's big plays but couldn't get off the field, allowing a 69% third-down conversion rate. Grade: D

Chargers pass defense: No heat on Manning, but not all bad, either. LB Donald Butler made a nice end-zone interception before the half to kill a Denver drive. The pass D also forced Thomas' first-half fumble, though no points came of it. It must be noted that injuries forced a lot of San Diego backups onto the field by game's end, but this crew didn't get scorched the way many of Manning's victims do. Grade: C+

Chargers special teams: Tough day. Prater's five touchbacks precluded any kickoff return chances. The San Diego defense precluded any punt return opportunities. The coverage units were spotty. Punter Mike Scifres appeared to injure his back, and Nick Novak slipped on the turf and missed a field goal after Thomas' second-quarter turnover. The highlight was Novak's perfectly executed onside kick, which San Diego recovered and parlayed into a field goal that cut the lead to 24-17 with just under four minutes left. But Denver never gave the ball back after that. Grade: C-

Manning advances to face Brady

By Brent Sobleski
USA TODAY Sports
January 12, 2014

Four primary takeaways from the Denver Broncos' 24-17 victory over the San Diego Chargers in the AFC divisional game.

1. Peyton Manning's historic season continues.

Despite rewriting the NFL's record book during the regular season, skepticism still surrounded Manning. He's often considered a great regular season quarterback, but he's fallen short in the playoffs too often.

Manning overcame two trends with Sunday's victory.

First, Manning wasn't knocked out of his initial playoff game. The QB lost in his opening playoff appearance eight previous times. A ninth would have given him sole possession of the infamous stat.

Second, Manning showed he can lead his team to victory against the Chargers. Manning was 1-5 against San Diego in his previous six games against the franchise.

Manning will now face his nemesis, the New England Patriots and QB Tom Brady, in the AFC Championship Game. Another win will help rewrite the narrative against Manning.

2. Chargers didn't look like a Super Bowl-caliber team.

San Diego didn't come to life until the end of the third quarter. Prior to the Chargers scoring their first touchdown of the game, they punted four times and missed a field goal.

San Diego wasn't the same team Sunday as it was the previous time these two franchises met in Denver. The Chargers' offensive line struggled. The running game never got on track. Keenan Allen was the only wide receiver to have more than one catch. Philip Rivers wasn't able to get comfortable until the fourth quarter. And the defense had trouble stopping Denver's run game.

The Chargers only lost by seven points, but the Broncos dominated most of the contest.

3. Broncos will have issues against the Patriots.

The last two times these teams met, the Patriots won 34-31 in overtime. Tom Brady and his squad overcame a 24-0 halftime deficit.

The team the Broncos will face next weekend in the AFC Championship Game isn't the same Patriots. New England developed into a heavy run offense. The Patriots ran for 116 yards in Week 12. They ran the ball 46 times for 234 yards in the divisional round of playoffs against the Colts.

Manning and Brady will be this week's headline, but the Broncos have to worry more about LeGarrette Blount, Stevan Ridley and Shane Vereen.

4. Chargers should expect offensive turnover.

Mike McCoy revived Philip Rivers and the Chargers' offense this season. The offense won't look the same this fall, though.

Offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt is expected to be offered a head coach position with either the Detroit Lions or the Cleveland Browns. RB Ronnie Brown and OG Chad Rinehart are free agents. Malcolm Brown will return from a season-ending surgery. And the Chargers are expected to add pieces through the draft.

It was a good run from the Chargers, but they should have a different feel, particularly on offense, next season.

Klee: Out with the Chargers, bring on the Patriots

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 12, 2014

DENVER — When all the anxiety was finally released from Mile High, in one big whoosh of relief, Peyton Manning joked about beer.

"What's weighing on my mind is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth," Manning said after the Broncos beat the Chargers 24-17 Sunday.

His brother, Cooper, leaned against a back wall and cracked a smile.

See, he's just like us. After a long, hard day at the office, Peyton Manning simply wants a cold one.

Except he's not. We've never played in the most-anticipated home game in our state's football history. Manning and the Broncos will, next Sunday at Sports Authority Field, against the Patriots. No other game played here boasts the kind of star power that will take the field at quarterback in the AFC championship game.

Remember Elway-Montana on a Monday night? Brady-Manning is that, but with a trip to the Super Bowl on the line. So yeah, this is kind of a big deal.

And Peyton? He's joking about beer.

Next Sunday is why Pat Bowlen, Joe Ellis and John Elway ditched their poker faces and went all-in to sign an aging quarterback coming off multiple neck surgeries.

Next Sunday is the best quarterback rivalry in league history, a matchup so good it will be put on display for the 15th time. Next Sunday is today's equivalent of Bird-Magic, Nicklaus-Palmer, Agassi-Sampras.

And Peyton? He's joking about beer.

"The game next week is the Broncos against the Patriots," he said.

Except it's not.

Our sports world is firmly grounded in perception, not reality. And the perception, when it comes to Brady-Manning, is this:

"When you talk about Peyton Manning, you talk about numbers," TV commentator Ray Lewis said on one of those pompous pregame shows Sunday. "When you talk about Tom Brady, you talk about championship rings."

It's quite a dumb perception, really. Sunday's divisional playoff game offered the latest example why it's silly to blame Manning for his teams' under-.500 playoff record (10-11).

Manning was awesome. His touchdown pass to Demaryius Thomas, at the goal line, slid through a window barely wide enough to slide a hamburger. His lob to Julius Thomas, on third and 17 with a region having flashbacks to the Mile High Mistake, was a thing of wobbling beauty.

Throwing into vicious winds that forced Mile High to ditch the giant American flag during the national anthem, Manning was the best thing in sports. He was a great being great.

And yet his numbers Sunday (25 for 36, two touchdowns, one interception) were oddly similar to his numbers in regulation in this game last year (24 for 37, three touchdowns, one interception).

The Ravens won last year, and Manning got called out for his playoff record.

The Broncos won this year, and Manning will hear, for the next week, how he struggles to win the big one. Sunday felt like a big one, didn't it?

"Any time you get a playoff win it's a big deal," Broncos wideout Wes Welker said. "But it doesn't mean anything if you don't get the next one."

And Peyton? He's joking about beer.

The Broncos didn't watch the Patriots whip the Colts and advance to the AFC championship game in Denver.

"We didn't get to see much of the game," Quentin Jammer said.

For all the car commercials, "Saturday Night Live" skits and supermodel girlfriends, maybe the biggest reason we're drawn to this quarterback rivalry is the human element.

In the over-the-top production that is the NFL, it's easy to forget the human element. The human element was at work Sunday, when Rahim Moore ambled through the Broncos locker room, slapping the backs of his teammates, one year to the day from his personal nightmare. It was at work when Philip Rivers kicked dirt and grounded the football in disgust, like a naughty fifth-grader sent to the principal's office.

It was at work when Peyton joked about beer.

"You're supposed to enjoy these wins," he said.

The Broncos and Patriots are the AFC's best teams, playing their best, at the best time.

"There's an obvious reason why we're the No. 1 and 2 seeds," said Champ Bailey, who hasn't played in a Super Bowl, but would like to.

The Broncos are superior, but the Patriots are a worry, mostly because Brady is and always will be a worry.

So worry about Broncos cornerback Chris Harris getting healthy by Sunday. If Harris can't practice this week, the Patriots will ditch their newfound running game quicker than they discovered it. When Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie missed the second half of the game at Gillette Stadium, Brady picked at their weakness, over and over. Worry about the Dark Lord of Foxboro, Bill Belichick, sticking needles into the Voodoo doll he must hide under his pillow.

But don't worry about Peyton Manning. He just wants a beer.

Ramsey: Peyton Manning heads toward proper conclusion of Super Bowl title

By David Ramsey
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 12, 2014

DENVER — Marshall, one of his toddler twins was saying "daddy" and his father, Archie, was beaming with parental pride while Peyton Manning described the 9,247th pass of his spectacular, if strangely unsatisfying, NFL career.

You know the pass I'm talking about. With 3:06 left in a much-closer-than-it-should-have-been victory over the San Diego Chargers, Manning and his Broncos faced extreme peril. Against all odds, the Broncos were clinging to a 24-17 lead despite dominating most of the game. They had tripped over their own feet, which prevented Eric Decker from scoring on a punt return, and allowed a foolish, needless block to erase a touchdown by Trindon Holliday. This is a short list of the Broncos' disturbing generosity.

A door needed to be slammed shut, and Manning was just the man to do the slamming. It was third and 17, and Manning knew Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers and his blazing hot arm waited on the sideline for a final chance. A packed house at Mile High was thinking about the game that somehow got away in the playoffs last season against the Ravens. This also was the fear of millions of Broncos fans scattered across the Front Range and the world.

Manning banished the fear. He retreated into the pocket and searched downfield for a long instant. Finally, he saw tight end Julius Thomas sprinting toward the Broncos' sideline.

This is a pattern Manning and Thomas have crafted in after-practice sessions. Just the two of them working together, one of the NFL's greatest-ever players and a promising young receiver embracing the rewards of diligent labor.

Manning, under pressure from Chargers behemoth Corey Liuget, zipped a pass to Thomas, who made a skipping catch along the sidelines for a 21-yard-gain.

Thomas ran into the embrace of fellow tight end Jacob Tamme on the sideline. Tamme shouted into the ear of Thomas. "Way to make a play!"

It barely occurred to Tamme to celebrate Manning's throw.

"Ah, no," Tamme said with an admiring laugh. "He plays at such a high level all the time. You kind of expect that throw and that first down."

We, along with Tamme, expect Manning to make those season-saving throws. His utter mastery has spoiled us along with blurring the wow factor of witnessing him terrorize defenses. Watching Manning throw passes in the winter of 2014 is similar to watching Babe Ruth attack fastballs in the summer of 1927 or Michael Jordan rise to ridiculous heights in the spring of 1989.

And yet .

Manning only owns one Super Bowl ring. Yes, I realize "only" might seem a cruel modifier, but it's a proper description for a quarterback who reigns in the regular season but often struggles in the playoffs. This is where unsatisfying enters the conversation.

Only one conclusion can properly end Manning's career-ending journey to Colorado, and that's a Super Bowl title. Anything less will diminish the mythical quality of this saga.

In the late stages of the Broncos' surrender to the Ravens last season, Manning looked utterly human and depressingly old. In the final minutes of this victory over the Chargers, Manning was sharp and courageous. The Super Bowl beckons.

Of course, there is a stupendous obstacle in the way. The Patriots and Tom Brady will invade Colorado this week for the AFC title game. Brady, like Manning, faces the twilight of his career. Brady, like Manning, is ravenously hungry for a trip, most likely the final one, to football's ultimate game.

Manning already is weary of the Brady-Manning storyline. Prediction: He will grow much more weary.

"The game next week is the Broncos vs. the Patriots," Manning said, his southern drawl turning stern.

That's true, Peyton. But it's also a meeting of two of history's greatest quarterbacks, and only one can craft a fitting finale.

Far-flung fans were excited for game and pregame

By Scott Kaniewski
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 12, 2014

They came from both coasts. They traveled by air and land. They brought with them beverages of all kinds and let the smell of grilling meat scent the air around Sports Authority Field at Mile High on Sunday.

Before the Denver Broncos knocked off the San Diego Chargers in an AFC divisional game - more than three hours before kickoff - fans took to the parking lots and streets surrounding the stadium to enjoy themselves.

Flags of all kinds - USA, Colorado, Broncos - soared in the stiff, cold wind that swirled across the lots. But after last season's divisional game that never reached 10 degrees, Sunday's wind appeared to hardly register with fans.

"We're really excited, a little nervous," said Denver's Scott Lockhart, who tended bar at a mobile, horseshoe-shaped pub on wheels. "It's not as cold as it was last year, wind's not helping though. Seems like there's a lot more excited people out here than there were last year."

Lockhart's moving pub sat about a football-field's length from a giant-sized screen showing the San Francisco 49ers taking on the Carolina Panthers.

It wasn't just Broncos fans enjoying the scene. Uriah Rohrbacher, a 27-year-old Chargers fan from Portland, Ore., met up with his father and 11-year-old Broncos fan, Trevor Rohrbacher, who lives in Clinton, Conn.

Trevor was not pleased with his dad's LaDainian Tomlinson jersey. Why?

"Because I hate the Chargers," Trevor said.

Uriah wasn't the only Portland resident in town to watch the game. Marianne Donaldson, who got married at Fountain-Fort Carson a number of years ago, walked through the grounds holding a bright-orange sign that said, "From Portland Oregon! #18 Manning we love ya!!"

"They (the Broncos) better win," Donaldson said, smiling. "We came last year for the playoffs. We went to Seattle and they lost too. If they're down, we're leaving the stadium. I don't want any part of it."

The Broncos were never down, leading throughout before closing out the Chargers 24-17 and advancing to next weekend's AFC championship game home game against the New England Patriots.

Some tailgaters started lining up Saturday morning outside the stadium, waiting to grab the best spots. It didn't seem like there was a bad one. Every corner overflowed with drinks and grills. On the menu: anything the fans could dream up.

Tim Hancock, of Brighton, and Preston Pandolfo, of Parker, worked a grill together, tending ribs, rack of lamb, green chile and bratwurst.

They both wore Broncos jerseys and wore the early look of fans hopeful for a long playoff journey - unlike last year's outcome.

"When the clock goes zero," Pandolfo said, "it'll be a different outcome."

Win over San Diego helps Broncos erase lingering disappointment

By Pete Prisco
CBSSports.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- It was like not being able to go to the bathroom for a year, the misery of that feeling with you all the time, waiting for, and then finally getting, that moment of relief.

That might sound crude and nasty. But when I ran that description by some Denver Broncos players after their 24-17 victory over the San Diego Chargers on Sunday to describe what they felt like after losing as the top AFC playoff seed last season, then coming back to win here, they didn't disagree.

"Yeah," quarterback Peyton Manning said, "but you can't write it that way, right?"

OK, so maybe it was cleaned up a bit from the version I threw at him, but you get the point. This was a big, giant ... relief for the Broncos, who now advance to the AFC Championship Game next week against New England.

This was a team that agonized for over a year after losing as the top seed to the Baltimore Ravens, maybe nobody more so than Manning, the face of the franchise and the target for many for his playoff failures -- however unfair some of that may be.

This time they won a playoff game unlike any games they won this season, by playing stifling defense for three quarters, controlling the clock and running for 133 yards.

Who was this team? The quick-strike offense was replaced by a grinding style that feasted on San Diego playing so off to protect against the pass. Manning threw for 230 yards, by far the lowest this season.

"All in all, tonight I think we played well up front on both sides of the ball," Broncos coach John Fox said.

That loss to the Ravens last year hung over this team like stale air, following the Broncos' every move. No matter how many gaudy offensive numbers they put up -- and there were plenty of records set this season -- it was always about getting back on this Sports Authority Field at Mile High turf again and putting it behind them, a chance for redemption.

"It was tough to hear all the time, to know we came up short," Broncos corner Champ Bailey said. "We're just trying to make sure it doesn't happen again."

Denver led 24-7 and appeared to be cruising to next week's title game, but the Chargers scored 10 points to cut the deficit to seven and make it a game late.

When they did, you could hear the moans in the crowd and the critics of Manning waiting for disaster again. Admit it, many of you were doing the same.

"Everybody wanted to see a pick-six by the Chargers," Bailey said.

What they saw was Manning and the offense run the four-minute drill to perfection. The biggest play of all was a 21-yard completion to Julius Thomas on third-and-17 with 3:06 left from his own 20. Manning climbed the pocket and found a wide-open Thomas, who did a toe dance to get his feet in bounds. Two more first downs, including a third-down throw to Thomas for 9 yards on third-and-6, and Denver was advancing.

"Third-and-17, you know you're going to have to hold the ball a little bit longer just to give guys a chance to get down the field," Manning said. "It was the perfect call against the perfect coverage, which you may get one or two of those a game."

When the final seconds clicked off, the relief was obvious on the Denver sideline. But after a Nick Novak field goal cut the lead to 24-17 with 3:53 left, the Broncos even had some nervous moments on their sideline.

"I know when they scored, everybody started looking around like here we go again," Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton said. "I wasn't nervous at all."

So where were you watching that last drive?

"I was sitting down," said Knighton, who is in his first year with the team as a free agent from Jacksonville and might not have understood the tension as much. "I was calm. The whole team was standing up. I was the only one sitting, I think."

It's hard for a team to admit that something that happened a year ago would impact what they do for 365 days, but there is no denying it did. When I visited this team in May, you could feel it. Observers close to them said it was noticeable all season long. The fancy numbers and accolades to earn the top seed were great, but none of it would have mattered if they failed -- or fail -- in the playoffs again.

Manning, ever the historian of the game, said he spoke to the team Saturday night about what they had accomplished to be in this position again. It's not easy to get the top seed in consecutive years. And, luckily for them, they didn't lose in consecutive years to go with it.

"I really think this team needs to be commended for even getting to this point," Manning said. "There were a lot of teams that had disappointing losses last year. Atlanta, Washington -- everybody says in the locker room, 'Let's get back next year.' It's hard to get back. I talked to the team last night. I said you need to be

commended for getting back to this point. We've been through more this year. We are proud and happy to be at this point and we certainly want to keep it going."

The shock in this one was how well the Denver defense played. They came in after finishing the season ranked 19th in total defense and 27th against the pass. Until the fourth quarter, they limited San Diego, a team that beat them on this field in early December, to 25 yards passing through three quarters.

The Chargers got the passing game going in the fourth quarter when Denver was forced to play without corner Chris Harris, who left with knee and ankle problems. His status is in question for next week, which would be a key loss when readying to face Tom Brady.

San Diego attacked Quentin Jammer and had success to make it a game and, in the process, get all those in the I Hate Peyton Club on the edge of their seats. Only this time, it wasn't to be. Only this time, the Broncos found a way with two huge throws by Manning. No more can the cultists say he hasn't done what their guy named Tebow did in a Broncos uniform, which was to win a playoff game.

"That was some big third downs on that drive," Bailey said. "That doesn't happen a lot in four-minute football."

There was an ESPN report that Manning will have to undergo a neck exam to determine whether he will play after this season. Asked whether that was weighing on him, he said, "It's really not. What's weighing on my mind is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth. Even the Patriots is (too far) ahead. And that question is way too far ahead."

As Manning made his way out of the stadium, his forehead still red from his helmet, he shook hands and hugged his family and friends, the relief of this playoff victory so easy to see. This was a man who wondered himself after 2011 neck surgery if he would ever even play again, let alone compete at this level.

Now he's one game away from his third Super Bowl. The only thing standing in his way is his old nemesis, Tom Brady and the New England Patriots, but for at least a few hours, before jumping in to dissect the Patriots tape, this was a quarterback and a team that was feeling so much lighter than just a day ago.

Manning, Broncos hold on to defeat Chargers

CBSsports.com
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DENVER -- Peyton Manning took a knee again, just as he had at the end of regulation exactly a year earlier.

Only this time, he trotted off to cheers, high-fives and smiles.

Manning welcomed Wes Welker back into the lineup with a touchdown toss Sunday and the Denver Broncos narrowly avoided a repeat of their playoff slip from last year, advancing to the AFC championship game with a 24-17 win over the San Diego Chargers.

The Broncos (14-3) took a 17-0 lead into the fourth quarter before Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers capitalized on an injury to cornerback Chris Harris Jr. to stage a comeback reminiscent of Baltimore's shocking win 38-35 in double overtime at Denver.

On that night, Jacoby Jones hauled in a 70-yard pass from Joe Flacco to tie it and Denver coach John Fox had Manning take a knee so the Broncos could regroup in overtime.

This time, Manning rescued the Broncos from the brink of another crushing collapse and sent them into the title game for the first time in eight seasons.

They'll host the New England Patriots (13-4) on Sunday.

Get ready for Brady vs. Manning once more.

In the most recent matchup of QBs with Hall of Fame credentials, Tom Brady and the Patriots rallied past Manning and the visiting Broncos 34-31 in overtime on Nov. 24.

"That's two of the greats," Eric Decker said. "It's going to be talked about a lot throughout the week."

"It's the Broncos versus the Patriots and certainly Tom and I have played against each other a lot," Manning said. "But when you get to the AFC championship, it's about two good teams that have been through a lot to get there."

The Chargers regretted not trying another onside kick after Manning converted a 20-yard pass to Julius Thomas on third-and-17 from his 20-yard line, the first of three third-down conversions on Denver's final possession.

In their playoff loss last year, they couldn't salt away a fourth-quarter lead, in no small part because of curious calls and inexact execution.

"I felt like that game last year forced us to address those types of situations all season long," Manning said. "We've worked on it in training camp, we've worked on it in the season. ... It was nice that all that hard work paid off for us."

Manning also hit Thomas on third-and-6 from his 45, then the Broncos iced it on Knowshon Moreno's 5-yard burst on third-and-1 with 1:12 left.

"When they got that first down I was jumping up and down," Broncos defensive lineman Malik Jackson said. "It was delightful."

San Diego coach Mike McCoy, who was Denver's offensive coordinator a year ago, was downcast in Denver once again, and so was Rivers, who had led his team to five straight do-or-die wins.

"If we got it one more time, I believe deep down we would've tied that thing up," Rivers said. "But we didn't. Those are all a bunch of what-ifs."

Manning ended a personal three-game postseason skid in winning for the first time since leading Indianapolis over the Jets 30-17 in the AFC championship game on Jan. 24, 2010.

Manning completed 25 of 36 passes for 230 yards and two TDs, numbers that weren't quite up to the standards he set during a record-breaking regular season when he established new benchmarks with 55 TD passes and 5,447 yards.

But it was windy and the Broncos were intent on establishing the run and controlling the clock, and they converted 9 of 13 third downs while holding the ball for 35 minutes.

After gaining just 18 yards on the ground against San Diego last month, the Broncos ran for 133 yards, including 82 by Moreno, whose 3-yard TD run put them ahead 24-7 with 8:12 left.

After that, things got interesting.

Keenan Allen hauled in a 49-yard catch with Quentin Jammer in coverage on fourth-and-5 from the San Diego 25 with seven minutes left. That led to his second TD -- both from 16 yards -- that pulled the Chargers to 24-14 with 5:43 left.

"We got those two touchdowns in the second half, but it's unfortunate we didn't get started earlier," said Allen, who finished with 142 yards on six catches.

Decker then made his third big blunder of the day, flubbing the onside kick, which San Diego recovered, leading to Nick Novak's 30-yard field goal with 3:53 remaining that pulled the Chargers (10-8) to within a touchdown.

Novak followed with a pooch kick, and Trindon Holliday secured the ball at the Denver 27 with 3:51 left.

Manning's third-down brilliance kept the Chargers' offense on the sideline.

"Third-and-17, I was thinking we were definitely going to get the ball back," Allen said. "And we were feeling good on the offensive side, having the momentum. It was just unfortunate we didn't get it."

Notes: In the first half, Decker tripped at the San Diego 30-yard line after a 47-yard punt return. "I guess it was that invisible fence that got me." said Decker, who then let Manning's pass in the end zone bounce off his chest and into the arms of linebacker Donald Butler -- Manning's first red zone interception of the season. ... Welker wore an oversized safety helmet. ... Manti Te'o and Marcus Gilchrist sustained concussions. ... Denver did not punt for the first time in its playoff history and just the eighth time in NFL postseason history -- three of those came with Manning under center.

Ten things to ponder for conference championship weekend

By Josh Katzowitz
CBSSports.com
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The conference title games are set. The final four teams are looking ahead to the opponents that will try to keep them from playing in the Super Bowl. And as fantastic reporters and journalists, we have questions about each team.

Here are 10 things to ponder this week as the NFL heads into its conference championship games next Sunday.

1) What can be done to hurt the Seahawks secondary? Or for that matter, their run defense. New Orleans didn't have many answers Saturday. Though the Saints found early success running the ball -- particularly with playoff surprise Mark Ingram and the unheralded (and basically unknown) Khiry Robinson -- it didn't translate to many points. But the real worry for the 49ers when they play in Seattle next week is how to gain yards through the air. Even without cornerback Brandon Browner, the Seahawks secondary, with Richard Sherman and Earl Thomas and Kam Chancellor, is so damn tough. Although Drew Brees threw for 304 yards (it totally didn't seem like it, right?), that was the first time anybody had thrown for as many as 210 yards against Seattle since Week 4. The 49ers will have to make sure to rely on their running game Sunday, although that's not necessarily a terrible idea for San Francisco anyway.

2) Can Russell Wilson get back on track? It hasn't hurt the Seahawks yet (with the exception of the Cardinals win in Seattle in Week 16), but it very well could in the conference title game if San Francisco can bottle up Seattle running back Marshawn Lynch. A healthy Percy Harvin obviously would help -- the receiver suffered a concussion Saturday, and his availability for next week will be a major question -- but Wilson just hasn't been sharp lately. As my CBSSports.com colleague Ryan Wilson recently wrote, "Through the first 12 games of the season, Wilson completed 64.9 percent of his passes for 223 yards per game, with 22 TDs and a passer rating of 108.5. In games 13-16 his completion percentage dropped to 57.8, yards per game fell to 171, with four TDs and a passer rating of 79.1." On Saturday, Wilson went 9 of 18 for 108 yards. Some of the plays Wilson made as a quarterback Saturday were simply sublime, but if his passing doesn't improve, the path to a Super Bowl title will be that much harder for Seattle.

3) So much is made about the Seahawks' home-field advantage, but the atmosphere certainly seemed to affect the Saints on Saturday. Especially when Marshawn Lynch was rushing for a touchdown. See?

Either way, the Seahawks have won six-straight home playoff games, and the last time the 49ers played in Seattle, the Seahawks dominated 29-3 in what was likely the most disappointing San Francisco performance all season. The 49ers have to be salivating at the chance to find redemption in the Pacific Northwest.

4) Can anybody stop the playoff beast that is Anquan Boldin? After winning a Super Bowl with the Ravens last year, where he caught six passes for 104 yards and a touchdown, Boldin has had to be the 49ers' No. 1 receiver for much of the season while Michael Crabtree was injured. On Sunday, it didn't matter that Crabtree was on the field. Boldin still played like a No. 1 receiver. How good has Boldin been in the playoffs? Good enough to talk enough trash to fill a landfill and still manage not to get penalized for it by game officials. But seriously. With the exception of last week, he hasn't caught less than four passes or gained less than 60 yards in every playoff game he's participated in during the past three seasons (a total of seven games, again not including last week). He's also scored four touchdowns. On Sunday, he caught eight passes for 136 yards, compared to Crabtree's three catches for 26 yards, and the Seahawks will have to spend much of their time next week focusing on the 33-year-old who the Ravens deemed expendable last off-season.

5) The 49ers pass rush bothered Cam Newton on Sunday, and San Francisco will try to do the same to Wilson next week. While the Panthers ranked 14th in the league in most sacks allowed, Seattle's offensive line allowed one more sack than Carolina. But here's what will make the 49ers smile. If you go by the Football Outsiders metrics, Seattle is the worst pass protection team in the NFL. For the record, the last time these two teams met, San Francisco sacked Wilson four times.

6) The Patriots have a running game? Apparently, they do. Actually, they've had one all year, ranking ninth in the league in rushing offense. But what happened Saturday vs. the Colts felt strangely sweet. Tom Brady didn't throw a touchdown pass, and yet, New England scored 43 points. And LeGarrette Blount, who was traded from Tampa Bay for a seventh-round pick, scored four touchdowns and gained 166 yards. You'll recall that in 2012, he rushed for 151 yards and two scores ALL SEASON. It's not just Blount, though. Shane Vereen is such a weapon out of the backfield, and Stevan Ridley has combined for more than 2,000 rushing yards in the past two regular seasons. The Broncos benefitted Sunday from not having to face a healthy Ryan Mathews, but those three Patriots running backs could give Denver problems next week.

7) New England's defense doesn't usually have a great reputation, and though the Patriots ended up ranked 25th in the league this season, they looked sturdy against the Colts. Without Brandon Spikes, who was placed on the IR list this week, rookie linebacker Jamie Collins had his coming-out party, recording six tackles (two for a loss), a sack, and an interception. He was around the ball all game long, and though he had 43 total tackles on the season, Pro Football Focus ranked him 15th out of the 35 outside linebackers playing in a 4-3 scheme. He was a different player Saturday, though. Yet, it wasn't only Collins. Aqib Talib, for the most part, played well against Colts receiver T.Y. Hilton, and cornerback Alfonzo Dennard made high-

impact plays throughout the game. Another high-level game from the defensive backs will be what the Patriots need when they face Peyton Manning next week.

8) You know you want to watch Peyton Manning vs. Tom Brady again. We saw it earlier this year when the Patriots beat the Broncos 34-31 in New England, but you have to figure that this time, Denver won't blow a 24-0 halftime lead. And with the game to take place in Denver, that should be another advantage for the Broncos. "It's the Broncos vs. Patriots," Manning told CBS' Tracy Wolfson after the game. "We've played against each other a lot. But when it's the AFC championship, it's about two good teams." Still, Brady typically beats Manning when the two face off against each other, winning 10 out of 14 times. As this Mile High Report graphic shows, Manning actually plays pretty well against Brady; it's just that Brady typically plays a little better. Manning and Brady have faced off two times in the AFC title game. Manning is 1-1.

9) The Broncos haven't been known much for their defense this season, but against the formerly-hot Chargers offense -- San Diego ranked fifth in the league this season and scored at least 26 points in every game for the past five weeks -- Denver shut down San Diego for 3/4 of the game. And shut the Chargers out for the first 47 minutes. Even without Von Miller, the defense -- led by the play of linebacker Danny Trevathan, defensive end Shaun Phillips and cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie -- has played much better in the past three games, allowing 13 points to the Texans, 14 points to the Raiders and 17 points to the Chargers. But even a Rob Gronkowski-less New England offense is capable of scoring plenty of points, especially if the running game is as good as it was Saturday.

10) The weather should be better. So far the playoffs have featured an ice-cold game in Green Bay, plenty of rain in New England and Seattle, and a blustery wind in Denver. The inclement weather makes for a fun visual on TV, but it doesn't much help to keep those games from being sloppy. Next week's weather should be better. According to the Weather Channel, Denver's forecast calls for a high of 55 degrees with partly cloudy skies, zero percent chance of rain and 9 mph winds out of the west, while Seattle's forecast is predicted to be a high of 50 degrees with a chance for some showers. Still, considering conditions were monsoon-like Saturday in Seattle, next week will be an improvement.

Sorting the Sunday Pile: Broncos win sets up Manning-Brady XV

By John Breech
CBSSports.com
January 12, 2014

*Sometimes the story lines write themselves and next week's AFC Championship game in Denver is one of those times. Thanks to the Broncos' 24-17 win over San Diego on Sunday, Tom Brady and the Patriots will be traveling to Denver next week with a trip to Super Bowl XLVIII on the line.

If you want to know what that means for you, this tweet sums it up pretty well:

The AFC title game will mark the 15th time that Brady and Manning have met in their careers, the fourth time they've met in the playoffs and the third time they've met in an AFC Championship game. Brady and Manning have each won one title game against the other, making Sunday the ultimate rubber match.

Brady beat Manning and the Colts 24-14 in the AFC title game following the 2003 season. Manning didn't help his reputation of choking in big games that year as he threw four interceptions in the New England win.

Manning got the best kind of revenge though following the 2006 season when he led the Colts back from a 21-3 second quarter deficit to a 38-34 win. That victory propelled the Colts to Super Bowl XLI, where Manning picked up his only Lombardi Trophy in a win over the Bears.

Although the two quarterbacks are 1-1 against each other in AFC title games, Brady has dominated almost every other game in the series. Including those title games, Brady holds a 10-4 career record against Manning.

Manning-Brady XV could be the last time these two meet in the postseason, so we should probably appreciate it. Also, since you'll probably need something to do to pass the time until next Sunday, here's a video of Peyton Manning throwing a football at kids.

*The best news to come out of Denver's win is that Tim Tebow's no longer the last Broncos quarterback to win a playoff game in Denver, as everyone on the Internet pointed out this week. But don't worry, just because Manning finally got a playoff win with the Broncos, that doesn't mean we're going to stop talking about Tebow. We'll be talking about him until a Heisman winning quarterback finally wins a postseason game.

*The Chargers might have lost, but they might have won if they would have had 10 Keenan Allens on the field and Philip Rivers throwing passes to those Keenan

Allens. The rookie wide receiver caught six passes for 142 yards and two touchdowns. The rest of the team combined to catch 12 passes for 75 yards and zero touchdowns. Allen's performance marked only the second time in the Super Bowl-era that a rookie wide receiver topped 100-yards receiving and scored at least two touchdowns in a playoff game. The other rookie to do it was Lions wide receiver Willie Green who did it in Detroit's last playoff win -- in 1991.

*Broncos wide receiver Wes Welker returned to the field for the first time since Dec. 8. Welker has had a problem with concussions, so the Broncos decided to fix that problem by having Welker wear a giant helmet. As you can imagine, this went over well with the Spaceballs crowd.

At least one person thought the giant helmet was a horrible idea and that's former U.S. Men's National Team member and MLS player Taylor Twellman. Twellman had to deal with concussions in his career and his take is that if Welker needs to wear a giant helmet to play, then maybe Welker shouldn't be playing. The other side of that is that maybe Welker's helmet is the helmet of the future that more players will be wearing down the road. The big helmet didn't seem to cause too many problems for Welker, who caught six passes for 38 yards and a touchdown.

*The Broncos beat the Chargers 24-17, but maybe they should have only beaten the Chargers 21-17. In the third quarter, Broncos kicker Matt Prater made a 45-yard field goal that went directly over the right upright. The kick was called good on the field, but it might have been no good, I have no idea, you can decide for yourself here. I know what you're thinking, why not just make the uprights higher? Maybe Roger Goodell should focus more on that and less on everything else.

I only bring that field goal up because it started a string of events where it seemed like the officials had no idea what was going on. In the fourth quarter, the Broncos were facing third-and-7 from their own 22 and Denver was unable to convert after a Peyton Manning incomplection. Two flags were thrown on the play, one for defensive holding against San Diego and one for pass interference against the Chargers. Even former NFL VP of Officiating Mike Pereira had no idea what was going on. The pass interference penalty gave the Broncos a first down on a drive where Denver eventually scored a touchdown.

*If bad officiating puts you in a bad mood, here's something to cheer you up, it's a horse playing a drum. It's a good thing Denver's season is going to last at least one more week because Miles -- that's the horse's name -- looks like he could definitely use some more practice time.

*Finally, lets end with this classic from Tom Brady. If no one in Denver understands a word he's saying next week, it's because of his unintelligible Boston accent.

By the numbers: Manning sets more records; Vernon Davis ties one

By Josh Katzowitz
CBSSports.com
January 12, 2014

With only four teams left in the postseason vying for the NFL title, here are some of the most interesting numbers to emerge from the divisional round of the playoffs this weekend:

2: The number of playoff touchdown catches for Colts receiver LaVon Brazill in his career after he caught two on Saturday. As Scott Kacsmar points out, that's as many playoff scoring grabs as Marvin Harrison had in his entire career.

3: The number of playoff road wins 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick has produced in the less than two years he's been the starter. In their careers, Joe Montana and Steve Young combined for one, via Adam Schefter.

4-0: The record of the Patriots in playoff games when Tom Brady doesn't throw a touchdown pass, as he did (or didn't) on Saturday (via ESPN Stats Info).

4-1: The record of Kaepernick in playoff games. Cam Newton, Jake Locker, Blaine Gabbert, Christian Ponder and Andy Dalton -- all of whom were drafted before Kaepernick -- are a combined 0-4, via SportsCenter.

6: The number of rushing touchdowns scored by the Patriots on Saturday, the highest total in franchise history. As John Breech points out, it's also the second most in playoff history, behind only the Bears' seven rushing scores in the 1940 NFL title game.

7: The number of touchdowns caught by San Francisco's Vernon Davis in his playoff career. That ties Dave Casper for the most all time by a tight end.

8: The number of games in NFL history, before Saturday, that a game had ended with a final score of 23-15. The 23-15 win by the Seahawks was the first of its kind since 2002, and it's the first time that score has occurred in playoff history.

12: The number of years since the Saints were shut out in the first three quarters of a game. Seattle allowed zero New Orleans points Saturday, and the last time that happened was when the 49ers managed it in 2002.

15: The number of conference games to which the 49ers have advanced. That ties the Steelers for the most since the NFL merger, via NFL Communications.

24: The number of passes thrown by Kaepernick in the first half Sunday. Via ESPN Stats Info, that's the most passing attempts made by Kaepernick in any first half of his career.

34: The number of yards thrown for by Drew Brees in the first half. As Breech wrote, it was the worst statistical half of Brees' career.

36: The number of years it's been since a Super Bowl runner-up advanced to the next season's NFC title game until San Francisco managed it Sunday. The last squad to do that was the 1977 Vikings, via ESPN Stats Info.

42: The number of career playoff touchdowns thrown by New England's Tom Brady -- who, stunningly, didn't throw any against the Colts on Saturday. Still, Brady has the third most throwing scores in history behind Joe Montana (45) and Brett Favre (44). More on Brady's career playoff prowess below.

42: The number of rushing yards accumulated by the Saints in the first quarter of their loss to the Seahawks. The first time those teams met this season, New Orleans gained 44 rushing yards for the entire game (H/T to Jerry Brewer). Note: on Saturday, the Saints finished with 108 rushing yards.

57: The number of touchdown passes for a single season (including the playoffs) thrown by Peyton Manning. He passed Dan Marino for the entire season record Sunday, via NFL on CBS.

67: The number of tickets that went unused for the Broncos-Chargers game, according to the home team. Otherwise, 76,902 managed to make their way to the stadium.

81: The success percentage rate for the Panthers offense when they've gone for it on fourth down in its last 11 chances. Of course, that includes the Panthers' inability to score on a fourth-and-goal from the 1-yard line in the second quarter of their loss to the Seahawks.

6,147: The number of postseason yards thrown by Tom Brady in his career. He's the first quarterback ever to break the 6,000-yard mark in the postseason.

Wes Welker returns from concussion with oversized helmet

By Ryan Wilson
CBSSports.com
January 12, 2014

After missing five weeks with his second concussion of the season, wide receiver Wes Welker returned to the field Sunday for the Broncos' AFC Divisional matchup against the Chargers. And he did so wearing an oversized helmet and a new mouthguard.

Taylor Twellman, a former U.S. Men's National Team member and MLS player, was forced from the game in 2010 due to a serious concussion. He now covers soccer for ESPN.

Welker, meanwhile, suffered his first concussion of the 2013 season back on Nov. 17, and then again on Dec. 9. He had been sidelined until Sunday.

Through two quarters, Welker has two catches for 10 yards, including a touchdown grab.

Report: Peyton Manning's NFL future hinges on offseason neck exam

By Ryan Wilson

CBSsports.com

January 12, 2014

Whatever happens in the coming days and weeks, Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning's NFL future beyond this season won't be decided until he has an offseason exam on his surgically repaired neck, ESPN's Chris Mortensen reports.

"If the exam reveals that his neck is stable, Manning plans to return to the Broncos in 2014, regardless of how Denver fares this postseason, according to sources," Mortensen writes. "But if there is an increased risk of injury, Manning will be forced to decide whether to retire, sources said."

Earlier this week, Manning raised eyebrows when he said, "The light is at the end of the tunnel for me, no question." The 37-year-old has been in the league since 1998, when the Colts drafted him first overall, and he had four neck surgeries before arriving in Denver prior to the 2012 season.

If Manning does end up calling it a career, Brock Osweiler, who was taken in the second round of the 2012 draft, would be his likely replacement.

On Sunday morning, hours before the Broncos were to host the Chargers in the AFC Divisional game, the Denver Post ran this on the front page of their playoff section with the caption: "Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning has been heavenly during the regular season, but merely mortal in the postseason with a 9-11 record that ranks poorly among the all-time greats."

Denver Post on Peyton in the playoffs: 'A legacy under a cloud'

By Ryan Wilson
CBSSports.com
January 12, 2014

Should we question Peyton Manning's playoff legacy? (Denver Post via @StaceyDales)

This is the front page of playoff section in Sunday's Denver Post, hours before the Broncos host the Chargers in the AFC Divisional game. The caption to the right reads: "Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning has been heavenly during the regular season, but merely mortal in the postseason with a 9-11 record that ranks poorly among the all-time greats."

Oh boy.

The "A legacy under a cloud" premise is flawed for any number of reasons but thankfully, the Post's Mike Klis writes about more than the 9-11 record, touching on everything from skewed perceptions about Manning in the postseason to this reality: Many of Manning's defenses over the years have been pretty awful.

"So many of those Indy teams were soft on defense," Klis writes. "This year's Broncos have allowed an average of 24.9 points per game — easily the most among teams remaining in the NFL tournament's Elite Eight.

"Given the makeup of so many Manning-led teams, it's pretty much up to the offense to carry them. And it's looking that way again Sunday, even though in their last meeting, Dec. 12, the Chargers abused the Broncos in yards rushing, 177-18."

ESPN analyst Trent Dilfer, who won a Super Bowl with the Ravens in 2000 but wasn't considered a franchise quarterback, offers up a nuanced, smart take on Manning's playoff performance.

"I think football has so many layers to it that we want to direct a narrative to focus it simplistically and say he's 9-11 and Tom Brady is (17-7), so he's not as good as Tom Brady," Dilfer told Klis. "That's the water-cooler talk that people want to make. ..."

"I can tell you from studying Peyton over his entire career that he's played really well in some playoff games they've lost," Dilfer continued. "He's played not so great in games they've lost, but it's not the playoffs that makes him play bad. He's had dropped balls. They haven't been able to run the ball as well. Protection has been an issue. There are reasons for some of his performances that aren't so hot."

And that -- not some vague notion of Manning stumbling his way through January -
- should be the takeaway.

Whatever happens in the coming days and weeks, Manning's NFL future beyond this season won't be decided until he has an offseason exam on his surgically repaired neck, according to an ESPN report.

NFL is shopping 1-year deal to air Thursday night games

By Ryan Wilson
CBSSports.com
January 12, 2014

The NFL is shopping a one-year Thursday night deal to other networks to broadcast games starting in September 2014, according to Sports Business Journal's John Ourand, who adds that the package would share the Thursday night games with NFL Network.

CBS Sports NFL Insider Jason La Canfora hears that the league is looking for roughly \$800 million, and the NFL Network would like to be able to keep late regular-season games leading up to the playoffs, but chances are that the network that lands the deal will want those games.

More from La Canfora: "This has always been the plan -- to use the full-season package to get higher carriage fees and get on Time Warner Cable, then sell off half the package."

Prime bidders include: FOX, Turner and possibly NBC Sports Network.

Back in October, days after Cowboys owner and general manager Jerry Jones hinted that the NFL was considering Thursday doubleheaders, La Canfora noted that selling part of the broadcast rights would be "[O]ne way to get the salary cap up. Because the salary cap hasn't really moved since 2009, and this new TV money from the existing contracts probably won't start kicking in until 2015."

Garafolo: A weekend so good, it took nearly a decade to happen

By Mike Garafolo
FOX Sports
January 12, 2014

It seemed almost too good to be true: The best team and personal rivalries in the NFL in the conference championship games.

No way it would happen. Not with the way the unexpected has taken over the NFL postseason in recent years. To get the Seattle Seahawks hosting the San Francisco 49ers in the NFC Championship Game and have Peyton Manning vs. Tom Brady XV in the AFC Championship Game would require all four favored teams to win in the divisional round. And that just couldn't happen, right?

Well, it did. For the first time since Jan. 15-16, 2005, all four favored teams in the divisional round took care of business.

Order has been restored to the NFL playoffs.

And while some complained about a lack of drama this weekend, the favorites advancing should make for three terrific games to close out this postseason:

'You know where we're going now'

In the postgame locker room, the 49ers did their standard "slap hands" thing, in which they all high-five one another. Then, coach Jim Harbaugh gave a brief speech and asked who had it "better than us." The answer, as always, came back: "Noooooobody."

And then, as the players dispersed from the middle of the room toward their lockers, Niners offensive coordinator Greg Roman grabbed quarterback Colin Kaepernick.

"You know where we're going now," Roman said, matter-of-factly.

"Yup," Kaepernick replied.

End of exchange.

Right about that time, Seahawks wide receiver Doug Baldwin tweeted, "Wouldn't want it any other way..."

<A href="http://msn.foxsports.com/nfl/video?vid=da364cda-a0f8-4c86-b568-3dbe47366658&videoId=da364cda-a0f8-4c86-b568-

3dbe47366658&from=shareembed-syndication&src=v5:embed:syndication:&target=&_new&title=&NFL Divisional Round Recap&Video: NFL Divisional Round Recap&/A&

Neither would much of the football-loving nation. At this point, to have these rivals facing each other for a trip to the Super Bowl is about as good as the NFL fan could have it in the NFC. Truth be told, the yapping between the teams has been better than the play on the field.

The Seahawks blew out the 49ers 29-3 in September. The Niners responded last month with a 19-17 win in a somewhat entertaining game at Candlestick.

Last year, it was the same deal — a close loss for Seattle in San Fran and a blowout victory for the 'Hawks at CenturyLink Field. If not for a furious comeback victory by the Atlanta Falcons over the Seahawks in the postseason, there would've been the rematch in the NFC Championship Game that many were hoping to see.

Now, we've got it. And though the Seahawks have owned the Niners in Seattle, expect this one to be a much, much better contest.

For one, the 49ers are the hottest team in the NFL right now. Their win over the Carolina Panthers was their eighth consecutive victory. There's plenty to be said for momentum in the NFL playoffs these days.

The Niners, a week removed from a frigid, physical game in Lambeau Field, were also able to withstand a big punch in the mouth from the Panthers in the first half. Once that game settled down in the second half, the 49ers clearly became the more physical team.

In other words, from a mental toughness standpoint, they're in top form right now. So while they've melted amid the din of the "Clink" in their past two trips to Seattle, this team right now doesn't seem likely to fall apart anywhere.

"You're very proud of your team when they do that, when you go out on the road and in the playoff game and beat another team that's a very good football team in their stadium," said Harbaugh, whose next line has to make one chuckle, given his ballerina-type pirouette on the sideline: "Yes, it does make you feel like a strong, mighty man."

&A href=&http://msn.foxsports.com/watch/fox-sports-live/video?vid=192e2d23-4a61-49f3-8c88-c88fbd7e3df4&videoid=192e2d23-4a61-49f3-8c88-c88fbd7e3df4&from=shareembed-syndication&src=v5:embed:syndication:&target=&_new&title=&Let it Ride: Conference Championship lines&Video: Let it Ride: Conference Championship lines&/A&

The game will be a matchup of strong, mighty men. And it will be won in the trenches, particularly when the Seahawks have the ball.

In their past six games, the 49ers have allowed the opposing team to rush for more than 100 yards only once. And in their past six games, the Seahawks have been held under 100 rushing yards only one time. That would be their loss to the 49ers, when they had just 86 yards on 23 rushes.

It's the play of the 49ers' linebackers that's making their front seven so ferocious right now. Defensive player of the year candidate NaVorro Bowman, inside linebacker Patrick Willis and outside linebacker Ahmad Brooks were credited with a combined 28 total tackles Sunday at Carolina.

Those guys will be watching the film of the New Orleans Saints' defenders unable to wrap up Marshawn Lynch (again) and realize it's on them to make sure that doesn't happen next weekend.

Just like it didn't happen in Carolina.

"(Defensive coordinator) Vic (Fangio) told us last night, 'I'm challenging you guys to come out and play the best defense you've played all year because that's what it's going to take,'" Willis said. "He talks all the time about packing the defense on the road. And I think, for the most part, we did that."

Get ready for an even bigger challenge. And a better, more physical game than these teams have played in Seattle before.

<A href="<http://msn.foxsports.com/video?videoid=142a5c44-8c7b-4515-901d-73094ea4a7a1&src=v5:embed:syndication:&from=shareembed-syndication">; target="_new"; title="Online OT: SD/DEN Recap">Video: Online OT: SD/DEN Recap

Peyton will drink to that

It's nice to know a guy who's portrayed as a film-devouring, recovery-drink-pitching football robot likes to unwind like many of us.

"What's weighing on my mind," Manning told reporters after the Broncos' victory Sunday over the San Diego Chargers, "is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth after this win."

That was Manning's reply to a question about his future. Manning also didn't take much time to reflect on his latest matchup with Brady. He'll dabble in that department later this week, though Archie Manning told me last year before the 13th matchup of these great quarterbacks, neither will truly understand how great their rivalry has been until they both retire and reflect upon their careers.

Manning and Brady don't face one another on the field. They face the opposing defenses, as they've pointed out in the past.

But the ratings and buzz of these matchups tell us all we need to know about what it means to have two future Hall of Fame quarterbacks opposing each others' teams. And for as much flak as Manning has received for his postseason failures over the years (see this past Sunday's Denver Post with the cloud over his head), this is his chance to cement a pretty important part of his legacy.

Manning has only four victories against Brady's Patriots, while Brady has beaten Manning's teams 10 times. But in the postseason, it's 2-1 Brady, which means Manning can pull even in playoff games. And if the Broncos win on Sunday, Manning would have two AFC Championship Game wins to Brady's one in this series.

That's a pretty important piece of this rivalry Manning can nail down. Despite everything else he's done in the playoffs otherwise, and the advantage Brady has overall, Manning has a chance to get the edge in matchups with Brady when it mattered most.

Not that he was mulling that opportunity on Sunday.

"(A postgame beer) is priority No. 1," he deadpanned to a room full of raucous laughter. "That was an intense game, up-and-down and a lot of emotions. Even the Patriots is ahead and that question (about his future) is way far ahead. I'm not there. This team's been (through) a one-week-at-a-time season. For all we've been through — losing our coach, losing a lot of guys to injuries — that approach has served us well. And we need to keep that approach from here on out."

Video: Glazer: NFL Coaching Vacancy Update

Quick takes

- Coaching carousel: Best guess at how the rest of the jobs will be filled: Minnesota Vikings (Mike Zimmer), Detroit Lions (Ken Whisenhunt), Tennessee Titans (Dan Quinn), Cleveland Browns (who knows?).
- Adam Gase: As FOX Sports' Jay Glazer reported on Sunday, the Broncos' offensive coordinator is the Browns' top target, though he won't interview until Denver's season is over. Even then, I'll say he doesn't take Cleveland's job, thus leaving the Browns to take a fallback option (Todd Bowles?) once again.

- Bowles: There have been reports Zimmer's second interview with Minnesota will be this week. Don't be surprised if Bowles gets his, as well.
- Percy Harvin: Concussions are too tough to predict, but a source said Harvin felt pretty good after Saturday's game and again on Sunday. He and the team are hopeful he'll be cleared for the game against the Niners. We'll see.
- Final Four quarterbacks: Don't get too caught up in the fact Manning, Brady, Kaepernick and Russell Wilson threw only three touchdowns combined this past weekend. The real stat to measure their success this month is that they've thrown a combined two interceptions in 137 attempts. That's a rate of 1.5 percent, which is excellent.

Pereira: We've finally rounded out the NFL's final four

By Mike Pereira
FOX Sports
January 12, 2014

The NFL's Final Four ... the best of the best. And that's exactly what we got -- all four favorites making it to the championship round for the first time since 2004 -- after Denver defeated San Diego 24-17 Sunday in the final game of the divisional round.

A valiant comeback by Philip Rivers and the Chargers in the fourth quarter wasn't enough to win the game.

Officiating-wise, since I've been giving out grades for the playoffs, I'll continue on. I don't think this was necessarily as bad as it might have looked.

However, the grade for referee Clete Blakeman, his crew and the replay official: C.

I can't give them more than a C and I say that for the following reasons:

1. You had a play that was ruled a Broncos catch and a fumble recovered by San Diego, but from what I saw it should have been called an incomplete pass. There was no question the receiver had not completed the process of the catch. The ball was knocked loose and then came loose again when he hit the ground.
2. There was a Broncos play that included multiple fouls against San Diego, a pass interference and a defensive holding. The Broncos took the pass interference penalty, but the officials lost the spot. All of the sudden, the supervisor got involved through the alternate and they adjusted the spot to the 45-yard line, but the officials spotted it at the wrong 45. Then the supervisor had to call back down again and have the ball put to the proper 45. It was very questionable whether it was pass interference in the first place, but there were tangled feet, and technically by the rule since the feet tangled when the receiver was looking for the ball and the defender wasn't, that makes it pass interference if the pass was catchable. But I just think there were too many "ifs" to make that call.
3. There was a San Diego touchdown that was reviewed that didn't have to be reviewed. It was a waste of time. The replay official could have confirmed that the ruling on the field was correct and moved on, but he sent it down for a review and added three minutes to the game that was unnecessary. The replay official had plenty of evidence to show that was a catch and a touchdown.

This isn't the level of officiating you expect to have in the playoffs and I hate to say that, being that I've been so involved in officiating. These types of things shouldn't be happening at any time, especially when you reach the playoffs.

But back to the four finalists. We have two of the best young guns in the game in Colin Kaepernick and Russell Wilson squaring off in the NFC championship game, while two of the best quarterbacks to ever play the game -- Tom Brady and Peyton Manning -- battle it out in the AFC title game.

Like I said before, the best of the best.

Can't wait.

UNDER FURTHER REVIEW: THE FINAL STATS

TOTAL FOULS: 15

TOTAL FOULS ACCEPTED: 14

PENALTY BREAKDOWN: San Diego 8-63, Denver 6-50

REPLAY REVIEWS: 3 (2 stands, 1 confirmed)

Pereira: Sorry, this call should have been overturned

By Mike Pereira
FOX Sports
January 12, 2014

It was so cold in the "Ice Cube" here at the Fox Network Center Sunday that I was having flashbacks to the weather in Green Bay last week.

So, it's a good thing there was a play to look at in the San Diego-Denver AFC Divisional game that the crew had to gather around the replay machine to review. It was almost like we were around a campfire, so it seemed to warm things up a little.

Here was the play in question: Denver had the ball, third-and-2 at the 50-yard line with 14:17 left in the second quarter. Denver led 7-0. Quarterback Peyton Manning dropped back to pass and attempted a throw to Julius Thomas, who was sandwiched in between two San Diego defenders, Donald Butler and Jahleel Addae. As Thomas was going to the ground, it looked like he dropped the ball. But it was ruled on the field that Thomas caught the ball, then fumbled and was recovered by San Diego's Richard Marshall at the San Diego 43-yard line. After a booth review, the call stood.

I not only don't agree with this being ruled a catch and a fumble, I think it was an incomplete pass. The question is, did Thomas get both feet clearly down and then complete the process of the catch before contact was made?

In my opinion, Thomas didn't do that. He was hit at the same time his second foot came down, which means he has to hold onto the ball throughout the entire process of going to the ground. He didn't. The ball came out. Based on that interpretation, which is the interpretation of a catch, it should have been reversed to an incomplete pass.

I understand that the league's view is not to overturn the call on the field unless it's absolutely conclusive that the call was wrong. To me, it was conclusive that it was wrong and should have been reversed to an incomplete pass.

Report: Win or lose, Manning could retire in offseason

FOX Sports

January 13, 2014

Could Peyton Manning be walking off the field in uniform for the final time this season? According to one report, that possibility could be more real than ever imagined.

Will the Broncos' next loss be the last of Peyton Manning's career? If Denver wins the Super Bowl, will Manning become the second Broncos QB to walk off into the sunset with a championship?

According to a report on Sunday, the answer to each could be yes.

Manning, the MVP front-runner who just turned in the most prolific season by a QB in NFL history and whose Broncos are hosting the AFC Championship Game next weekend, will see have his future in football very much determined by a medical exam in March, regardless of how this season ends, ESPN has reported.

According to the report, Manning will have the exam on his surgically repaired neck per the terms of his contract. If Manning's neck is stable, it is his expected he will return next season, regardless of how the Broncos' season ends, the report stated, citing sources. If the exam reveals an increased risk for injury, Manning would be forced to consider retirement.

Manning, 37, missed the entire 2011 season as he underwent a reported four neck surgeries, including bone fusion. Last season, he led Denver to the No. 1 overall seed in the AFC playoffs before a stunning loss to Baltimore in the divisional round eliminated the team. This season, the four-time NFL MVP set NFL records with 5,477 passing yards and 55 passing touchdowns. The Broncos again earned the No. 1 seed in the AFC, and will host the New England Patriots in next weekend's AFC Championship Game after beating the San Diego Chargers 24-17 in Sunday's divisional-round game in Denver. Manning threw for 230 yards, two TDs and an interception in that game.

While a 37-year-old with Manning's injury history weighing his future in the offseason in itself is not major news, the timing of it adds to the noteworthiness as Manning told reporters on Wednesday this postseason carries significance, "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."

Manning is in the second year of a five-year, \$96 million contract. Broncos executive vice president of football operations John Elway won Super Bowls in his

final two seasons as a player in the NFL, beating the Atlanta Falcons 34-19 and winning MVP honors in Super Bowl XXXIII, the final game of his career

Peyton Manning dodges questions about his future and legacy, but they're tough to avoid

By Frank Schwab
Shutdown Corner/Yahoo! Sports
January 12, 2014

DENVER – If Peyton Manning is on his final victory lap, or even if he thinks it's possible he might be very close to the end, he's not letting on.

He might not even know. ESPN reported Sunday that a physical exam in March will determine the Broncos quarterback's future. If his surgically-repaired neck is healthy, he'll play on. If it isn't, he will have a tough decision.

That's all common logic, and there's no indication that he won't pass that test. If he knew his neck was in that bad of shape and he will be retiring because of it, he probably wouldn't be playing now. But it's a reminder that the 37-year-old is not going to be chasing championships forever. As he said this week, "the light is at the end of the tunnel for me — no question."

If any of that was on his mind after Denver's 24-17 win in an AFC divisional playoff game against San Diego to advance to the AFC championship game against New England, he wasn't going to say.

"It's really not, what's weighing on my mind is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth after this win," Manning said.

After the laughter died down, he gave an insight into his mindset.

"That is ... even the Patriots is ahead, and that question [about his neck] is way far ahead, so I am not there," Manning said. "I've really been, this team has been a one week at a time season. For all we've been through, losing our coach and losing different guys to injuries, that approach has served us well. I think we need to keep that approach from here on out."

Most likely, the ESPN report is much ado about nothing. Manning is coming off what is likely the greatest single season in NFL history, and will win a fifth MVP award. He's not showing any physical limitations. ESPN said in a follow-up story that the exam is just like one he had and passed after the 2012 season.

But even if his neck is never an issue, how much time does Manning have left? Two years? Three? Not many quarterbacks keep going into their 40s. And even a healthy Manning, who has been derided for his lack of playoff success, knows that opportunities like he has this season are rare. He could play for 10 more years and

never get back to the NFL's final four. Last year the Broncos were the first seed in the AFC and lost in its first playoff game to Baltimore.

You just never know.

"There are a lot of teams that had disappointing losses last year – Atlanta and Washington – and everybody says in that locker room, 'Hey, let's get back next year,' and it just doesn't happen," Manning said. "It's hard to get back. You have injuries, things happen, and so I talked to the team last night and said, 'You need to be commended for getting back to this point.' "

The Broncos couldn't even have it easy on Sunday. They took a 17-0 lead, but in the fourth quarter San Diego suddenly turned it on, and after an onside kick and a field goal the Chargers trailed just 24-17 with 3:53 left.

Manning made two huge plays on the final drive. Last year, the Broncos were content to keep the ball on the ground and run clock, and were criticized after Baltimore's miracle win for being too conservative. This time, Manning hit Julius Thomas for 21 yards on third-and-17. Then he hit Thomas for 9 yards on third-and-6. After one more rushing first down, it was over.

On the third-and-17, Manning had to stand in against the pass rush long enough for Thomas to get open. Cornerback Champ Bailey was asked what impressed him most about the throw.

"The pressure," Bailey said. "He had so much pressure in his face."

Bailey was talking about the Chargers' defenders, but he could have been speaking about Manning in general.

Manning's win improved his playoff record to 10-11. He has won a Super Bowl before, but for some reason that rarely gets mentioned. But every failure lives on in the many ill-conceived criticisms of one of the greatest quarterbacks ever. Every playoff game becomes a referendum of his career and legacy. That's wrong, but it surely won't die down this week.

Patriots quarterback Tom Brady is coming to Denver for the AFC championship game. This is it for Manning. A Broncos loss and some people will never let him live it down when they discuss him and Brady, the quarterback he'll always be compared to. A victory erases a lot of complaints about his playoff success (unless the Broncos lose the Super Bowl, and then there will be something new to criticize him about).

Manning wanted to enjoy Sunday's win for a few hours. One week at a time, right? Early in his postgame media conference he said he'd discuss the colossal matchup with the Patriots, and the inevitable Brady questions, on Wednesday during his

midweek availability. But he relented when "Brady-Manning XV" was brought up again.

"Tom Brady has just been an outstanding quarterback for such a long time, but the game next week is the Broncos versus the Patriots," Manning said. "I know there will be some individual matchups that will get headlines, but it will be a battle between two good teams. Teams that have been through a lot, that have overcome a lot to get to this point, and that's where my focus will be – trying to help the Broncos get a win against the Patriots."

The Broncos better win this week. Manning will never hear the end of it if they don't. No matter how many years he has left in the NFL.

Denver Broncos ride their surprising defense to AFC championship game

By Frank Schwab
Shutdown Corner/Yahoo! Sports
January 12, 2014

DENVER – The Denver Broncos' defense was supposed to be the one liability that might keep them from the Super Bowl. But defense is the reason Denver advanced to the AFC championship game.

The Broncos shut down the Chargers in a fairly easy 24-17 win at Sports Authority Field. The Chargers made it a little interesting at the end with 17 fourth-quarter points after Denver built a huge lead, but Peyton Manning hit Julius Thomas for two third-down conversions late in the game to help seal it.

For most of the game, the Broncos' defense starred. The Chargers had 45 yards in the first half. Philip Rivers had five completions for 20 yards before halftime, and his longest completion was for 7 yards. Rivers had just 44 yards through three quarters, and as a team the Chargers didn't break the 100-yard barrier until the fourth quarter. The Chargers scored a couple touchdowns in the fourth quarter, but both came with Denver holding a 17-point lead.

Denver is back in the AFC championship game for the first time since the end of the 2005 season, and what a title game it will be. New England will be coming to town for another matchup between Manning and Tom Brady, the fourth time the two quarterbacks have met in the playoffs. Brady's Patriots won two of three playoff meetings against Manning when he was with the Colts. This is the third time the two legendary quarterbacks have met in the AFC championship game, with each of them winning one.

The Chargers didn't do much, at least in the first three quarters, to keep that highly anticipated matchup from happening, putting forth a forgettable performance on Sunday. But give the Broncos credit for that.

Denver's pass rush was strong and the coverage didn't allow much for Rivers, at least until he rallied a bit in the fourth quarter. San Diego won at Denver in Week 15 by running the ball and controlling the clock, but did neither on Sunday.

Manning, who set NFL records for passing yards and touchdowns in the regular season, was as sharp as he needed to be. Touchdown passes to Demaryius Thomas and Wes Welker in the first half gave the Broncos a comfortable 14-0 lead.

Denver's defense lost outside linebacker Von Miller to an ACL injury late in the season, but still played well in its final two regular-season games. But that came against Houston and Oakland, which wasn't much of a measuring stick. The performance against San Diego was a bit more convincing.

A strong wind that howled through the game affected San Diego's passing game. Ryan Mathews, who was a huge part of San Diego's offense down the stretch, was limited with an ankle injury. Those things didn't help the Chargers, but the Broncos played very well.

Denver is a step away from the Super Bowl, and get ready to hear a lot about Brady and Manning before the Broncos and Patriots square off on Sunday. Just don't forget about the Broncos' defense in that matchup. They looked surprisingly good on Sunday.

Peyton Manning will reportedly return in 2014, on one condition

By Jay Busbee
Shutdown Corner/Yahoo! Sports
January 12, 2014

Peyton Manning will not play forever. This we knew. Heck, the guy's basically playing with house money at this point, given the fact that most players in his position would have retired years ago due to injury. Even so, the end will arrive at some point for Manning ... and, pending the results of an offseason physical, could arrive sooner than anyone expected.

ESPN is reporting that sources "familiar with the star quarterback's mindset" have said that Manning will undergo a neck exam at the end of the season. The results of that exam will have a profound effect on the quarterback's future. According to ESPN, Manning will return for 2014, regardless of this postseason's result, if the neck exam indicates he's still healthy and able to take another season's worth of punishment.

If, however, the neck exam indicates potential problems, Manning will face a choice of whether to retire. He's a couple years removed from fusion surgery on his neck that forced him to miss the entire 2011 season.

Manning set NFL records for both passing yards and touchdowns this season in one of the most remarkable years in the game's history. He'd have every right from a player's perspective to walk away now, but obviously he'd like to go out with some more postseason honors. His boss, John Elway, set a pretty solid example: two Super Bowl trophies in his final two years.

Eric Decker has a magnificent punt return, then trips over his feet in the open field

By Frank Schwab
Shutdown Corner/Yahoo! Sports
January 12, 2014

You see NFL players do superhuman things, and then look very human ... all on the same play sometimes.

Denver's Eric Decker had a superb punt return late in the second quarter against San Diego. He had five Chargers get a hand on him, and some really had him wrapped up, but he kept breaking free. It was a great run and after Decker got past punter Mike Scifres, he was in the open field as the crowd rose for what looked like a sure touchdown.

Then Decker tripped on the turf and fell on his face.

Now, perhaps it was a delayed effect from Scifres getting a good piece of Decker's legs as he ran through him, and that's what eventually caused Decker to go down. But it sure looked like he just tripped, like any of us clumsily stumbling all over ourselves at home. Decker's trip looked worse when Peyton Manning threw an interception at the end of that drive.

Even though it was costly for the Broncos, there was something humorous about seeing such an unbelievable run by a great player end with him tripping over the 40-yard line and falling flat.

Team Report - DENVER BRONCOS

Sports Xchange/Yahoo! Sports
January 12, 2014

INSIDE SLANT

With a berth in the AFC title game hanging in the balance, quarterback Peyton Manning dodged pressure to make his best throw of the day and tight end Julius Thomas made the clutch catch.

The 21-yard completion on a third-and-17 play was the key component in Manning's clock-killing drive in the final four minutes as the Denver Broncos held off the San Diego Chargers 24-17 on Sunday to advance to the conference championship.

Manning and the Broncos (14-3) will play host next Sunday to Tom Brady and the New England Patriots, who beat the Indianapolis Colts in a divisional playoff on Saturday. The winner will advance to the Super Bowl against either San Francisco or Seattle, who will meet in the NFC title game.

In the most recent matchup between the future Hall of Fame quarterbacks, Brady and the Patriots rallied past Manning and the visiting Broncos 34-31 in overtime on Nov. 24.

Manning finished 25 of 36 for 230 yards and two touchdowns and was at his best on the Broncos' final possession to help fend off the Chargers (10-8), who scored all their points in a furious fourth quarter.

"This was a pretty intense game," Manning said. "(San Diego quarterback) Philip Rivers got hot there in the second half. I did not want to give him the ball back there at the end. There was some real want-to on our offense's part to stay on the field on that last series."

And it took some doing.

San Diego, which trailed 14-0 at halftime and 17-0 early in the third, had fought back to within a touchdown after Nick Novak kicked a 30-yard field goal with 3:56 left. The Broncos returned the ensuing kickoff to their 27-yard line but were set back to the 22 by a false start. Moreno lost 2 yards on a run and Manning's second pass fell incomplete before he connected with Thomas near the right sideline as two San Diego defenders converged on him in vain.

"It was the perfect call against the perfect coverage," Manning said, referring to play called by offensive coordinator Adam Gase. "You may get one or two of those a game. It certainly came at a good time."

Chargers safety Eric Weddle said Thomas got open on a blown coverage.

"We had a miscommunication and it got us," Weddle said. "It was great execution by them and not by us. It cost us the game or the chance to at least tie it up."

Manning converted another third down with a 9-yard completion to Thomas, Moreno then gained 5-yards on a third-and-1 play, and with the Chargers out of timeouts, Manning took a knee at the San Diego 32-yard line to run out the last few seconds and culminate what was a classic four-minute "keep-away" drive.

"It was very frustrating watching it," said Chargers wide receiver Keenan Allen, who caught a pair of 16-yard touchdown passes from Rivers. "With third-and-17, I was thinking we were definitely going to get the ball back. And we were feeling good on the offensive side, having the momentum. It was just unfortunate we didn't get it."

Rivers finished 18 of 27 for 217 yards passing but was without running back Ryan Mathews in the second half. Mathews started the game despite an ankle injury that forced him to miss practice this week but was unable to finish.

Denver used a more deliberate offensive approach, running effectively with Moreno and Montee Ball and controlling the ball more, to avenge a late season loss to San Diego, which was the only team to beat the Broncos in Denver this season.

The Broncos stretched their lead to 17-0 on Matt Prater's 45-yard field goal midway through the third quarter but he later missed a 47-yard attempt wide left, giving the Chargers a short field for a drive that led to their first score.

Allen got behind cornerback Quentin Jammer, who had come in for the injured Chri

NOTES, QUOTES

--Quarterback Peyton Manning did not comment following the Denver Broncos' 24-17 victory Sunday in a AFC Divisional playoff game on the report that his football future will be decided by a neck exam.

Asked how much the uncertainty of his career was weighing on him, Manning offered only a cold bit of comedy.

"Really not. The only thing weighing on my mind is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth," said Manning, smirking in the direction of friends and family near the back of the media room.

Manning might not play beyond this season, depending on the results of an offseason exam on his surgically-repaired neck, ESPN reported Sunday.

ESPN reported that Manning will have the exam in March, which is required in his contract. If the exam shows that his neck is stable, Manning plans to return to the

Broncos next season. However, if there is an increased injury risk, Manning may retire.

Manning, 37, set NFL single-season records for passing yards (5,477) and touchdowns (55) in 2013.

Manning had fusion surgery on his neck in 2011, which weakened his throwing arm and forced him to miss the entire season. He was then released by the Indianapolis Colts. He signed a five-year, \$96 million deal with the Broncos in 2012.

In Manning's first year in Denver, the Broncos lost to the Baltimore Ravens in the AFC playoffs. In 2013, the Broncos went 13-3 and got the No. 1 seed in this year's playoffs. They host the San Diego Chargers in a divisional playoff Sunday.

--Perhaps mindful of their double overtime loss to the Baltimore Ravens in the divisional playoff round last season, the Broncos ditched the conservative approach and let it all hang out offensively in the late going Sunday.

With quarterback Peyton Manning passing for two key first downs, the Broncos ran out the final four minutes, keeping the Chargers from getting another shot at a game-tying score. Still, the harrowing finish brought back some painful memories.

"Yeah, absolutely," Denver cornerback Champ Bailey said. "We have been in a position like this before, except this time we found a way to get it done, and on to the next opponent."

--According to coach John Fox, the Broncos lost only one player to injury in the game, but it came at a key position heading into the AFC Championship Game against quarterback Tom Brady and the New England Patriots. Cornerback Chris Harris left the game in the second half with what the team said were knee and ankle injuries. There was no immediate update on his status for the conference title game.

--Broncos wide receiver Wes Welker had six catches for 38 yards in his return from a concussion. He missed the last three games of the regular season after suffering his second concussion of the season. Welker wore a specially designed oversized helmet to better protect his head from any damaging blows.

"I have been practicing with it the last few weeks, so I got used to it," Welker said. "But it is kind of looking like 'The Jetsons' out there."

QUOTE TO NOTE: "(The defense) is still a work in progress. We've got to be a much better team because we've got a much better quarterback and team coming in here next week. (The New England Patriots) gave us a good beating a couple of months ago, so we're looking forward to it." -- Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey.

And. ...

--"It's hard to explain all the stuff we've been through, offseason and in-season. To get to this point was hard work, and to win this game was really hard work. We are proud and happy to be at this point, and we certainly want to keep it going." -- Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning.

STRATEGY AND PERSONNEL

Championship Game Credentials

RECORD: 14-3, AFC West champions

COACH: John Fox; 111-89 overall at Carolina and Denver; 1-1 in playoffs since hired in 2012

CURRENT WINNING STREAK: Three games

LAST FOUR GAMES VS. NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

--Nov. 24, 2013: Patriots 34-31 (at Foxbrough, Mass.)

--Oct. 7, 2012: Patriots 31-21 (at Foxborough, Mas.)

--Dec. 18, 2011: Patriots 41-23 (at Denver)

--Oct. 11, 2009: Broncos 20-17 (at Denver)

PLAYOFF HISTORY: Denver has six AFC titles and two Super Bowl victories (XXXII in 1997 and XXXIII in '98). The Broncos last AFC Championship game appearance came after the 2005 season, a 34-17 home loss against the Pittsburgh Steelers.

2013 REGULAR SEASON RANKINGS

--Offense: 1st (457.3 yards per game)

--Scoring: 1st (37.9 points per game)

--Passing: 1st (340.3 yards per game)

--Rushing: 15th (117.3 yards per game)

--Defense: 19th (356 ypg)

--Scoring: 22nd (24.9 ppg)

--Passing: 27th (254.4 ypg)

--Rushing: 7th - tied (101.6 ypg)

--Sacks: 41 (Shaun Phillips, 10.0)

Peyton Manning, Broncos erase ghosts of past in win over Chargers

By Joan Niesen
SI.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- Marshall Manning doesn't know.

Marshall Manning makes his entrance, just a few minutes into his father's postgame press conference, with a bang. The door slams. "Daddy, Daddy," the 2-year-old squawks. Archie Manning shushes him, and Marshall watches, wide-eyed, as Daddy talks, and dozens of reporters take down his every word.

Marshall knows Daddy is important, but he's too young to realize just how so. He's too young to know how crazy it is that it took a year and a half of his life to see his daddy play a postseason game, and that when his daddy finally did, he lost. He's too young to see that reputations stick, that a 9-11 playoff record going into Sunday and an interception exactly one year ago have rendered his daddy something approaching a postseason bust.

Maybe Marshall knows his daddy won on Sunday. Maybe, but there's no way he realizes that with their 24-17 victory over the Chargers, Peyton Manning and his Broncos finally kicked the ghosts of last Jan. 12 out of their locker room.

Before Sunday, Manning's last playoff win had come all the way back in 2009's AFC Championship Game. Since then, he's seen a Super Bowl loss at the hands of Drew Brees and the Saints, multiple neck surgeries, a release from the only team he'd ever known and last year's meltdown against the Ravens. He's heard he's too intense, that he overthinks, that the focus that's the hallmark of his greatness simply isn't suited for postseason ball.

And then he shot it all to hell, at least until next week.

After Sunday's game, in which Manning went 25-of-36 for 230 yards and two touchdowns, the quarterback was the closest thing to relaxed as he's been in months. He allowed himself a sideways glance and even a smile at his father and son when they entered the room. He cracked a joke when asked about his legacy -- "What's weighing on my mind is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth," he quipped -- and he left the podium with a grin.

He was a natural.

In a game Manning described as "big-time football," he didn't have to be the 400-yard, five-touchdown man he was at moments this season for the Broncos. Instead, he and his team reacted to the flaws that were their downfall a month before, when

the Chargers beat them 27-20 in Denver. They ran effectively, for 133 yards after posting just 18 in the loss. They dominated the time of possession, too, holding the ball for more than 35 minutes, and they ate up nearly four minutes of clock to end the game without handing the ball back to San Diego.

"I did not want to give [Philip Rivers] the ball back there at the end," Manning said. "There was some real want-to on the offense's part to stay on the field during that last series."

Maybe that's it, the want-to. Maybe the Broncos just wanted it more this year after learning how acutely painful it is to see a dream die early. It certainly seemed that way in moments. Despite how close the Chargers crept in their 17-point fourth quarter, there were moments when it seemed the Broncos were toying with their opponents. Former Charger Shaun Phillips logged two thunderous sacks on Rivers, with Jeremy Mincey and Malik Jackson adding two more. The quarterback was rattled, and his defense wasn't much more poised, committing five neutral-zone infractions on the afternoon.

"Peyton did a great job with the cadence, getting them offsides," Broncos receiver Demaryius Thomas said. "I think it's Peyton. He's got people thinking that they think they know what he's doing, but they really don't."

It must be frustrating to contend with something so annoyingly efficient, and the Chargers showed it early, when things got ugly, and fast. In the first quarter, San Diego took two careless timeouts when the Broncos and their crowd completely rattled the team's focus, and at one point, Rivers threw a full-fledged temper tantrum. The Broncos ate it up.

"He complains the whole game," defensive tackle Terrance Knighton said of Rivers. "He throws a temper tantrum the whole game. I'm not worried about that."

Comparatively, Manning was cool, calm and collected. There were a few instances of his patented face of frustration, and his offense was certainly far from perfect, with several of his wide receivers dropping passes that flew through their hands. In the moments that counted, though, Manning was Manning, and when the first 56 minutes of football seemed for naught, he capitalized in the four that counted. That's what he couldn't do last year, what his team failed to do. Instead of buckling under pressure or being upended by the gusty wind, the Broncos did what any 13-3 team should be able to do and held their ground at home.

"It's about doing your job and doing it under pressure," Broncos coach John Fox said. "I think we've gotten better at that. We're going to have to get a lot better, even, moving forward."

As Marshall and Archie entered the press conference room Sunday evening, Marshall's daddy was thanking his teammates and praising his opponents. He meant every word: Rivers turned it on in the second half, when his team logged all but one of its 194 passing yards. He certainly deserved credit. Julius Thomas and

the Broncos offense locked in on that last drive, converting on three third downs, including one on 3rd-and-17. And most of all, Denver's defense didn't buckle after losing its steadiest cornerback, Chris Harris, keeping Manning and the offense in the game with an effort no one would have predicted a month ago.

That's the only way this is going to work, after all, the only way Manning can inch closer to that second Super Bowl win. His thank yous have to be genuine. His teammates, especially on defense, have to step up. Manning might be a spectacle, but he can't be a one-man show.

Anticlimactic divisional round produces marquee final four

By Don Banks

SI.com

January 12, 2014

CHARLOTTE -- Musings, observations and the occasional insight from the NFL's divisional round. ...

- The NFL's four divisional-round games might have felt somewhat flat compared to the close contests and thrilling finishes we saw for the most part in the wild-card round, but you can blame the dominance of the Seahawks, Patriots, 49ers and Broncos for that. The cream rose this weekend in the NFL, and the four favorites all flexed their muscles and won as expected.

Upsets make for some great drama in the NFL playoffs, but there's nothing wrong with getting a postseason final four that features the four best teams in the league throughout the long four-month regular-season slog.

Let's face it: Any of the four survivors could win the Super Bowl early next month and raise nary an eyebrow. You can't call any of these clubs upstarts. The Seahawks and Broncos went an NFL-best 13-3 this season, while the Patriots and 49ers were both a strong 12-4 and are playing in their third consecutive conference title game. No pretenders in sight. All four teams were in the playoffs last season, and all but the Seahawks have made it at least three years in a row, with Seattle settling for three trips in four years.

Last week's four games had an average winning margin of 5.8 points, with only San Diego's 27-10 win at Cincinnati being decided by more than three points. This week the four victors won by an average of 12.3 points, with no game closer than the seven points that separated Denver and San Diego in the Broncos' 24-17 win.

And you can bemoan the overkill to come all you want in regards to another Tom Brady-Peyton Manning matchup in the AFC Championship Game, but it has been seven years since those two warriors met in a playoff game, and that one was Indy's memorable 38-34 comeback win over New England in the 2006 season's AFC title game. We should be so lucky to get another such instant classic next week in Denver.

When you throw in the San Francisco at Seattle slugfest in the NFC title game, a showdown that pits two of the best defenses in football and division rivals who have something of a blood feud going the past two years, how could the NFL have drawn up its conference title matchups with any more must-see factor? The two veteran Hall of Fame-bound quarterbacks face off yet again, this time in Denver, while the

Russell Wilson-Colin Kaepernick young guns debate gets its first playoff chapter written in Seattle.

Onetime Super Bowl coaching rivals Bill Belichick and John Fox will match wits in the AFC, while those old collegiate antagonists, Jim Harbaugh and Pete Carroll, meet for the third time this season in an all-NFC West conference title game. This final four also assures that either Brady or Manning will get another late-career Super Bowl shot, with either Kaepernick and the 49ers returning to the big stage for a second consecutive year, or Seattle's Wilson leading the Seahawks to the NFL's ultimate game for the first time since the 2005 season.

What's not to like? The Super Bowl may be played in the cold Northeast this season, but the West is clearly where it's at this year, with three of the final four teams hailing from the league's two West divisions.

This weekend's divisional round might have lacked some competitiveness, but you can't deny that it delivered the best possible glamor matchups in the AFC-NFC title games to come. There's a scant three games left on the NFL's 2013 schedule, and they have a more than decent chance to be the best three games of the year. Let the fantastic four unfold.

- It's January, so that means Anquan Boldin is putting a team on his back again. OK, maybe Boldin wasn't the entire difference between winning and losing for the 49ers on Sunday in Charlotte, but his team-best eight catches for 136 yards against the Panthers had a lot of echoes of his dominance for Baltimore during the Ravens' Super Bowl run last year.

Boldin is one more win away from making his third Super Bowl, with a third team: Arizona in the 2008 season, and Baltimore last year. His presence on the roster is definitely not a coincidence in this case.

- Riverboat Ron Rivera's luck finally ran dry Sunday in terms of gambling on fourth downs. Carolina's third-year head coach entered the game against San Francisco having seen his team convert on 10-of-13 fourth-down plays this season, but Carolina was stuffed on a 4th-and-1 from the 49ers' 1 on the first play of the second quarter.

Later in that same quarter, San Francisco made another stout goal-line stand, holding the Panthers off from 3rd-and-1 from the one-foot line. Carolina wound up kicking a 24-yard Graham Gano field goal to take a safe-but-sorry 10-6 lead. The Panthers won 11 out of their last 12 games, often rolling the dice and hitting it big. But maybe the odds caught up with Rivera, whose team had costly struggles in the red zone in its 23-10 loss to the visiting 49ers.

- Of all the many New England trips to the AFC title game, this one is by far the most ridiculous. The Patriots' receivers Saturday night against the Colts were all under 6-foot in height, and two of them went undrafted: Danny Amendola and Kenbrell Thompkins. The tight ends were the underwhelming Michael

Hoomanawanui and Matthew Mulligan. The fullback is James Develin, an Ivy Leaguer from Brown who also went unselected in the draft. The starting offensive line includes two more undrafted talents: center Ryan Wendell and right guard Dan Connolly. Then there are all the key injuries and defections that rocked New England this season, from Vince Wilfork to Rob Gronkowski to Aaron Hernandez.

How in the world did a Patriots roster that devoid of pedigree wind up winning 12 games in the regular season, one more in the playoffs, and find itself in position to win at least three other games on New England's final drive? It's a crazy impressive accomplishment that's getting considerably overlooked just because we're so used to the Patriots winning with Tom Brady and Bill Belichick.

And speaking of the Patriots' quarterback and the head coach, of the 12 seasons they've worked together as the team's healthy starter and boss man (minus Brady's lost season of 2008), this is their eighth AFC Championship Game berth, an absurd 66.6 percent success rate when it comes to playing for a Super Bowl invite. And with the Patriots making their third straight AFC title game, that annual storyline about New England's window of Super Bowl opportunity being about ready to close has been shot full of holes once again.

We may all take Brady's and Belichick's greatness for granted at this point, but Brady's ability to elevate the play of those around him, and Belichick's knack for getting the utmost production out of the talent he has available to him is in my eyes unmatched in NFL history.

- Taking nothing away from Seattle's dominating defensive performance for most of the game, but that's not looking like a Super Bowl-ready offense in Seattle about now. The Seahawks offense in the second half was playing in full awareness of taking care of the football in the rough weather, and calling plays designed to protect a 16-0 lead at the break. Still, Seattle had produced just 44 yards of offense in the second half until fewer than four minutes remained, and that lack of execution allowed the Saints to come dangerously close to stealing the game.

In the end, the Seahawks produced just enough offense to beat the Saints, who couldn't move the ball against Seattle's suffocating defense until the fourth quarter. But I don't see the Seahawks getting past San Francisco if they don't threaten more than they did on Saturday. Don't think Russell Wilson completing just nine passes for a career-worst 103 yards, like he did against New Orleans, will cut it next Sunday.

The Seahawks are clearly a more explosive team with receiver Percy Harvin on the field, but how can you begin to count on him in the NFC title game after he twice had to leave the game for concussion testing against the Saints. Between his issues with his hip, his head and his shoulder, Harvin gives Seattle no reasonable expectation of help this season.

- What a forgettable Saturday in Seattle for Saints' all-world tight end Jimmy Graham. Talking loudly in the pregame and then going completely silent when it

counts, in the game, is the nightmare scenario for any proud and productive star. But Graham clearly let the chatty Seahawks defense get in his head with his pregame warm-up shouting matches, and that no doubt helped Seattle take him out of his game. His lone catch came in the game's closing 20 seconds, and Graham was never able to shake the blanket coverage the Seahawks threw at him all day.

Graham is freakishly gifted and the centerpiece of the Saints offense other than Drew Brees, but he's going to have to live with that zero of a performance all offseason, and there will be significant pressure on him to reprove himself the next time New Orleans makes the postseason.

- Speaking of Saints named Graham, New Orleans kicker Shayne Graham also came up way small under the glare of the divisional-round spotlight. He'll always have his strong night last week in Philadelphia to recall fondly, but the wind and rain in Seattle proved more than a match for Graham's veteran right foot on Saturday. He missed narrowly on a 45-yard field goal effort in the first quarter, but he absolutely Vanderjagt-ed that ill-advised 48-yard desperation try in the fourth quarter. Not that I would have even run him out there to try that long shot in those conditions.

Come to think of it, Saints punter Thomas Morstead had a rough day at the office, too. His 16-yard shank job on New Orleans' first possession helped set up Seattle's first score, and it came after the snap sailed through his hands and hit him in that spot for which there is no real defense.

- Had to be particularly brutal being a Tampa Bay fan and watching Saturday's divisional games unfold. There were ex-Bucs LeGarrette Blount, Aqib Talib and Michael Bennett, all making mighty contributions to help their teams advance to the conference title games, while Tampa Bay is starting over yet again on the coaching and GM front after its sixth consecutive non-playoff season. I know Talib and Blount had their issues with the Bucs, but New England has gotten quite the return on its investment.

Why do I get the feeling that Greg Schiano's name might have been taken in vain a few times in Tampa Bay on Saturday?

- Marques Colston might have made the dumbest play by a truly good player since Vikings defensive end Jim Marshall scored his infamous wrong-way "touchdown" in 1964. Even if you want to maintain the element of surprise and not just rely on a Hail Mary heave or two in that situation, the key to the throw-back-across-the-field play is to throw it "back" across the field, not forward by a good five yards or so.
- In the end, the Colts' Jekyll-and-Hyde-type regular season stayed perfectly true to form in the playoffs, didn't it? First, there were Indy's two wildly divergent halves of football at home against Kansas City, in that improbable 45-44 comeback victory over the Chiefs in the wild-card round. Those four quarters could have encapsulated the whole rollercoaster-like season in Indianapolis all by themselves.

And then, there was no real follow-up performance against the Patriots Saturday night, which again kept Indy's season-long pattern in place. The Colts had four comeback wins this season after trailing by 10 points or more, and each time they fell flat and lost the following week, losing those games by a combined 140-50.

The Colts have a bright future with Andrew Luck on the scene, but consistency is not yet their calling card.

- I'm pretty sure the the nasty weather in Seattle and Foxboro had plenty to do with the play-calling, but it was refreshing in an old-school way to see the Seahawks and Patriots so dominating on the ground on Saturday. Seattle and New England combined to rush for 408 yards and eight touchdowns on 81 attempts, for slightly more than 5.0 yards per crack. More than 75 percent of that yardage total was produced by the twin monster games turned in by the Seahawks' Marshawn Lynch (28 carries for 140 yards and two touchdowns) and the Patriots' LeGarrette Blount (a franchise playoff-record four touchdowns and 166 yards on 24 carries). Blount took a page out of the old Corey Dillon playbook in New England, and Lynch's great game was just another healthy dose of Beast Mode.

I'm not going to overreact and claim the NFL isn't a passing-first league after all. Of course it is. But the ground game was the path to victory for the Seahawks and Patriots in the divisional playoffs, and both teams rode some exquisite power running to a date in their respective conference title games. And that made it feel like a Throwback Saturday in the NFL.

- If you're the opposing offense against the Seahawks, how do you begin to identify the one Seattle defender that you have to account for going into the game? Linebacker Bobby Wagner was everywhere against the Saints. But safety Earl Thomas came up huge in some key moments, and sub-package defensive lineman Michael Bennett was a difference-maker all game long. And we didn't even mention cornerback Richard Sherman, because Drew Brees seemed content to not even test him for the most part.

Naming an MVP on Seattle's defense might be the toughest call in the NFL this season.

- The way last season ended in New Orleans, with the defense collapsing in historic fashion, did you ever dream the Saints would make the playoffs this season, but find themselves being let down by a lackluster offense and kept alive by their stout defense in the playoffs? That was the scenario in Seattle, where Rob Ryan's defense did everything it could to give Brees and Co. a chance to mount a comeback.

Said this starting in the offseason, but hiring Ryan wound up being even more beneficial to New Orleans' 2013 season than head coach Sean Payton's return.

First Down/Fourth Down: Bolts keep it close, but Broncos advance to AFC title game

By Doug Farrar
SI.com
January 12, 2014

None of the divisional playoff games were pretty, but it's safe to say that most of America got the conference championships it wanted as a result. By beating the Carolina Panthers, the San Francisco 49ers punched their ticket to Seattle to renew the NFL's best current rivalry. And with their 24-17 win over the San Diego Chargers, the Denver Broncos advanced to their first AFC Championship Game since 2005, giving everyone another opportunity to see teams led by Peyton Manning and Tom Brady compete against each other.

For the Broncos, this win was the culmination of a process that had taken a year, and the elimination of a lot of bad memories. On Jan. 12, 2013, Denver lost a double-overtime heartbreaker to the Baltimore Ravens in the divisional round and had all offseason to reflect on the missed opportunities. The road past those demons wasn't textbook, but it was good enough.

"We've worked on that all season," Manning told CBS' Tracy Wolfson about his team's ability to finish things this time. "When you have a game that ends like it did last year, it becomes an offseason focus point and an in-season focus point. You do a lot of situational work throughout the season — first, our defense, game on the line, who's gonna win? It was good to see all that work pay off in that situation tonight. Hopefully, we can do it again next week."

Come Sunday, they'll hope to capitalize on the kinds of missed opportunities they missed against San Diego. Had everything gone according to plan, this could have been a blowout. But between their own red-zone fiascos and San Diego's stubborn refusal to go away quietly, the Broncos had quite the fight on their hands.

More observations from Denver's close victory:

- First Down: Denver's pass defense... for the most part.

The Broncos ranked 21st against the pass in Football Outsiders' opponent-adjusted metrics this season, but they turned it around against Philip Rivers, especially in the first half. Rivers completed five-of-eight passes for just 20 yards in the game's first 30 minutes, and he was sacked three times. But as the game progressed, especially after cornerback Chris Harris was injured, Rivers started to find his groove, finishing with 18 completions in 27 attempts for 217 yards, two touchdowns and no picks. Rivers finally started to find rookie receiver Keenan Allen in the second half, and the

Broncos had no answer for that — especially cornerback Quentin Jammer. Allen finished his day with six catches for 142 yards and both of San Diego's touchdowns — becoming the first rookie in the Super Bowl era to amass more than 100 yards and two scores in a playoff game — and the Chargers had to be left wondering what might have been.

- Fourth Down: D.J. Fluker's first drive.

Part of the problem in the first half was that Rivers didn't just suffer those three sacks, but also he was under constant pressure, and the Chargers punted on three of their first four drives. Right tackle D.J. Fluker was a problem, especially on San Diego's first drive. Fluker gave up sacks to end Jeremy Mincey and linebacker Shaun Phillips a few plays apart, and showed a vulnerability to inside moves that plagued him at Alabama, as well. The big rookie has a bright future, but he needs to be a bit more nimble out there.

- First Down: Peyton Manning's first drive.

While the Chargers were figuring things out on offense, Manning was carving their defense up. Denver's first drive was a 14-play, 86-yard masterpiece of no-huddle flash in which Manning hit five receivers and finished things off with a two-yard touchdown pass to Demaryius Thomas. Still, Manning threw for just 100 of his 250 yards in the first half, and this was an issue that would bite the Broncos all day: They left at least as many points on the field as they actually scored.

- Fourth Down: Denver's scoring aversion.

It wasn't pretty. There was an almost touchdown to Wes Welker that was dropped, a throw to Eric Decker in the red zone that was bobbled and picked off by linebacker Donald Butler, and a fumble by Julius Thomas that shouldn't have been a fumble at all (more on that later). Manning finished with 25 completions in 36 attempts, and had his receivers been on point all day, this game could have gotten out of hand a lot sooner than it actually did. Winning ugly is an important and valuable skill, and the Broncos proved that they have it, but there will be a lot of unpleasant tape review this week on the offensive side of things. Oh, and there was the Trindon Holliday kick return touchdown that was negated by a block in the back.

- First Down: Donald Butler's red-zone pick.

Butler's interception near the end of the first half may have been set up by Decker's bobble, but it's worth reviewing anyway, because the fourth-year linebacker did an amazing job of keeping his feet in-bounds. Sadly, it was too late in the first half for the Chargers to capitalize ... which kind of summed up their day.

- Fourth Down: What constitutes a catch? Does anybody know anymore?

Yes, we're all sick of the bad officiating narrative, but if the NFL is going to throw this many hanging sliders at us, who are we to keep the bat on our shoulder? The crew in this game was led by referee Clete Blakeman, who's had more than a few fiascos this season, and had more than one in this game. The most glaring was the ruling that Julius Thomas fumbled with 14:17 left in the second quarter and that the Chargers recovered the ball. The ruling was upheld, but it certainly didn't look like a catch — not to us, and not to a couple of notable former officials.

Later in the game, according to Pereira, Blakeman's crew had to be advised that they were spotting the ball on the wrong 45-yard line after a highly questionable pass interference penalty. As we've said many times before, this is unfortunately par for the course at this point — with Blakeman, and with too many of his comrades.

Peyton Manning reportedly may consider retirement after offseason exam on neck

By Chris Burke
SI.com
January 12, 2014

Could this postseason mark the last hurrah for Peyton Manning? It's possible, pending the results of an offseason exam on his surgically repaired neck, ESPN.com reported.

According to Chris Mortensen, Manning is expected to return in 2014 if everything checks out. However, should that upcoming exam reveal that Manning is at risk for additional injury, the Broncos' quarterback will "be forced to decide whether to retire." The decision will not be based at all on Denver's playoff results, per Mortensen.

The 37-year-old Manning raised speculation about his future this past week when he said, "The light is at the end of the tunnel for me, no question." The four-time league MVP made the comment leading up to Denver's AFC divisional playoff game Sunday against the San Diego Chargers.

Manning sat out the 2011 season, his last with the Colts, due to a neck injury. Those 16 games were the only ones Manning has missed in his NFL career, counting two full seasons of action since joining the Broncos prior to the 2012 campaign.

The future Hall of Famer rewrote the record books in 2013, breaking Drew Brees' single-season passing yardage mark and Tom Brady's single-season touchdowns record. The Broncos also set a new standard for points in a season with 606.

Manning's contract runs through the 2016 season, though his guaranteed money runs out after next year. The Broncos do not have a sure-fire contingency plan in place should Manning opt for retirement — his backup, second-year QB Brock Osweiler, is signed through 2015 and may take over the job eventually, but he has yet to make an NFL start.

NFL Playoffs 2013: An early look ahead to AFC, NFC Championship Games

By Chris Burke
SI.com
January 12, 2014

For all the talk about parity around the NFL, and despite the rise of teams like Kansas City and Philadelphia this season, we more or less wound up right where many believed we would: with New England and Denver in the AFC title game, and San Francisco battling Seattle for the NFC's Super Bowl bid.

What's on tap for championship weekend? We take an early look:

AFC

No. 2 New England Patriots (12-4) at No. 1 Denver Broncos (13-3)

Tom Brady vs. Peyton Manning ... what more could you ask for? And lest anyone forget, the most recent meeting between the two future Hall of Famers — a Week 12 game in Foxboro — turned into an instant classic, with Brady's Patriots somehow erasing a 24-0 halftime lead to nab a 34-31 win. New England also bested Denver in 2012, 31-21.

Revenge may not be on the Broncos' minds Sunday so much as figuring out how to replicate their first-half effort from Week 12. Denver forced three New England turnovers early in that game and appeared to have things totally in control, right up until a Montee Ball fumble really shifted the momentum in New England's favor. Brady wound up throwing for 344 yards and three touchdowns. Manning, meanwhile, mustered only 150 yards through the air, as he was unable to crank it back into gear once the Broncos started reeling.

Leading the offensive charge for the Broncos instead was RB Knowshon Moreno, who churned out 224 yards and a touchdown on 37 carries. He and Montee Ball have developed into a very steady 1-2 punch out of the Broncos' backfield — the duo no doubt benefiting from the attention defenses have to pay to Manning and the passing game.

New England may not have Wes Welker anymore (or anyone like Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker or TE Julius Thomas), but its offense keeps cranking. Brady's bunch finished the year by hanging 41 on Baltimore and 34 on Buffalo, then torched Indianapolis for 43 points and 419 yards of offense Saturday. All six Patriots touchdowns in that playoff win came on the ground, with surprise hero LeGarrette Blount scoring four times and Stevan Ridley twice.

Standing in the way of New England's ability to do that again: A Denver defense that played arguably its best game of the season vs. San Diego on Sunday. Bulky defensive tackle Terrance Knighton led the way up front by generating a consistent push against the Chargers' line. Doing the same next week may force Brady to hurry his progressions or allow Shaun Phillips to lead a charge off the edge.

Manning may have to contend with extra pressure himself. The Patriots had the fifth-most sacks in the league this season (48), despite only taking down Manning once back in November.

NFC

No. 5 San Francisco 49ers (12-4) at No. 1 Seattle Seahawks (13-3)

Much has been made of Seattle's incredible home-field advantage and, well, San Francisco has not been immune to the effects of late. In their last two trips to CenturyLink Field, the 49ers have been handed a pair of losses by a combined score of 71-16. That count includes Seattle's 29-3 romp over its arch-rival back in Week 2.

The Seahawks moved to 2-0 with that victory and never really slowed down en route to the NFC's No. 1 seed. The 49ers needed more time to kick into gear — they started the season 1-2, then slipped to 6-4 after losses to Carolina and New Orleans, before embarking on their ongoing eight-game win streak.

If nothing else, San Francisco should be better positioned this time around to give Seattle a run for its money.

The 49ers do have a win over the Seahawks to draw from, too. That 19-17 decision came on the strength of a 110-yard rushing performance from Frank Gore, who was one of few offensive players to find success during the Week 15 contest. He'll need to need to be on his game again Sunday, because the Seahawks finished the regular season with the league's top-ranked pass defense and mostly stuffed Drew Brees this weekend. The latest Seattle shutdown included holding Jimmy Graham to one late, relatively meaningless catch; Vernon Davis could land in the crosshairs during the title game.

Of course, Colin Kaepernick has other options available to him. Michael Crabtree turned in an impressive performance during the wild-card round, then Anquan Boldin confounded Carolina Sunday.

The Seahawks may be at least a little concerned with their own passing attack after a shaky nine-completion showing by Russell Wilson vs. New Orleans. Some of his issues were created by an ultra-conservative game plan in the second half, one meant to preserve what appeared to be a comfortable lead. Wilson, though, has yet to top 200 yards passing in four career starts against the 49ers. (Kaepernick is 1-for-3 in that regard vs. Seattle.)

Marshawn Lynch, on the other hand, has scored in his last three games against San Francisco and is coming off a 140-yard, two-TD afternoon in the Seahawks' divisional-round win.

Each team will try to use its top running back to grind out some yards on early downs, in hopes of preventing the opposing defense from pinning its ears back on 3rd-and-longs. The Seahawks generated 44 sacks during the regular season with their deep and versatile set of linemen and linebackers; the 49ers dropped Cam Newton five times on Sunday, led by 2.5 sacks from Ahmad Brooks.

Peyton Manning, Denver Broncos learn from last year's loss

By Judy Battista
NFL.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- Most of the stadium lights were already out Sunday night and the parking lots were emptying, but Peyton Manning was back briefly on the sideline in his suit, glancing over his shoulder, watching his son scamper around the end zone. It has been four long years, through a crushing Super Bowl loss and an unfathomable first-round playoff exit, through a career-threatening injury and the wrenching departure from the only team he had ever known, through a relocation and, exactly one year ago, an excruciating renewal of his postseason history, since Manning had been able to revel in even an early playoff victory.

The yoke of expectation and the burden of disappointment had attached themselves to Manning for years, unfairly in many cases. So there was no missing the significance of Sunday's 24-17 victory over the San Diego Chargers to set up the AFC Championship Game matchup everyone had wanted all along, the 15th renewal of Manning's rivalry with Tom Brady and the New England Patriots.

It meant Manning would not be one-and-done for a ninth time. It meant that the Broncos will host the conference championship game next Sunday afternoon, an important accomplishment for the Broncos because Manning and Brady have split the two epic championship games they've played, with the home team winning each and then going on to win the Super Bowl. It means that Manning, in his gray suit, with his family nearby and his young son signaling a touchdown in the end zone a few yards away, had forestalled for at least another week any more questions about the fleeting time he has left to play, about how many more passes he might have to perfectly place to secure a victory, about how many more chances like this he might get.

He might not get many more, and certainly not against his rival and friend Brady. Their meetings have defined their generation of football, and while Manning has been the dominant regular-season player, it is Brady's Super Bowl victories against which Manning has been measured. If that has created undue pressure for Manning, he will not acknowledge it. Last week, Manning said that as he has gotten older, he has tried to enjoy even the grinding preparation for games more. The light is at the end of the tunnel for him, he said. But Manning has been in good humor, too. And on Sunday night, asked if an upcoming scheduled exam of his neck weighs on his mind, his lighthearted response revealed just how much relief he must have felt that his uncertain future would have to wait.

"What's weighing on my mind is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth," Manning said to laughter. "That's priority one. It was an intense game and up and

down and a lot of emotions. Even the Patriots is too far ahead. And that question is way far ahead. I am not there."

Where he is now is back where he wanted to be when he returned from the injury last year, with a chance to win another Super Bowl, with a team that, on this night, had learned from the mistakes of last season's double-overtime loss to the Ravens. The Broncos had taken a 24-7 lead with 8:15 remaining on the back of a balanced offensive attack, although they had been less than crisp -- bedeviled by dropped passes, a fumble by Julius Thomas and an end-zone interception. But after the Philip Rivers had sliced through the Broncos' defense once, then did it again after San Diego recovered an onside kick, the Broncos were faced with a strikingly similar situation to the one they were in a year ago to the day: trying to preserve a one-touchdown lead with just a few minutes to go.

Last year, the Broncos had played conservatively, running the ball to try to run out the clock. It failed miserably, opening the door for Joe Flacco's 70-yard touchdown heave over Rahim Moore's head that sent the game to overtime. This year, there was no such restraint. The game was in the hands it always belonged in, the ones that set the touchdown and passing yards records.

And so they threw, as the Broncos had done all season, to set the scoring record and now to save their season. On third-and-17, Manning threw a deep pass on the right sideline, where Julius Thomas dragged his right foot for the first down. Three plays later, he hit Thomas again, this time to the short right side of the field for another first down that allowed the clock to wind down. This victory was not the product of one of Manning's aerial attacks -- he had just 230 yards -- but among the recriminations after the loss to the Ravens, the Broncos' coaching staff had been criticized for how conservatively they had approached that game. Their reservations were gone on Sunday, although John Fox would not say that he was more aggressive than last year.

"I'm not going to bite on that one, other than I think you kind of adjust to your football team as you go," he said. "Our guys have proved to be pretty efficient."

That, of course, is a wild understatement, maybe the last one we'll hear in a week that will center on one of the greatest quarterback rivalries in football history. When the teams played in late November on a cold Foxborough night, the game was noteworthy for the Patriots' second-half comeback from 24 points down at halftime, and for Bill Belichick giving Manning the ball first in overtime, but forcing him to drive into the wind. Manning could not, and the Patriots ultimately prevailed, establishing a narrative that Manning chafed at about his perceived frailties in cold and wind.

He has chafed no less at the idea that he has not risen to the biggest moments in his career. He will have another one next Sunday, the next on a list that shortens with the inevitability of that light he sees at the end of the tunnel, against the one player of his era against whom he can be fairly measured. But for a few moments, as the shadows crept across the field and the workers began scrubbing clean the

luxury boxes above him, Manning lived up to one expectation he has put on himself -- to enjoy these moments, however few of them remain.

Broncos halt Chargers' rally, advance to AFC title game

By Gregg Rosenthal
NFL.com
January 12, 2014

One year after the Denver Broncos took the ball out of Peyton Manning's hands in the key moments of a divisional round loss, John Fox and company got aggressive Sunday. It paid off.

The Broncos are headed to the AFC Championship Game following a convincing 24-17 win over the San Diego Chargers. It's the first time the Broncos have made it this far since the Jake Plummer-led squad lost to Pittsburgh after the 2005 season. And it sets up a dream matchup for football fans next Sunday: Tom Brady versus Manning for a spot in the Super Bowl.

The Chargers made a furious rally in the final frame, including a successful onside kick, to put some late pressure on Manning and the Broncos' offense. In a similar spot last season, the Broncos ran the ball on third-and-7 against the Baltimore Ravens, and then punted. Fox also knelt on the ball to force overtime rather than go for a game-winning score.

This time around, the Broncos played to their strengths and Manning responded. With under four minutes left, facing a second-and-17, the Broncos called two straight passes. The first fell incomplete. The second pass was completed to Julius Thomas for a first down, a gut-punch play for Chargers fans. (Third-and-17 will live in infamy next to fourth-and-29.) A few plays later, Manning iced the game with another third-down conversion.

"I'm not going to bite on that one," Fox said after the game when asked about his newfound aggression. Then he did. "I think you adjust to your football team as you go. ... We've got a good passing game. Our regular-season stats prove that."

The late drama and final score makes the game look closer than it really was. The Broncos led by 17 points entering the fourth quarter, and their defense played near-flawless before falling apart late. For much of the contest, this was about as routine as a Divisional Round game gets.

The Broncos out-Chargered the Chargers, chewing up clock with a great running game and third-down play. The Broncos receivers were uncharacteristically sloppy in the red zone, but the Broncos' running game made up for it with 133 yards. Denver's defensive line was dominant for much of the contest; San Diego's offense somehow had just 79 total yards after three quarters.

The Broncos were already scary enough because of their record-breaking offense. This wasn't their best performance, but it showed that Denver can win a different style of game. Strong defense and running was the order of the day throughout Divisional Round Weekend, and the Broncos' performance fit right in.

If the Broncos' defense plays like this for two more games, Peyton should win his second Super Bowl trophy in Eli's building.

Denver Broncos' stingy defense primed for Patriots

By Chris Wesseling
NFL.com
January 12, 2014

The Denver Broncos' beleaguered defense held Philip Rivers to 1 net passing yard by halftime of Sunday's victory. The Chargers managed a meager 79 yards of total offense by the end of the third quarter.

Rivers and Keenan Allen made it interesting in the fourth quarter with cornerback Chris Harris sidelined and Jack Del Rio easing off the gas pedal, but it was still one of the Broncos' best defensive performances of the season.

This was supposed to be the soft underbelly of a team with a monstrous, record-breaking offense.

With All-Pro pass rusher Von Miller out for the season, run-stopper Derek Wolfe sidelined, middle linebacker Wesley Woodyard benched and 12-time Pro Bowl cornerback Champ Bailey relegated to a minor role, Del Rio's defense was billed as perhaps the most exploitable unit of any legitimate Super Bowl contender.

Don't look now, but the Bolts are the third consecutive opponent -- and fourth in the past five games -- held under 260 total yards.

So what's different about Denver's defense?

For starters, nose tackle Terrance "Pot Roast" Knighton has been an unblockable behemoth on the interior over the past six weeks. First-round draft pick Sylvester Williams has improved steadily since replacing Kevin Vickerson in the defensive line rotation in late November.

Second-year defensive tackle Malik Jackson has been one of the league's most effective interior pass rushers. Thirty-six year-old veteran Paris Lenon has solidified the middle, and strong-side linebacker Nate Irving has held his own as Miller's replacement.

The true test will come next week against the Patriots' fine-tuned offense. There's no tougher back to stop right now than LeGarrette Blount, who has exploded for 431 yards (6.73 YPC) and eight touchdowns over the past three games.

All of the hype leading up to the AFC Championship Game will justifiably concentrate on future Hall of Famers Peyton Manning and Tom Brady. Don't be surprised, though, if the decisive matchup is the Denver's revamped front seven against the New England's steamrolling ground attack.

Wes Welker debuts new helmet for Denver Broncos

By Gregg Rosenthal
NFL.com
January 12, 2014

Wes Welker returned to the field Sunday against the San Diego Chargers for his first game since suffering a concussion in Week 14. The Broncos have made some adjustments since we last saw him.

They are using Eric Decker as their primary punt returner, which has worked well. And Welker is using a new helmet that is hard not to notice.

The helmet doesn't seem to be slowing Welker down; he made a nice grab for a touchdown in the second quarter. If Welker and the Broncos' offense keeps it up, we should get to see Welker take on his former team next week.

Ten things we learned from Divisional Round Weekend

By Chris Wesseling
NFL.com
January 12, 2014

NFL strategy is cyclical. No one understands this elemental truth better than Patriots coach Bill Belichick, who has proven once again to be at the vanguard of an inverse reaction to conventional wisdom.

While the rest of the league was copying his two-tight end offense, Belichick was steering his team toward a stout ground attack that has finished in the top 10 in back-to-back seasons.

Once defenses countered the trend toward pass-heavy offenses, the obvious answer on offense was a move toward power football, taking advantage of mismatches against softer nickel and dime defenses.

That dynamic was on display during Divisional Round Weekend, as no winning quarterback topped 230 passing yards.

Pete Carroll and Jim Harbaugh have built the Seahawks and 49ers on physical, ball-control offenses and smashmouth defenses. Peyton Manning and Tom Brady are two of the rare quarterbacks savvy enough to check to the run at the line of the scrimmage when the advantage is there to exploit.

The NFL might be a passing league in the Indian Summer regular seasons, but it's a different game outdoors in January.

It's only fitting that the four teams with a shot at the first cold-weather Super Bowl churned out an average of 167 rushing yards in their divisional round conquests.

Here's what else we learned in Sunday's games:

1. From the "it's never too old to teach an old dog new tricks" department: John Fox placed the ball in Manning's hands late in the key moments rather than nodding to a faint notion of "playing by the book" and running his tailback into the pile as a fruitless clock-burning exercise. True football epiphany or not, it's a promising sign for the Broncos going forward.

2. Another promising sign: Denver's beleaguered defense has held four of its past five opponents below 260 total yards of offense. That will be put to a severe test against the Patriots' steam-rolling ground attack.

3. If the Broncos carry over Sunday's ball-control blueprint, Montee Ball will play a key backfield role. Over the past six games, he's outrushed Knowshon Moreno.

4. Harbaugh is the first coach since the 1970 merger to lead his team to the conference championship in his first three seasons. He and his coaching staff are arguably the NFL's most brilliant at game-planning and adjusting.

5. Harbaugh's Sunday fate turned on another standout postseason performance from Anquan Boldin, who pulled down receptions of 12, 14, 15, 16 and 45 yards as the 49ers pulled away on a pair of scoring drives leading into and coming out of halftime. If Richard Sherman shadows Michael Crabtree next week, it will be a challenge to shut down Boldin and Vernon Davis.

6. Having won eight straight -- including road victories in Green Bay and Carolina -- the 49ers are the hottest and most complete team left in the postseason pool. This will be a stiff test for Seattle's extraordinary home-field advantage and historically great pass defense, as San Francisco is a much tougher out now than they were in their last trip to CenturyLink Field.

7. After mocking Cam Newton's Superman celebration, Colin Kaepernick added Kryptonite to the equation.

8. Unable to shake off a string of questionable first-half calls, the Panthers lost their composure and pulled a no-show in the second half of Sunday's loss.

9. It's back to the drawing board for the Panthers and Chargers. With Steve Smith entering his mid-30s, Carolina desperately needs a downfield playmaker at wide receiver. They were one of just three teams that managed to top 275 passing yards in a game only once all season. As we saw again on Sunday, the secondary is exposed when the front seven is unable to muster a consistent pass rush. There's a need for a big, physical cornerback as well as a safety.

10. The Chargers had the fewest three-and-outs in the NFL this season. Now that Keenan Allen is emerging as a viable No. 1 receiver and Ladarius Green's role is expanding, the only major need on offense is up front. The defense desperately needs playmakers -- specifically pass rushers and cornerbacks.

First look at conference championship weekend

By Gregg Rosenthal
NFL.com
January 12, 2014

In the most shocking twist yet, the NFL got predictable on Divisional Round Weekend. The four favorites all won, mostly in convincing fashion.

The four best teams from the season, with a combined 50-14 record, all made it to conference championship weekend. Before the season started, everyone expected the Seattle Seahawks, San Francisco 49ers, and Denver Broncos to make it this far. They came through.

New England perhaps got slightly less love heading into the season -- Hello Texans! -- but any team led by Tom Brady and Bill Belichick is nobody's underdog.

We've got two of the greatest quarterbacks of all time, starving for another title chance, meeting for the fourth time in the playoffs. We've got two of the most promising young quarterbacks the league has seen in a long time, backed by ferocious defenses and coaches that have a long rivalry.

These are two games that we have been building toward for a long time. It sets up the best looking championship weekend the NFL could possibly hope for.

After a lackluster set of games in the divisional round, San Francisco-Seattle and New England-Denver are the two games that we deserve as football fans. It's almost too perfect to believe. Nothing is more surprising in the NFL than everything going according to plan.

We'll have coverage all week looking ahead to these games, but here are a few quick thoughts to get the week started:

New England Patriots at Denver Broncos

1. Can this game be flexed into primetime? The NFL sets the conference championship schedules years ahead of time, but something just feels wrong about Tom Brady and Peyton Manning being an undercard.
2. Weather should not be a factor in this game. Early forecasts call for a clear, sunny day with highs around 50 degrees. Denver was dry and relatively warm Sunday for Denver's win over San Diego, but it was very windy.
3. Both teams have run the ball well of late, but the Patriots would benefit more from gusty conditions. New England's best matchup advantage will come from their

power running game against a Broncos defense that gave up some big rushing performances down the stretch. Then again, Denver's defense was practically flawless for three quarters Sunday against the ball-control Chargers. If the Broncos' defense plays like that two more times, they will be nearly impossible to beat.

4. Keep an eye on the health of Broncos cornerback Chris Harris. Denver's secondary fell apart in the fourth quarter after he was injured and replaced by Quentin Jammer.

5. As great as Peyton Manning has played all season, there is a reasonable debate over which quarterback played better down the stretch. Brady has been on fire since just before New England's bye, even after Rob Gronkowski's injury. Manning also tested defenses vertically with great success late in the regular season, although he didn't hit as many big plays against San Diego.

6. The Broncos and Patriots run well, but they aren't balanced teams. The offenses carry their defenses. If one of these defenses can give a B- effort, they should prevail. The Patriots' secondary has made a few more big plays, but the Patriots also give up a ton of yards. The Broncos have been a better team overall all season, and deserve to be favorites.

San Francisco 49ers at Seattle Seahawks

1. The Seahawks have outscored the 49ers 71-16 in their last two games in Seattle, but those results don't matter much here. This 49ers team is not the same squad that was blown out back in Week 2. The 49ers know they can beat Seattle, because they have done it twice in San Francisco.

2. After a slow start to the year, Colin Kaepernick is the hotter quarterback entering the game. Russell Wilson's pass protection has been poor all season, and he's developed some bad habits of late. He didn't pull the trigger on throws to some open receivers on Saturday against New Orleans.

3. The Seahawks have the deeper defense overall. At least five or six of their players can take over a game at any time. This is the game that Pete Carroll and general manager John Schneider have been building toward for four years. They want an ugly game. That's how they thrive.

4. This is such a fascinating matchup because there are no secrets between the teams and because they are so similar. The 49ers have come out throwing in both playoff games, but they are still a relatively conservative offense. The Seahawks' offense plays it closer to the vest than anyone.

5. We'll let Vernon Davis say it for us on what to expect:

"A battle. A brutal battle. It will be sparks, flames, you name it," he told NFL Network's Jeff Darlington. "It's going to be tough, and we know that."

The only tough part for NFL fans will be the wait. January 19 can't get here fast enough.

NFL playoffs: Tom Brady, Peyton Manning, Super Bowl bid ... 'nuff said

By Sam Farmer
LA Times
January 12, 2014

DENVER — To the outside world, it's Peyton versus Tom — again — with a trip to the Super Bowl hanging in the balance.

Not surprisingly, that's not how the Denver Broncos quarterback views it.

"Tom Brady has just been an outstanding quarterback for such a long time, but the game next week is Broncos versus the Patriots," Peyton Manning said after a 24-17 victory over San Diego in a divisional playoff game.

"I know there will be some individual matchups that will get headlines. But it will be a battle between two good teams, teams that have been through a lot, that have overcome a lot to get to this point, and that's where my focus will be — trying to help the Broncos get a win over the Patriots."

Still, the familiar matchup of Manning and Brady — nicknamed the "War of 1812" because of their jersey numbers — is too enticing to ignore. Sunday's game in Denver will mark the 15th time the quarterbacks have stood on opposite sidelines, the fourth time they have met in the postseason, and the third time in the AFC championship game. Each has won one title game against the other.

What's more, Broncos receiver Wes Welker will face his former Patriots teammates with a trip to the league's marquee game hanging in the balance.

"It's the AFC championship game, so there will be plenty of juice," Welker said.

Broncos linebacker Shaun Phillips called Brady "my second-favorite quarterback behind Peyton."

"He really is," Phillips said. "I think he's a great quarterback and a great person. And what better way to do it? You want your two best teams going head to head, and that's what's going to happen."

In the NFC, Seattle plays host to San Francisco in Round 3 of what suddenly has become the league's most bitter rivalry.

The 49ers advanced to their third consecutive NFC championship game by winning at Carolina, 23-10, collecting their first road victory in a divisional game since 1970. San Francisco had lost the previous four of those. The 49ers also have won

consecutive playoff games on the road in the same postseason for the first time in their history.

San Francisco's Jim Harbaugh is the first coach since the AFL-NFL merger in 1970 to lead his team to the conference title game in each of his first three seasons. He is 5-2 in postseason games, tied for the second-most playoff victories in his first three seasons behind Washington's Joe Gibbs (six).

So it's back to Seattle, where the 49ers have lost the last two meetings by a combined 71-16, dating to December 2012.

But San Francisco won the latest round of the rivalry, beating the Seahawks, 19-17, on Dec. 8 to avenge a 29-3 loss at Seattle on Sept. 15.

"I think we're the two teams everyone was looking at from the beginning," 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick said. "It's going to be a knock-down, drag-out game."

Kaepernick added that the 49ers "are a different team than we were the first time we played them up there."

Most prominent of those differences is San Francisco receiver Michael Crabtree, who missed the first 11 games of the season recovering from a torn Achilles' tendon. He was Kaepernick's favorite target last season and, since his return, has helped create additional opportunities for receiver Anquan Boldin and tight end Vernon Davis.

For the last month, the Seahawks have failed to find their rhythm on offense and have relied primarily on their defense to win games. They could use an offensive playmaker, and Percy Harvin fills that bill — although Harvin left Saturday's victory over New Orleans after two jarring hits to the head.

This much the Seahawks know: the 12th Man will be jet-engine loud. Seattle has the loudest stadium in the league — in fact, the world record for loudest crowd was set (twice) at CenturyLink Field this season — and the crowd might not sit for a moment of this one.

It was always going to be Broncos vs. Patriots

By Christopher L. Gasper
Boston Globe
January 13, 2014

You knew it was going to come to this, Patriots fans. It was written with the Sharpie of destiny. Peyton Manning and the Denver Broncos would be the final barrier for Tom Brady, Bill Belichick, and the unsinkable Patriots on the road to the Super Bowl.

The Patriots and Broncos are the last teams standing in the AFC, after the top-seeded Broncos survived a late San Diego Chargers comeback to score a 24-17 victory on Sunday at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Brady-Manning XV, otherwise known as the AFC Championship game, will determine who represents the AFC in Super Bowl XLVIII. It will take place Sunday at 3 p.m. in Denver, but the countdown to the final showdown has really been on all season.

Like Pepsi vs. Coke, BMW vs. Mercedes, Apple vs. Google, Brady vs. Manning represents an on-going struggle for supremacy between the two biggest brand names in the genre, the genres being erudite, iconic franchise quarterbacks.

That show "Intelligence" about the guy with a computer chip in his brain that CBS kept annoyingly pumping during Sunday's Broncos-Chargers game would be less far-fetched if it was about Brady or Manning and their command and recall at the line of scrimmage.

It will be the third time that Brady and Manning have met in the AFC Championship game and the fourth time in the postseason overall, with Brady holding a 2-1 lead.

However, each has won an AFC title against the other on his home field. Brady and the Patriots won the 2003 AFC Championship at Gillette Stadium. As a member of the Colts, Manning helped his team rally from a 21-3 deficit to break the hearts of the Patriots in the 2006 AFC title game inside a sweltering RCA Dome in Indianapolis.

In that 2006 AFC Championship game, played in January of 2007, it felt like the Patriots had sent Brady into a gunfight with a Super Soaker. The eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg from "The Great Gatsby" had nothing on the eyes of Reche Caldwell.

This matchup could have a similar feel, as Manning spent this season bumping Brady and the 2007 Patriots out of the record books.

Manning threw for an NFL season-record 55 touchdowns, breaking Brady's mark of 50, and he also set the season record for passing yardage (5,477). The Broncos broke the 2007 Patriots' record point total of 589 by scoring a staggering 606 points. Denver became the first team to have five players register double-digit touchdowns.

This is Manning's *modus operandi*, piling up stats and points in the regular season.

Meanwhile, Brady, stripped of his weapons because of injury, incarceration, inexperience, and financial intransigence, threw for his fewest TD passes (25) since '06.

TB12 has taken a back seat to LeGarrette Blount and the Patriots' running game the last three weeks. Brady hasn't passed for 200 yards in any of the Patriots' last three games, including their 43-22 trampling of Manning's old team, the Colts, on Saturday night in an AFC divisional game.

In their last three games, the Patriots have morphed into Tom Osborne's Nebraska teams, averaging 214.3 yards rushing per game. (That fits right in with Manning's incessant "Omaha" calls at the line of scrimmage.)

In case you're wondering, Denver tied with Seattle for the seventh-best run defense in the NFL this year. The Broncos quickly derailed the Chargers' plan to run them out of the playoffs.

The quarterback comparison is the sexy subplot of the game, but the determining factor will be what it's always been — not Brady vs. Manning, but Manning vs. Belichick.

This will be the ultimate test for the Hoodie and a defense that has withstood a rash of injuries to vital defensive players — taking down Manning and an offense so high-powered it should have a National Rifle Association lobbyist.

Aided by a frosty, gusty New England night, the Patriots held Manning to his lowest completion percentage and yardage production of the season in the teams' meeting Nov. 24.

Manning was 19 of 36 for 150 yards with two touchdowns and an interception as the Patriots dared Denver to run. The Broncos obliged and ran for 280 yards on 48 carries, but surrendered a 24-0 lead, as Brady rallied the Patriots for a 34-31 overtime win and the largest comeback in franchise history.

That bumped Brady's record against Manning to 10-4 and Belichick's to 11-6.

This game isn't just about opportunity now; it's about legacy as well.

Beating Manning on his home turf with a depleted offensive arsenal and an injury-ravaged defense would be one of the great feats of Belichick's esteemed football career.

The Patriots have placed 11 players on injured reserve this season, including six starters, four of them on defense. Their best offensive weapon right now, Blount, was acquired for a seventh-round pick and an Olympic sprinter who was noncommittal about football.

Manning is 10-11 all time in the playoffs. Getting to .500 in postseason play by beating his New England nemeses of Brady and Belichick in the AFC title game would burnish a playoff résumé that doesn't have the same luster as Manning's regular-season résumé.

Adding to the intrigue is that Manning has Brady's BFF and former favorite target, Wes Welker, on his side. Welker couldn't come to a contract agreement with the Patriots after he overplayed his hand and the Patriots undervalued him. He ended up at Manning's side in Denver.

After missing time with a concussion, he returned against the Chargers Sunday and caught six passes for 38 yards and a touchdown.

Welker said it himself, it's kind of nice to stick it in Bill's face.

He'll have his chance.

Patriots-Broncos. The AFC championship couldn't have come down to two other teams or two other quarterbacks. It always felt like the only way to go.

Peyton Manning leads Broncos to AFC title game

By Theresa Smith
Boston Globe
January 13, 2014

DENVER — A game that appeared to be clinched by the Broncos midway through the fourth quarter turned out to be a nailbiter in the closing minutes, yet unlike exactly 365 days ago in a loss to the Ravens, the Broncos chose the aggressive route over the conservative option.

A pair of third-down pass completions from Denver quarterback Peyton Manning to tight end Julius Thomas Sunday propelled Denver to a 24-17 victory over the San Diego Chargers and into next Sunday's AFC Championship game against the Patriots at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

"I loved Adam's aggressive calls," said Manning of Denver offensive coordinator Adam Gase, who became the play caller when the man across the field, Mike McCoy, left last offseason to become the Chargers' head coach.

Interestingly, McCoy was not conservative late in the game. His gamble on fourth and 5 produced a 49-yard gain against Denver's porous secondary. A Denver defense that was stout against the run was exposed against Philip Rivers's passing prowess, particularly when former Chargers cornerback Quentin Jammer had to replace the injured Chris Harris (ankle, knee), who is questionable for the AFC title game.

"Philip got hot and I did not want to give him the ball back," said Manning, who completed a 21-yard pass to a wide open Thomas with 3:06 remaining, and a 9-yard pass on third down to Thomas with 2:02 to go. From there, Manning needed only two plays to run out the clock on his first playoff victory as a Bronco.

He improved his much-criticized playoff record to 10-11 just two years removed from four neck surgeries and his release from the Indianapolis Colts.

"To me, that is one of the most rewarding parts of football," he said of the improvement in late-game aggressive pass play execution. "When you put that work in off to the side or after practice and it pays off in a game, it really makes it feel like it was worth it."

Manning finished with 230 yards passing, completing 25 of 36 for two touchdowns and one interception.

Rivers was 18 for 27 with two touchdowns. The Broncos outrushed San Diego, 133 yards to 65, and dominated time of possession, 35:27 to 24:33.

It was not a flawless Denver offense or defense, which the Patriots no doubt noticed.

Broncos defensive end Shaun Phillips compared it to the last Denver-New England game, Nov. 24, when the Broncos blew a large lead and lost in overtime, 34-31.

"We have to do a better job of closing the door on teams," he said. "We didn't do it against the Patriots either, but now we meet again. The two best teams in the AFC. Tom Brady is my second-favorite quarterback after Peyton Manning."

Manning and Brady are constantly compared, and the marquee matchup is already the talk of the NFL despite the insistence of Denver coach John Fox and Manning to enjoy this hard-fought victory before turning the discussion to the Patriots. Indeed, Fox has much to savor after missing four games because of heart surgery.

While pointing out the difficulty of returning to this point after the heartbreaking loss the Broncos experienced against Baltimore last season, and Fox's absences, Manning did expand on another playoff meeting with Brady.

"Tom Brady has just been an outstanding quarterback for such a long time, but the game next week is the Broncos vs. the Patriots," Manning said. "I know there will be some individual matchups that will get the headlines, but it will be a battle between two good teams, teams that have been through a lot, that have overcome a lot to get to this point, and that's where my focus will be, trying to help the Broncos get a win against the Patriots."

Denver will have home-field advantage again, a true advantage it appeared Sunday when the combination of Manning's snap count manipulations and the roar of the crowd of 76,969 contributed to five penalties against the Chargers for jumping offside.

Along with the Brady-Manning talk, slot receiver Wes Welker, the former Patriot, will be part of the conversation.

Sporting a larger helmet, a concession to the concussions that had sidelined him for 3½ games leading up to the Chargers matchup, Welker caught six passes for 38 yards, but he dropped a pass at the goal line, forcing Denver to settle for a 45-yard field goal.

"It is good to be out there, and competing with my teammates and coming away with a win," Welker said. "Any time you get a playoff win it is a big deal, and we got a really big one coming up next week."

Despite the drop, Welker made a key play in drawing a crucial pass interference penalty as Manning was quick to return to him with the game on the line.

While that call was questionable, the block in the back that went against the Broncos was not, though it erased one of the more electrifying plays of the game on a cold, windy day — a 105-yard kickoff return by Trindon Holliday.

The speedster, who has muffed punts, was replaced by wide receiver Eric Decker in that role.

Broncos become focus of Patriots' preparations

By Shalise Manza Young
Boston Globe
January 13, 2014

The 49ers-Seahawks NFC Championship game will feature two of the NFL's young guns at quarterback, but the AFC Championship will pit two of the game's best ever at the position, as Tom Brady and the Patriots will travel to Denver to face Peyton Manning and the Broncos.

It is a matchup of the conference's top two seeds, as the Broncos finished the regular season 13-3, while New England was 12-4. One of Denver's losses, however, came to the Patriots Nov. 24, when the Patriots roared back from a 24-0 halftime deficit on a bitterly cold evening and had a Broncos overtime miscue work in their favor to pull off a 34-31 win.

After dispatching the Colts Saturday night, Bill Belichick and the Patriots were glued to their televisions like most NFL fans Sunday to see whether they would be headed to Denver or staying home to host the Chargers.

But the Broncos hung on for a 24-17 win over a San Diego team that got hot toward the end of the season and made a second-half charge Sunday afternoon.

In a conference call before Sunday's kickoff, Belichick said he would be watching the game, and that members of his staff already had done work on both the possible opponents.

"We've already broken down the Denver and San Diego games to this point, their last sequence of games, the ones we think are most relevant, for our preparations," he said. "And we'll start putting the pen to the paper and summarizing what we've seen and getting the scouting report ready and maybe putting together some game-plan ideas.

"We'll definitely watch the game. I'll watch it. One good thing is that you get to sit there and watch Denver play San Diego and watch both teams go; those are two good teams right there. Then once it's over, obviously we'll put one of them in the file for next year and use the other one, we'll get back to work on the other one."

This will be the 15th Brady-Manning matchup, fourth in the playoffs. Brady holds a 10-4 lead after the stunner in November.

Of course, the first 12 of those games came when Manning was the face of the Colts, not the Broncos. After missing the 2011 season because of neck surgery, Manning was released by Indianapolis, and ultimately signed with Denver.

He made an immediate impact, as the Broncos were the top seed last year, as well. But they were upset by the Ravens in the divisional round, and it went down as yet another playoff failure for Manning, who for all of his regular-season success is just 10-11 in the postseason, including eight years when his team lost its first playoff game.

Because of that, and because the Broncos had the highest-scoring offense in league history this season and have a solid defense, the pressure is on Denver to win far more than it is on New England, which has gotten this far despite a plethora of injuries to key players, as well as a few off-field problems.

This will be the first time Brady and Manning have met in the playoffs since the 2006 AFC title game, which Manning's Colts came from behind to win, going on to claim the Super Bowl two weeks later.

That game, played at the now-demolished RCA Dome, also marked the Patriots' last road playoff game.

Though the Patriots did play the Broncos this season and haven't played the Chargers since 2011, Belichick didn't see any advantage either way, all he saw was the challenge and opportunity of the conference championship game.

"We played well enough [Saturday] night to be able to play next week," he said. "So whoever we play, we're playing the other best team in the AFC. We're going to have to play well. We're going to have to play better than we played [Saturday] night. The competition is going to get stiffer.

"I think we've all seen in the playoffs that it's really about that game, that matchup, that day. Whatever happened during the regular season or some other year or some other time is really not that significant. What it's about is how things go on that particular day, just being at our best on the biggest game of the year.

"All of us players, coaches, making good decisions, good execution, good communication, playing good situational football, playing good down-after-down consistent football — that will be the challenge this week."

Patriots shouldn't be fazed by Broncos defense

By Ben Volin
Boston Globe
January 13, 2014

DENVER — This was the time for Denver's defenders to pound their chests and let the world know that they have some ballhawks and playmakers on that side of the ball, too.

The Broncos had just wrapped up a 24-17 playoff win over the Chargers, avenging their Week 15 loss to their division rival, holding them to 259 total yards and exorcising the demons from their gut-wrenching playoff choke to the Ravens a year ago.

So, Quentin Jammer, the Broncos' defense obviously made a statement on Sunday. Right?

"Not really," said Jammer, the Broncos' 34-year-old cornerback. "Because you've got to finish the game."

Jammer, a 12-year veteran, is wise. The Broncos may have opened as 7-point favorites over the Patriots for Sunday's AFC Championship game (bettors quickly moved the line to 5½), but they won't beat the Patriots if they play defense like they did Sunday against the Chargers.

Yeah, the stats look great. They sacked Philip Rivers four times, and held the run-heavy Chargers to just 65 yards on 18 attempts (3.6-yard average). And they allowed just 27 points over their final two games of the regular season.

Of course, it's fair to mention that those two games came against the hapless Texans and Raiders. And that the Broncos no longer have their best defender, Von Miller, who had eight tackles, two sacks, a forced fumble, and a fumble recovery he returned for a touchdown against the Patriots in late November.

And that the Broncos almost choked away Sunday's playoff affair, like they did to Baltimore last January and to New England in Week 12, when the Patriots overcame a 24-0 halftime deficit to win 34-31 in overtime.

Hey, kudos to the Broncos for holding the Chargers to 73 total yards through three quarters. Star tight end Antonio Gates and impressive rookie receiver Keenan Allen were both kept off the stat sheet until midway through the third quarter.

But when the Chargers went 63 yards for a touchdown early in the fourth quarter, and then 80 yards for a touchdown, then recovered the onside kick and went 48 yards for a field goal to pull within 7 points, you weren't the only one thinking, "Here we go again."

"I think it was in everybody's mind in the whole stadium," Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton said. "Of course it was."

This time, Peyton Manning bailed out the defense by icing the final 3:53 and converting on third and 17, third and 6, and third and 1.

Strangely, there was a little bluster coming from the Broncos' locker room after the game, as if the defense had finally proven it can play at a championship level.

"I think we finally came together as a group and decided enough was enough," Knighton said. "After the San Diego loss [in Week 15], we decided as a group it's time to play our best ball. We showed that when we went to Houston, and it continued from there."

OK, well, it's one thing to beat Case Keenum and Terrelle Pryor, and quite another to beat Tom Brady and Bill Belichick.

And that Chargers' offense on Sunday was hardly a juggernaut. It wasted four turnovers and let the Bengals hang around way too long in last weekend's playoff victory, and then couldn't even get the engine started until the fourth quarter on Sunday, when it was too little, too late.

The Patriots won't have Rob Gronkowski on Sunday, like they did in the Week 12 matchup, but still shouldn't be fazed much by a Denver defense that might not have top cornerback Chris Harris, who left Sunday's game with ankle and knee injuries and led the team with three interceptions this season.

The Broncos didn't watch much of the Patriots' dismantling of the Colts on Saturday night — they had meetings and didn't turn on the game until the Patriots were already up, 43-22 — but they are well aware of the challenge the Patriots present, even without Gronkowski.

"We'll just focus on how they beat Indy," Knighton said. "It's a different team. Gronkowski was there last time we played and he's not there now, so they'll have some different wrinkles in their offense. That's why they did a good job running the ball [Saturday]."

The Broncos went all out to slow down the Chargers' three-headed running game of Danny Woodhead, Ryan Mathews, and Ronnie Brown, and likely will do the same against New England.

It sounds weird to say, but the Broncos' best chance at success next Sunday might be to put the ball in Brady's hands.

"A lot of teams when you line up against Tom Brady, you want to come out there with five DBs and stop the deep ball and things like that," Knighton said. "But in the playoffs it's about playing defense and running the ball, and that's why we were successful today."

What's interesting is that the Broncos didn't have too much to say about the Patriots in the postgame locker room.

"Well, I think I'm just going to enjoy this one first," coach John Fox said. "It hasn't sunk in. We'll dig into that tomorrow."

You would think that the embarrassing loss to the Patriots on national television would be the Broncos' biggest motivation. And while there's no doubt that the loss stings, the Broncos were really more concerned about avenging their Week 15 loss to the Chargers, who beat the Broncos on Denver's turf.

"It's not easy to forget, but honestly, I thought our Chargers loss at home was worse," said Jammer, who replaced Harris in the lineup. "I thought that they just came in and just beat us, and I thought that that was the one that stuck with us a lot more."

The Broncos certainly have a lot of respect for the Patriots. There's probably an element of fear, as well, especially after the Patriots erased a 24-point deficit with such ease.

In fact, having a short memory and forgetting that Week 12 matchup might be the Broncos' best chance.

And figuring out how to play defense in the fourth quarter might help, too.

"One thing I always say to the guys is, 'Nameless and faceless souls' — whoever lines up in front of us," Knighton said. "We just wanted to prove that we can play at an elite level. But we need to see what we can do better to finish the game, not let it get interesting."

Borges: Generation's greatest quarterbacks square off for AFC title

By Ron Borges
Boston Herald
January 13, 2014

If this is the end of their great rivalry, as it well might be, then it ends in the right arena: with a championship on the line.

Years from now, when we think back upon all the times Tom Brady and Peyton Manning faced each other we will think of them all as championship games even though Sunday's AFC Championship confrontation between them at Sports Authority Field at Mile High (that's a mouthful) in Denver will be only the third time they've met with an actual conference championship on the line. That is another reminder that when it comes to Brady-Manning, reality is often merely just an afterthought.

Although Brady holds the overwhelming numerical advantage in the only statistical category that really counts in professional sports — victories — this will be viewed by many as the rubber match between them, each having led their team to one AFC title directly at the expense of the other.

It will come as no surprise that in some statistical categories it is Manning who has been triumphant but the most significant one remains this: Brady is 10-4 vs. Manning-led teams overall and 2-1 in playoff games. Yet that latter number doesn't seem quite right.

Somehow it feels like they've met in some sort of playoff showdown every year since Brady first took over the Patriots' huddle 13 years ago because their battle for supremacy as the alpha quarterback of their generation has been so constant and so controversial, every meeting seemed like it was for some sort of championship. It is why Sunday's game, while it may not be the Super Bowl, is at the very least the Legacy Bowl.

If you like towering piles of personal statistics you are by definition a Manning man even though Brady has a towering pile of his own. That has been Manning's truest impact on the game: the compilation of personal numbers like no quarterback who preceded him including an almost absurd 5,477 passing yards and 55 touchdowns this season alone.

If you believe quarterbacks are judged by their jewelry however, then you stand firmly with Brady, who has taken the Patriots to five Super Bowls and won three

while Manning has made it only twice and won once in a game in which he seemed eerily uninvolved and threw a crushing interception that cost his team any chance of a second championship. Unlike Manning, who despite all his numbers sometimes seems an almost tragic figure drawn up by the Shakespearian mind, winning in all ways has been Brady's truest impact on the game even when handed the kind of depleted arsenal of weapons he's been working with most of this season.

Geography has something to do with who you side with on this, of course, but so too does whether you prefer the homespun "Cut that meat" salesman-type Manning has become or the Uggs-wearing international bon vivant Brady has morphed into with the supermodel wife and the super life. They're different in more ways than their jewelry collections.

Regardless of who you side with this week though, there is one thing that is undeniable. To this point Brady has outplayed Manning in their 14 meetings. Not by a lot, to be fair, but by just enough.

Eight of the 14 games between them have been decided by a touchdown or less, including the latest one in November when Brady led the Patriots back from a 24-0 deficit by putting up 34 points in the second half and overtime to win, 34-31. Denver trampled the Patriots with its running game that night, Knowshon Moreno rushing for a ridiculous 224 yards on 37 carries which frankly struck Patriot fans as more than a bit of a white flag-waving by Manning.

Yet while it's true Manning threw for only 150 yards with two touchdowns and an interception in the game and only 73 through the first three and a half quarters when the game was on the line, it was the old Manning who emerged, driving the Broncos 80 yards in 10 plays to tie things with 3:06 remaining by accounting for 53 of those yards with his nerve-ravaged right arm, including the final 11 for the tying touchdown.

After that, neither quarterback was able to do much, the game finally hinging not on anything they did or didn't do but rather on the Broncos' Tony Carter unwittingly letting a Patriots punt hit him on the leg late in overtime to set up the winning field goal.

One can expect a similar type of game again, although hopefully not with so artistically unsatisfactory a finish, because it seems every Brady-Manning showdown boils down to some last-minute play (usually made by Brady unless the play is Manning throwing the ball to someone with a Flying Elvis on his hat). Why should the next one, and potentially the final one, be any different?

Results of offseason neck exam could force Peyton Manning to consider retirement

By Justin Tasch
New York Daily News
January 12, 2014

Peyton Manning just had one of the best regular seasons of his career at 37, setting NFL single-season records with 5,477 yards passing and 55 touchdowns. But there's a chance it could be his last.

According to an ESPN report, Manning's football future is contingent on an offseason exam he'll have on his surgically repaired neck. The assessment comes based on a provision in his contract.

Should the exam, which the report says will take place in March, show that Manning's neck is stable, Manning intends to play again next season with the Denver Broncos' fate in the postseason not being a factor.

However, if the exam shows Manning has an elevated risk of injury, he will consider whether the best course of action would be to retire.

The Super Bowl XLI champion quarterback made headlines during the week when he acknowledged that his career is coming closer to an end. "The light is at the end of the tunnel for me, no question," Manning said.

Manning has played remarkably well since undergoing fusion neck surgery at 35 years old, which kept him out the entire 2011 season, his last with the Colts as they released him at season's end. Manning then signed a five-year, \$96 million contract with Denver.

In 2012, Manning threw for 4,659 yards and 37 touchdowns, leading the Broncos to a 13-3 record and an AFC West title. Denver lost to Baltimore in double overtime in the Divisional Round. Denver also went 13-3 this season and captured another division title. The Broncos host the Chargers in the Divisional Round Sunday afternoon.

Report: Chris Harris to have MRI on knee

By Mike Wilkening
ProFootballTalk.com
January 12, 2014

At his postgame press conference Sunday, Broncos coach John Fox said he didn't have an update on the health of cornerback Chris Harris, who suffered knee and ankle injuries in Denver's divisional-round victory vs. San Diego.

Harris, who started at left cornerback vs. San Diego, was the Broncos' "only and most significant injury" in victory, Fox said.

According to Lindsey Jones of USA Today, Harris is slated to have an MRI on his knee on Monday.

The 24-year-old Harris is one of the Broncos' key players in the secondary. According to Pro Football Focus, Harris played a team-high 1,059 regular-season snaps for Denver, defending 13 passes and hauling in three interceptions in 16 games (15 starts).

Champ Bailey and Quentin Jammer are listed as the next two options at left cornerback on the Broncos' depth chart. The Broncos also have Kayvon Webster and Tony Carter in reserve at cornerback. Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie is the starter at right cornerback.

Patriots on track to be playoff underdogs for first time since 2006

By Mike Wilkening
ProFootballTalk.com
January 12, 2014

As has been the case in all of their previous regular-season and playoff games in the 2013 campaign, the Broncos are favored in next Sunday's AFC title matchup with New England.

According to Pregame.com, multiple Nevada sports books have made the Broncos a six-point favorite against the Patriots next Sunday in Denver.

The Patriots had been favored in their previous 11 postseason games dating back to 2007, per Marc Lawrence point spread data and Saturday's Indianapolis-New England closing line. The Pats were last underdogs in the 2006 AFC title game, when they fell 38-34 at Indianapolis as three-point underdogs.

According to Jim Feist point spread records, the Patriots have been playoff underdogs just five other times in Bill Belichick's tenure as head coach.

Three times, the Belichick-led Pats have won outright playing the underdog's role in the postseason.

Twelve seasons ago, they pulled off two major upsets, knocking off host Pittsburgh (-10) in the AFC title game and then beating St. Louis (-14) in Super Bowl XXXVI. The Patriots also won at San Diego (-4.5) in the 2006 divisional round.

On the other side of the ledger, the Patriots lost 27-13 at Denver (-3) in the 2005 divisional round. And the next year, they could not hold off the favored Colts' second-half charge in the RCA Dome.

Light beer, not neck, was on Peyton Manning's mind Sunday night

By Josh Alper on
ProFootballTalk.com
January 13, 2014

Before the Broncos and Chargers squared off on Sunday, Chris Mortensen of ESPN pointed out that Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning would have a neck exam in March that would determine whether he's healthy enough to play a third season with the Broncos.

There's no expectation that doctors will tell him that he has to stop playing, but it's necessary that the Broncos do their homework before handing Manning \$20 million for the 2014 season. When asked about the exam after the game, Manning made it clear that what he feels is necessary is that he leave thoughts about his doctor's appointment until it is actually time for the doctor's appointment.

"What's weighing on my mind is how soon I can get a Bud Light in my mouth after this win," Manning said, via *USA Today*. "I've really been, this team has been a one-week-at-a-time season. For all we've been through, losing our coach and losing different guys to injuries, that approach has served us well. I think we need to keep that approach from here on out."

Manning acknowledged last week that he's closing in on the light at the end of the tunnel, but he won't be reaching it before the end of this week. That should leave thoughts about another meeting with the Patriots to replace thoughts about light beer as the top priority of Manning's immediate future while the medical issues wait for their own turn in the spotlight.

Peyton gets first postseason win with Broncos

By Mike Florio
ProFootballTalk.com
January 12, 2014

While one game won't reverse a legacy of postseason futility, the narrative has at least been suspended for a week.

Quarterback Peyton Manning has won his first playoff game since joining the Broncos in 2012, beating the Chargers 24-17 in Denver one month to the day after losing there on a Thursday night to San Diego — and one year to the day after an epic late-game collapse against the Ravens in the 2012 divisional round.

And so Manning will welcome Tom Brady and the Patriots to Denver, site of a postseason loss in 2005 that ended New England's quest for a third straight Super Bowl win. Manning and Brady have met three times before in the playoffs, with Brady leading 2-1.

A win by the Broncos would pull Peyton and Brady even at 2-2; a victory by New England would square Brady at 3-3 in the postseason against the Manning brothers, thanks to a pair of Super Bowl losses to Eli.

Peyton helped the Broncos qualify for the AFC title game by holding the ball for the final 3:53 after the Chargers had narrowed the gap to seven with a field goal following the recovery of an onside kick. San Diego opted to kick away, and the strategy nearly worked. But Manning delivered on third and 17 with a 21-yard sideline throw to tight end Julius Thomas, who had found an empty spot in a Chargers secondary depleted by suspected concussions to Marcus Gilchrist and Jahleel Addae.

Manning converted another third and six with a throw to Thomas, and one more conversion on third and one via a Knowshon Moreno run allowed the Broncos to cement the victory.

Much like the Saints a day before in Seattle, who trailed 16-0 before waking up, the Chargers snapped out of a 17-0 funk to make the game interesting in the fourth quarter. In the end, Manning and company held off a team that wasn't intimidated by playing the No. 1 seed on its own turf.

Now, the Patriots draw that same assignment next Sunday night for a chance to chase the Vince Lombardi Trophy in the stadium where Eli plays his home games.

Offseason neck exam coming for Peyton

By Mike Florio
ProFootballTalk.com
January 12, 2014

We've heard much more about Peyton Manning's ankle than his neck this season. But we could be hearing plenty about his neck in the coming offseason.

As explained by Chris Mortensen of ESPN, Manning will have an offseason examination of his neck to check its stability following two years of football. Which followed a quartet of neck surgeries.

Per Mortensen, if there's an increased risk of injury, Manning will be forced to decide whether to retire.

The exam undoubtedly flows from the guaranteed money Manning is due to receive in 2014. Under his contract, he gets \$20 million next year unless he can't play due to a neck injury. If Manning can't play due to any other injury, he gets the \$20 million — and the Broncos get \$10 million in insurance proceeds.

The possible donut hole comes from a neck injury that keeps Peyton from playing in 2014, but that isn't related to the neck condition for which he previously had four surgeries. That could lead to a disagreement over whether Manning gets the \$20 million.

Regardless, the examination shouldn't be regarded as anything ominous. This is more about the Broncos protecting their \$20 million investment than it is about Peyton assessing whether he should retire.

But if he has to retire due to a recurrence of the neck problems that wiped out his 2011 season, the Broncos will owe him nothing in 2014.

Survive and Advance

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- In the playoffs, the result always trumps process.

So as the Broncos' once-sturdy lead wavered in the building chill of Sports Authority Field at Mile High late Sunday afternoon, there was no thought of how losing 10 points of a 17-point advantage would lead to the usual questions and examinations in the film room, nor even of how the experience might help the Broncos get better.

The only motivation was survival. No one particularly cared how it happened -- whether it took the offense converting third-and-longs, or the defense successfully gambling on blitzes, or a takeaway.

Survive and advance. It was a phrase coined by the late college basketball coach Jim Valvano in the 1983 NCAA Tournament, but it applies to the NFL just the same, given the one-and-done nature of both postseasons. One bad day, and your season ends, something the Broncos knew and heeded from their experience last year.

It didn't matter how it happened, or who delivered it. What the Broncos needed was a big play.

In the end, the gateway to the 24-17 win over the Chargers was the third-down offense, which struggled in their Week 15 loss without Wes Welker but was devastatingly efficient Sunday, moving the chains nine times in 13 attempts. Most were from third-and-moderate-yardage, but the key play of the final series appeared to be anything but: a third-and-17 from the Denver 20-yard-line with 3:06 remaining.

San Diego still had two timeouts, so a Broncos run would have meant they would be down to one stoppage. But with so much time on the clock, the Chargers could have had the football at their own 1-yard-line after a punt and been able to have their full playbook at their disposal. It was not a time to be timid, especially when the chances of reaching the Denver 37 with a clock-chewing run seemed remote, at best.

"Certainly it was a no-brainer there, what you had to do," said quarterback Peyton Manning.

It was a pass to tight end Julius Thomas, whose day had been marred by a fumble, a drop and a false start. It was not an individual performance to savor, although it was another valuable educational experience for him.

But when Manning's pass sailed toward Thomas, who was near the west sideline, all the frustration of the fourth quarter didn't matter. Nor did the eventual application of the lessons to come, part of the process of becoming an elite tight end.

Ten months of work rested on the throw, the catch, and Thomas' ability to get both feet in-bounds. Check, check and check. Another catch by Thomas on the following third down virtually sealed the game.

"(It was a) great play call by [Offensive Coordinator] Adam [Gase]," said Manning. "It really was a big-time play call. Got them in the right look and a good catch by Julius."

But once the result was achieved, it was back to the process. They got the win to preserve their season for at least one more week, and a few issues to fix that will prevent even the faintest of complacency from setting in.

The offense will focus on the two giveaways in San Diego territory that prevented the Broncos from putting the game out of reach by halftime. The defense will examine a fourth quarter in which the Chargers got away from their game plan -- but scored 17 points, averaged 10.0 yards per play and came within the two Thomas catches of having the chance to drive for the biggest fourth-quarter comeback in NFL postseason history.

"We're going to look at the fourth quarter. We've got to play 60 minutes," said defensive lineman Malik Jackson. "You can't expect to win a game closing out that kind of fashion, especially when a team might be hanging in there with us."

"We made some mental errors," added cornerback Quentin Jammer.

Jammer, the 12-year veteran, felt the worst about the fourth-quarter decline. After taking over for Chris Harris Jr. following the third-year cornerback's ankle and knee injury, Jammer found himself beaten for a 16-yard touchdown and the Chargers' two longest plays of the game.

"Myself, I made mental errors that led to three big plays," Jammer said.

The one that bothered him most was the 49-yard Philip Rivers-to-Keenan Allen connection on fourth-and-3 with 7:38 left. At that moment, the Broncos led by 17, the crowd was roaring, sensing a chance for the final knockdown blow, and the Chargers had put their fading hopes on one play.

As a seasoned veteran and nine-season teammate of Rivers, Jammer thought he knew what the quarterback would do -- especially given the windy conditions, with breezes gusting over 30 miles per hour at times.

"I over-thought everything," said Jammer, who added that he "sat" on Allen's route. "And me being a veteran player, it's fourth-and-3, going against the wind,

I'm thinking, 'a curl (route),' just something to get the first down and keep the chains moving, and I let the guy run right by me."

If Harris' injury is minor, Jammer will be one of the players called on for more extensive duty. His task would then be to ensure a quarter like the fourth does not happen again.

"There's a lot that we can clean up, and there's a lot that I need to clean up," he said.

But thanks to his teammates, he has that chance. To survive and advance does not simply mean that you move one step closer to the primary goal. It means you have one more chance to get it right.

And that's why when the Broncos racked up a final hat trick of third-down conversions, Jammer greeted the win with a low-key reaction.

"Relief," Jammer said, with a smile. "When you give up a couple of big plays in a game, you're just hoping that you get another shot to go out and prove that you belong. That's my mindset."

It was a sentiment shared in the locker room after the Broncos earned what they wanted: one more chance to get it right. One more win to get to the Super Bowl.

Twenty-eight teams pine for what the Broncos now possess: another opportunity to refine their process to achieve the result of their dreams.

They survived and advanced. But getting the result they want next week may depend on the process, and how they apply Sunday's lessons toward a showdown with the Patriots.

Three Keys Unlocked: Divisional Round

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER --Third down. Four-minute offense. Seven-point lead. Broncos moving toward the south end zone, near midfield, trying to get enough first downs to run out the clock.

If you watched Sunday's 24-17 divisional playoff win over the San Diego Chargers and had a flashback to exactly one year ago today, you weren't the only one. You also shared an emotion with some of Denver's players.

Not everyone would confess to having their minds replay the final moments of regulation from last year, when the Broncos could not get the final first down they needed to run out the clock, giving the Ravens one last chance, which they seized after a late defensive letdown. But some saw the memories return.

"That was definitely in the back of our minds," said defensive end Malik Jackson. "As the fourth quarter started coming and they were coming, a few guys kind of started thinking about a little flashback."

"But we hung in there, we had great play from our defensive backs and linebackers, and we got it through."

The suspense ended bit by bit -- first, with Julius Thomas' consecutive third-down receptions, and finally with a 5-yard Knowshon Moreno jaunt on third-and-1 that sent nearly all of the 76,902 fans home jubilant.

"We go over that every Thursday: the four-minute offense," said safety Mike Adams. "And they executed it well. I was just so happy, man, and relieved. They definitely got it done."

It was the final act of a game that the Broncos seemed to have won earlier, in large part because they controlled the pace, which brings us back to the three keys to the game, noted in this space Sunday morning.

1. LIMIT THE LENGTH OF SAN DIEGO'S POSSESSIONS.

An early third-down stop after six plays evaporated when Jackson was called for a face-mask penalty after his hand grazed the face mask of Chargers running back Danny Woodhead. But instead of allowing that to rattle them, the Broncos quickly regrouped. Shaun Phillips sacked Philip Rivers two plays later, and the Chargers punted two snaps after that, having only drained two minutes, eight seconds more from the clock -- less than one-third of the time that passed after a penalty on a

punt wiped out what would have been a crucial three-and-out against San Diego in the third quarter of that 27-20 loss.

The defense's response was the most illuminating sign that Sunday's game would be different. It continued to the next four non-kneeldown possessions, when the Chargers ran just 20 plays and did not score. They mustered just three third downs on these series, and only crossed midfield on a drive where they earned possession at their 44-yard-line following the replay-reviewed strip-fumble of Julius Thomas.

Only a fourth-quarter surge changed the tenor of the game, but that came when San Diego abandoned its strategy in favor of quick strikes. But San Diego never had a possession that took double-digit plays, and after their first series, never kept the football for longer than three minutes, 16 seconds. Denver's offense never sat idle as a result, and the game was in the Broncos' hands.

2. CLEAN UP SPECIAL TEAMS.

The Broncos looked to be doing just fine in this area until the fourth quarter, when an illegal block in the back nullified a potential 104-yard kickoff return by Trindon Holliday and Eric Decker lost his grip on an on-side kickoff after leaping to gain possession, allowing the Chargers an extra series that ended in the field goal that narrowed Denver's lead back to seven points.

But Decker's play can be chalked up to the randomness and chaotic nature of the on-side kickoff, and isn't necessarily cause for concern. His return to full-time punt return duties also came close to resulting in a touchdown, although it was an "invisible fence," as he said, that stopped his return at 47 yards.

Holliday didn't have an explosive return stand up on the stat sheet, but he alertly fielded a pooched kickoff and sprinted out of bounds to prevent any further damage, setting the offense up for its successful four-minute drill.

It wasn't perfect, but the positives outweighed the negatives for the special teams, which is the step forward the unit needed after a frustrating six weeks to close the regular season.

3. "PLAY YOUR GAME."

The league's best offense in the regular season didn't get that way with the assistance of short fields and big plays. Although it had them from time to time, it also proved capable of mounting long drives, with 17 scoring drives that took at least 10 plays over the last seven games of the regular season.

Like the running game that emerged late in the season, the Broncos had the ability to dink and dunk their way down the field and sustain long drives. But Sunday's performance was arguably their best in this regard. Seven of Denver's eight possessions lasted at least seven plays. Three of the eight took at least 10 snaps,

including the final drive that sallied the win. And the only drive that didn't see multiple first downs was the one that ended in Julius Thomas' fumble.

Denver averaged 3.25 first downs per possession. The Chargers averaged exactly half that: 1.625 per series. It wasn't the Broncos playing the kind of game that they knew best, but by turning the tables on the Chargers and building up advantages in long drives and time of possession, they added another tool to an offensive chest that is now overstuffed with handy items.

Three Keys: Broncos vs. Chargers

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER – It's not as though the Broncos have spent their downtime muttering "38-35" and "Baltimore" to themselves for the last 12 months.

The Broncos' coaches didn't channel Bo Schembechler and post that score in the locker room or on every player's practice uniform, the way the famed Michigan coach did to remind his 1969 Wolverines of the 50 points that rival Ohio State dropped on them one year earlier.

But that loss, which occurred exactly one year ago today, is in the Broncos' minds - - if not always at the front of them, then not far from their thoughts. It has been throughout the offseason and regular season. It's been the motivation for every bit of work that went above and beyond the required duty.

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

Manning knows about this situation. He's been here before.

Since the wild-card round was established in 1978, sixteen teams that lost at home in the divisional round of the playoffs were at home to open their postseason run the following year. Fifteen of them won that first playoff game the following year. Nine of them went on to the Super Bowl the following season. Five of them won it all.

Two of those five were the 1997 Broncos -- whose tale is well-told -- and the 2006 Colts, to date the only Super Bowl winner of which Manning was a part. A year after losing to the Steelers 21-18 in the divisional playoffs, they began their postseason run with a wild-card win over the Kansas City Chiefs at the RCA Dome, followed by a win at Baltimore, an AFC Championship triumph over the Patriots and a Super Bowl XLI win over Chicago.

Much has been made of history repeating itself regarding the 2013 Broncos, compared to their 1997 brethren. But the 2006 Colts are equally instructive. And the 15-1 record of teams in the situation like the Broncos face Sunday -- and the

legacy of these teams making the Super Bowl more often than not -- shows just how powerful the lingering sting of an upset playoff loss can be one year later.

Neither the Broncos nor the Chargers will lack for motivation today. But the Broncos have a little extra, and it has been exactly 12 months in the making.

It helped the 1983 Raiders, 1988 49ers, 1990 Giants, 1997 Broncos and 2006 Colts to Lombardi Trophies. Now the Broncos will learn if they are the next in this redemption club.

To take the first step, there are three keys that stand out:

1. LIMIT THE LENGTH OF SAN DIEGO'S POSSESSIONS.

Easier said than done, right? No team has possessed the football more than the Chargers, which is largely due to their league-best third-down conversion percentage, which itself is because of their ability to avoid calamity and keep themselves in third-and-moderate yardage.

While the Broncos don't want to be besieged by explosive plays, it can be suggested that a Chargers scoring drive of two to four plays is less damaging than one that consumes 10 or more snaps and reduces the number of chances Denver's record-breaking offense has.

San Diego succeeded at limiting Denver's chances in both games toast fall. When kneeldown drives are eliminated, the Broncos averaged 10 possessions a game against the Chargers, and 12.14 against all other opponents.

The Chargers also held the Broncos to 2.40 points per possession -- 0.7 points below the overall average on Manning-led drives this year. But if the Broncos had enjoyed an average number of possessions against San Diego, their pace against the Chargers would have meant an average of 29.14 points per game, instead of the 24.0 they actually scored.

The key might rest in the Denver defense's willingness to gamble when it does force the Chargers into third down. It might expose itself to some big gains, but disguised pressure might lead to a stop or an errant throw that becomes a turnover.

2. CLEAN UP SPECIAL TEAMS.

In each of the last six games, the special teams were responsible for at least one significant negative play, from the punt that bounced off Tony Carter in New England in Week 12 to the blocked punt at Oakland six weeks later. In the two losses in that span, the gaffe arguably cost the Broncos the game; certainly the Week 15 loss to San Diego might have been avoided if an encroachment penalty

had not allowed the Chargers to drain six minutes, 48 seconds more off the clock in the third quarter after the defense had forced a three-and-out.

The cliches about little things having big impact in the playoffs exist for a reason: they're tried and true, proven since time immemorial. For instance, if not for San Francisco's issues on punt returns late in the 2011 NFC Championship, we're not talking about the last three Super Bowl winners having a combined 29-19 regular-season record, with none better than 10-6.

The special teams have proven capable of explosive, positive plays this year, most coming in the first 10 games of the season. They need to recapture that -- or, at least, avoid the mistake that could derail the Broncos' Super Bowl hopes.

3. "PLAY YOUR GAME."

During the 1980 Winter Olympics, microphones caught U.S. ice hockey coach Herb Brooks repeating this mantra to his players. It's worth noting again, even though it's the Broncos who are the favorite, rather than the Chargers.

The offense cannot waste too much time worrying about whether the Chargers gobble up yardage and clock time. All it can do is not be forced to be something it is not, whether it's because of the Chargers' penchant for disguising their pass-rush intentions or because of the gusty winds that are forecast for Sports Authority Field on Sunday.

While the offense has proven it can ground and pound when the need arises, the Chargers' weakness remains their pass defense, which was one of the league's worst from a statistical perspective in 2013.

The Broncos' passing game is merely the most prolific for a single season in league history, and with Wes Welker back in the lineup, has all of its skill components healthy for the first time since the first half of the 51-28 romp over the Titans on Dec. 8. Assuming good health Sunday, the Broncos can focus on what they did best. The closer the Broncos stick to the script that brought them to the postseason, the better their chances.

Knighton Gets Support from Former Bronco

By Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- Plenty of former Broncos were in the stands to watch Sunday's Divisional Round win.

Alumni Jake Plummer and Rod Smith were both shown on the ThunderVision screen soaking in the Broncos victory.

But one familiar face that flew a little more under-the-radar was sitting in the front row watching his best friend help Denver earn a spot in the AFC Championship Game.

Current Washington Redskins defensive lineman Chris Baker, who was with Denver for the 2009 season, was decked out in Broncos gear, holding a sign that read "Let's Go #94 T-Knight!"

"That's my best friend," Knighton explained after the game. "We grew up together our whole lives. He just said he wanted to come and see a game and support me."

Knighton got Baker the prime seat next to his mom.

So was it strange to have a player from another team rooting on the Broncos?

"We're family. I don't see it as a guy from another team in the stands watching. I just see that family's watching," Knighton said. "He's up there with my mom. She's known him since he was born. I'm just looking forward to seeing him."

Defensive end Robert Ayers sought out Baker after the game, running up to high five him following the Broncos' 24-17 win.

"When Chris was here, me and him were real close," Ayers said. "We hung out a lot. We came in the same year, so it's always fun seeing him. Whenever I see him, we've always got jokes for each other."

"When I saw him, I went over there and dapped him up. He's a great guy."

Add the contingent of former Broncos attendance Sunday adding to the list of familiar faces at Broncos games this season -- which has included Tiger Woods and Lindsey Vonn.

No telling who will be in the stands next week.

Broncos Advance to AFC Championship Game

By Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- The Broncos are now one win away from the Super Bowl.

Denver's Divisional-Round win against the San Diego Chargers means the Broncos will host the New England Patriots in the AFC Championship Game next Sunday.

It's the ninth time the Broncos have made it to the conference championship game and the sixth time they've hosted it.

Kickoff at Sports Authority Field at Mile High is scheduled for 1 p.m. MST.

The No. 2 seed Patriots earned their spot in the game with a 43-22 win against the Indianapolis Colts on Saturday.

The Broncos and Patriots played earlier this season in Week 12 -- a 34-31 overtime loss that saw Denver jump out to a 24-0 lead before New England came roaring back.

The rematch will come with a spot in Super Bowl XLVIII on the line.

How It Happened: Broncos 24, Chargers 17

By Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- The AFC's road to Super Bowl XLVIII still runs through Denver.

The Broncos defeated the San Diego Chargers 24-17 Sunday afternoon in the Divisional Round of the postseason to advance to the AFC Championship Game for the ninth time in team history.

As the AFC's No. 1 seed, the Broncos will host the game next Sunday against the No. 2 seed New England Patriots, with kickoff scheduled for 1 p.m. MST.

"I thought today was a hard-fought game. Team victory," said wide receiver Eric Decker, who nearly returned a punt for a touchdown in the win. "It's fun to go onto the next step and just stay alive. There are four teams left and to be one of them is pretty special. And I think everyone in this locker room said they are pretty excited."

It was a wire-to-wire win for the Broncos, who took a 7-0 lead in the first quarter on a 2-yard Demaryius Thomas touchdown catch and never looked back.

At halftime, the Chargers had just 1 net passing yard. Through three quarters, the Chargers hadn't cracked 100 yards of total offense. In fact, they had just 79.

"We came out with a lot of energy," said defensive tackle Terrance Knighton, who had three tackles and a quarterback hit in the game. "We fed off the crowd and we just knew what they were going to try to come in and do. We just wanted to eliminate their run game — not let (RB Ryan) Mathews kill us, not let (RB Danny) Woodhead kill us — and make them throw the ball. We did a good job of that the first three quarters."

To Knighton's point, the Chargers finished the game with just 65 rushing yards, with Woodhead's 29 yards leading the team.

But San Diego didn't simply fold.

After a 3-yard Knowshon Moreno touchdown run made it 24-7 Broncos midway through the fourth quarter, the Chargers offense got to work.

Quarterback Philip Rivers found wide receiver Keenan Allen for a 49-yard gain to jumpstart the drive, which was capped by a 16-yard touchdown strike from Rivers to Allen three plays later.

Down just 10 points, the Chargers recovered an onside kick and proceeded to drive 48 yards down the field before settling for a 30-yard field goal to pull to within a touchdown.

"I know people were like, 'deja vu,' but no," said cornerback Champ Bailey, who tied for the team lead with four solo tackles. "We knew better. We knew we had it in control. We just had to go out there and make a few plays."

That's exactly what the Denver offense did after San Diego kicked off to the waiting Trindon Holliday, who took the ball to the 27-yard line with 3:51 remaining in the fourth quarter.

The ensuing drive began with a false start penalty, and it looked like the Chargers would get the ball back as that first-and-15 turned into third-and-17. But Manning and tight end Julius Thomas had something to say about that.

"Third-and-17, you know you're going to have to hold the ball a little bit longer just to give guys a chance to get down the field. It was the perfect call against the perfect coverage, which you may get one or two of those a game," Manning said. "It was good to get the ball out of my hands in time and certainly nice to see Julius catch it."

Thomas went up and hauled in the pass on the sideline for a 21-yard gain and a first down.

After two more runs, the Broncos faced another third down, this time with 2:12 left on the clock. Once again, Manning looked to his playmaking tight end.

"We talked all week about who plays the hardest, the longest," tight end Jacob Tamme said. "When we had to make plays at the end, Julius was in there, and he did a heck of a job making them."

Thomas' 9-yard gain gave the Broncos a fresh set of downs and caused San Diego to use its final timeout.

With the two-minute warning stopping the clock again, the Broncos needed one more first down to ensure that San Diego wouldn't get another chance.

Moreno put that task on his back, gaining 6 yards on second-and-7 and 5 more on third-and-1 to allow Manning to take a knee in the victory formation and secure a trip to the AFC Championship Game.

"It was great. That's what we need. We need clutch drives like that," Bailey said. "That's the way you win games and our offense definitely showed why we're one of the best in the league."

Now, for the first time since the playoffs following the 2005 season, the Broncos will play in the AFC Championship Game. They'll host the Patriots at Sports Authority Field at Mile High in a rematch of Week 12, a game New England won in overtime.

"We're looking forward to it," said defensive end Shaun Phillips, who notched two sacks against the Chargers. "Obviously we're the two best teams in the AFC because we're playing for the AFC championship. What more can you ask for? That's what you want as a football player."

"You want the two best teams going head-to-head, and that's what's going to happen."

Peyton's Take: Broncos vs. Chargers

By Stuart Zaas
DenverBroncos.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER – The Broncos earned a 24-17 victory against the San Diego Chargers in the AFC Divisional Round, the team's first postseason win with quarterback Peyton Manning at the helm.

Manning, who has helped lead the team to the AFC's No. 1 playoff seed in each of the past two seasons, completed 25-of-36 passes for 230 yards and a pair of scores in Denver's win.

"This was a good team win," Manning said. "The biggest difference early in the game was the defense was getting them off the field and we were staying on the field. So it was a good team win. That's what you have to have in the playoffs to beat good teams, and certainly what we'll have to have next week."

The quarterback completed passes to seven different players in the victory, but none were bigger than h

is pair of third-down connections with tight end Julius Thomas.

After a Chargers field goal cut the Broncos' lead to 24-17 with 3:56 to play in the fourth quarter, Manning and the offense were able to put together a 10-play drive that drained the clock.

"To run (four) minutes off of the clock at the end of the game, that was big-time football there," Manning said.

Denver converted three third downs on that possession, including a 21-yard completion from Manning to Thomas on third-and-17, the third play of the drive.

"We have worked situations all week," Manning said. "It was nice that all that hard work paid off for us in that situation. The third-and-15, certainly it was a no-brainer there what you had to do. It was really disappointing that we were even in that position. We had been so good on first and second down the entire game, and we had a penalty, had run for a negative loss, had an incomplection.

"Great play call by (Offensive Coordinator) Adam (Gase). Really was a big-time play call. Got them in the right look and a good catch by Julius. The second one was another good route by Julius. I thought you saw that all game, Adam putting different guys in different positions. Certainly two huge third-down conversions, which were the difference in the ball game."

With the win, Denver will host the New England Patriots in the AFC Championship Game at 1 p.m. MST on Sunday, Jan. 19 at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Next week's game will mark Manning's fourth conference championship game. He has a 2-1 record thus far for his career in that round.

It will be the third time he plays against the Patriots for a chance to earn a trip to the Super Bowl. Manning's Indianapolis Colts beat the Patriots in 2007 and lost to them in the teams' 2004 matchup.

"We'll enjoy this one. You're supposed to enjoy these wins," Manning said. "They're hard to come by, and we'll start working on the Patriots tomorrow."

AFC Championship Tickets On Sale Monday

By Stuart Zaas
DenverBroncos.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER — The Broncos have announced that a limited amount of single-game tickets for the AFC Championship Game against the New England Patriots will go on sale to the general public on Monday at 10 a.m.

That game kicks off at 1 p.m. MST on Sunday, Jan. 19, at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Tickets will be available at all Ticketmaster locations by calling 1-800-745-3000 or by visiting www.ticketmaster.com. Tickets will be available only to those with a valid billing address in the Rocky Mountain region, including Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming, Nebraska, Montana, South Dakota and Western Kansas. Tickets will not be available at the Broncos Ticket Office until Tuesday (if there is any inventory remaining).

Ticket prices range from \$90-\$300 for reserved seats and \$300-\$600 for club seats. There is a limit of four tickets per household.

AFC Title Game Set

By Brandon Moree
DenverBroncos.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER – The AFC Championship Game is set. The top two seeds – the Denver Broncos and the New England Patriots – will square off next Sunday at Sports Authority Field at Mile High with a trip to the Super Bowl on the line.

The Broncos punched their ticket to the AFC title game with a 24-17 win Sunday in the Divisional Round against the Chargers.

"It's another step in the right direction," cornerback Champ Bailey said. "I mean, we have our hands full and it's definitely not a time to be looking at the Super Bowl. We just have to take care of what's in front of us and not look past it."

The Broncos and the Patriots are certainly no strangers to each other as just seven weeks ago they met in Foxborough, Mass. – and 60 minutes wasn't enough to decide a winner.

The Patriots kicked a game-winning field goal with just a touch more than a minute left in overtime to give the Broncos their second loss of the season. Sunday, they'll meet for a rematch in Denver.

"We're looking forward to it," linebacker Shaun Phillips said. "Obviously we're the two best teams in the AFC because we're playing for the AFC championship. What more can you ask for? That's what you want as a football player. Tom Brady's my second-favorite quarterback behind Peyton Manning. He is. I really like Tom. I think he's a great player and a great person. What better way to do it? You want the two best teams going head-to-head, and that's what's going to happen."

After the Broncos lost in Foxborough, they lost just one more game in the regular season. That was a Week 15 bout with AFC West rival San Diego.

Sunday, the Broncos were presented with the chance to avenge that loss in the Divisional Round. Having completed that task, the Broncos will get another shot at redemption next week.

"It always feels good to actually play another team that beat you – just like we did the Chargers," defensive end Malik Jackson said. "It should be a fun game. They're a great team. They beat a really good team last night – very tough."

Of course, the game next Sunday is more than just another crack at a team that beat them earlier in the season. It's another step towards the goal the team set at the start of the season.

"It's the AFC Championship Game," wide receiver Wes Welker said. "It doesn't get any bigger than that."

Though they'll have a shot at their first Super Bowl berth since 1998 next weekend, right now, they're letting this win sink in.

"Well, I think I'm just going to enjoy this one first," Head Coach John Fox said. "It hasn't sunk in. We'll dig into that tomorrow. We'll enjoy it tonight for what it is. We're very honored and pleased to be in that position."

Thomas Comes Through in Clutch

By Mike Morris
DenverBroncos.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- As darkness fell over Sports Authority Field at Mile High and tension began to mount, the Broncos sought a playmaker on their final drive of an AFC Divisional Round contest that suddenly had narrowed to a one-score game.

Julius Thomas answered the call with open arms – and sure hands.

Thomas reeled in a pair of crucial third-down receptions on the Broncos' final drive of their 24-17 win over the Chargers on Sunday, helping keep Denver's offense on the field for the game's final 3:51 and ultimately allowing the Broncos to run out the clock on San Diego's hopes for a comeback.

With the Chargers just one third-down stop away from getting the ball back for a potential game-tying drive, quarterback Peyton Manning twice called Thomas' number.

And on an afternoon of ups-and-downs for the tight end, Thomas saved his best for last, reeling in catches on third-and-17 and third-and-6 to help the Broncos put away the Chargers.

"Those were huge," wide receiver Wes Welker said. "Huge."

That would hardly be an overstatement, especially when describing the first of Thomas' catches, when he reeled in an arching spiral from Manning with the Broncos pinned in a third-and-17 situation at their own 20-yard line.

"Third-and-17, the best way to convert those is don't get in them," Manning said.

But with the game on the line on Sunday, the Broncos found a way. Manning stepped up in the pocket with the Chargers' pass rush swirling around him and lofted a ball to the sideline, where Thomas twisted and hauled in the pass – dragging his feet just inches in bounds to preserve the 21-yard reception and allow the Broncos to move the chains.

"Ah, man – third-and-17 is a tough position to put yourself in as a team, but I came off the ball and had a good look," Thomas said. "Peyton threw a great pass and I was able to get both feet in on the sideline and really give us an opportunity to end the game with the offense on the field."

"It was the perfect call against the perfect coverage, which you may get one or two of those a game," Manning said. "It certainly came at a good time. (Offensive

Coordinator) Adam (Gase) dialed it up, it was something we worked on and it was nice we were able to execute.”

Three plays later, and the Broncos again found themselves in a similar situation – this time, third-and-6.

Once again, it was 18 to 80, as Manning found Thomas over the middle for a 9-yard conversion that forced the Chargers to use their final timeout with 2:02 remaining.

From there, the Broncos took things into their own control, picking up one final first down to put the game away without ever conceding a final opportunity to the Chargers offense – something that Thomas pointed out was critical to preserving a win in the game’s closing moments.

“We didn’t want to have to punt the ball back and give them an opportunity,” Thomas said. “We knew that we needed to go out there and take care of what we needed to do so that we could end the game in a victory formation. There is no better feeling for an offense or for a team to go out there and kneel to win the game.”

For Thomas, it also provided decisive closure for a day that also had been at times forgettable.

Though he caught six passes for 76 yards, Thomas also had a key drop earlier in the game and lost a fumble in Chargers’ territory in the second quarter that ended a potential scoring drive.

It was the way that he responded in the face of adversity, however, that caught his teammates’ attention.

“Those kinds of things happen throughout the game,” running back Knowshon Moreno said. “You can’t be perfect all the time and Julius is the kind of guy that forgets those kinds of things – moves on after that play whatever the play is and just focuses on the next play. He did a good job of just erasing that out of his mind and going out there and playing football.”

And when it mattered most, Thomas rose to the occasion.

“It wasn’t a perfect game by anybody on our team, and I’m just really proud of him, the way -- you know, we talked all week about who plays the hardest, the longest,” tight end Jacob Tamme said. “When we had to make plays at the end, Julius was in there, and he did a heck of a job making them.”

“Bottom line, he bounced back,” defensive end Shaun Phillips added.

And, in bouncing back, he helped ensure that his team plays on for at least one more week – this time, with an AFC championship and a trip to Super Bowl on the line.

“Julius was huge all game,” Manning said. “He’s been huge all season.”

“Julius and I have spent a lot of time working on those particular routes – after practice, in-practice,” he added. “To me, that is one of the most rewarding parts of football. When you put that work in off to the side or after practice and it pays off in a game, it really makes it feel like it was worth it. Those two plays specifically were certainly worth the hard work.”

Inactives: Broncos vs. Chargers

By Brandon Moree
DenverBroncos.com
January 12, 2014

DENVER -- The following players will not participate in Sunday's game.

Broncos:

QB Zac Dysert

RB Ronnie Hillman

CB Tony Carter

G Chris Kuper

TE Joel Dreessen

DE Derek Wolfe

DT Sione Fua

Chargers:

G-T Jeromey Clary

DE Sean Lissemore

QB Brad Sorensen

WR-KR Lavelle Hawkins

SS Brandon Taylor

CB Marcus Cromartie

T Kenny Wiggins