

# Broncos' defense knows Patriots plan to run the ball Sunday

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
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Defense aware pats prefer to rev run game

Just because Patriots coach Bill Belichick is a football genius doesn't mean there should be much mystery as to the strategy he will devise against the Broncos in the AFC championship game Sunday.

The Patriots figure to start with the intent of ramming the ball down the big-belly section of Denver's defense. And the Broncos know it.

"The onus is on me, personally, and up front we've got to make it happen," said Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton. "We can't put eight guys in the box, nine guys in the box, because we'll get beat over the top. So it's going to come down to the front guys."

Why wouldn't the Patriots run the ball? In the past two games, tailback LeGarrette Blount has rushed for 166 and 189 yards while the Patriots as a team have rushed for 234 and 267 yards.

"That's definitely some of the tape that's fresh in our minds," said Jack Del Rio, the Broncos' defensive coordinator. "They have made a concerted effort to be the more physical team and have done so. And so we understand that we can't allow that to happen."

The Patriots' throwback emphasis on the run game seems to have come out after the season-ending knee injury of star tight end Rob Gronkowski and the nagging foot injury of outside receiver Aaron Dobson. Added incentive for the Patriots' ground game: All of the records set this season by Broncos QB Peyton Manning.

Capt. Rod. As the Broncos' honorary captain Sunday, Rod Smith's primary role will be to provide moral support for the team's playing captains during the pregame coin toss.

It's what the Broncos do after the coin flip where Smith has noticed a changing trend.

"We wanted the football," said Smith, the Broncos' all-time leading receiver in catches, yards and touchdowns. "Now with the kickoffs moved up, they get a lot of

touchbacks, so everybody is pretty much going to start at the 20. (Deferring) is a strategy you probably see in 80 percent of the league now. If you look at when we played, it was always probably 90 to 95 percent that everybody wanted the ball."

The Broncos have deferred, or gladly accepted waiting until the second half to get the ball first, in 14 of their 17 games this season.

Demaryius gimpy. Broncos No. 1 receiver Demaryius Thomas showed up on the injury report Friday with a calf problem. He will play Sunday, but it's the first time his calf in- jury made the report.

# Tom Brady's response to Denver's legalized pot will make you giggle

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
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Tom Brady.

In more ways than one, Patriots quarterback Tom Brady is a smooth customer.

At his second AFC championship game press conference, here's how Brady handled the tricky question about marijuana.

Question: This is the first time you'll be visiting an NFL city where recreational marijuana use is legal.

Brady: Are you excited about that?

I laughed reading that. And I'm only buzzed on coffee. Brady had one more wisecrack in him.

Question: Has anyone advised the young players against it?

Brady: We haven't talked about that. Maybe you guys (can) tell me what that's all about.

Beau-ti-ful! Finally, Brady turned serious.

Question: I was just wondering if it would be a temptation.

Brady: Hopefully not. This is a very important game for us and it's a business trip.

# Peyton Manning-Tom Brady: QBs' images pit everyman vs. glamour boy

By Patrick Saunders  
The Denver Post  
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Peyton Manning vs. Tom Brady.

We're not just talking about substance here, we're also talking about style and image.

By the numbers, the Manning vs. Brady argument is pretty easy to quantify. In 2013, Manning had statistically the greatest season by a quarterback in NFL history with 5,477 passing yards and 55 touchdown passes. Manning's supporters point to his four MVP awards (vs. Brady's two), his 491 career touchdown passes (vs. Brady's 359) and his 64,964 passing yards (vs. Brady's 49,149).

Brady's bunch points to his three Super Bowl wins (vs. Manning's one), his 18-7 postseason record (vs. Manning's 10-11), his 10-4 record against Manning and the fact he's never had a losing season.

Image is a tougher nut to crack.

One would think that Brady's chiseled face and Hollywood jaw would make him the coveted QB of the fairer sex. But my wife, Nancy, says that's simply not the case. Then again, she thinks Lyle Lovett is hot and she married me, so ...

Anyway, I asked Nancy, a true football fan, why she preferred Manning to Brady. She enthusiastically rattled off her list of reasons.

"Peyton shows so much heart, drive and passion," she exclaimed. "Brady is so much glitz, so much 'Gi-Zell!' "

She was referring, of course, to Brady's supermodel wife Gisele Bundchen.

Nancy wasn't finished.

"On the field, Peyton is so fiery, so intense," she said. "But off the field he has that great self-deprecation sense of humor. He lets his personality show through. He comes across like the working-class man. I know he's really not, he's the son of Archie Manning and he makes millions, but that's how he comes across."

Brady? Boston Back Bay all the way.

"Brady has no personality off the field," my wife said. "He's just this celebrity." (She pronounced it see-leb-ra-tay.)

How Nancy knows all this, I'm not sure. But I think she's on to something when it comes to the quarterbacks' public persona.

As a recent Time magazine article notes, the way Brady and Manning are portrayed in commercials and endorsements — and their associations with brands and products — are radically different.

Manning pitches pizza for Papa John's and sells middle-America brands such as Buick, DirecTV, Oreos and MasterCard.

Brady's brands are glitzy and trendy — Movado watches, Glaceau Smartwater and Ugg boots.

In a recent Boston Herald story about the differences of the two quarterbacks' endorsement deals, Steve Connelly of the Boston ad agency Connelly Partners explained that the two have very carefully crafted their images and chosen their endorsement partners.

"Manning uses marketing to enhance his likability, whereas Brady does not," Connelly explained. "The Tom Brady brand is more aspirational and very influenced, I think, by his wife."

Another marketing expert described Manning's image very much the way Nancy did.

"Manning is a bit closer to everyman; Brady is a little bit outside Everyman because of his looks and because of his relationship with his wife," said Chris Colbert, chairman of Holland-Mark, a Boston advertising and marketing firm.

When it comes to selling the image, Manning is beating Brady. Last year, Manning had the most endorsements of any football player — worth \$12 million to Brady's \$7 million — according to Forbes' list of the world's highest-paid athletes. Both made the top 20.

As for Nancy, a Minnesota native, she'll be watching Sunday's game wearing her orange No. 18 jersey and cheering on Manning. And no, she's never, ever wanted a pair of Uggs.

# Tony Carter ready to shine for the Broncos

By Patrick Saunders  
The Denver Post  
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Tony Carter, a 5-foot-9, 175-pound cornerback, was engulfed by the media in the Broncos' locker room this week. He seemed a little shocked, but he handled the attention usually reserved for a star player as best he could.

How he plays against quarterback Tom Brady and the New England Patriots' passing attack in the AFC championship game Sunday is a bigger, more important matter.

After spending much of the season on the bench because of a series of early season mistakes, Carter has been thrust into the spotlight because starting cornerback Chris Harris went down with a knee injury in Denver's divisional playoff victory over San Diego last Sunday.

Carter said he's ready.

"My confidence is always high, no matter if I'm playing or not playing," he said. "We'll be ready. It's a big game, so there's no time for thinking about what did and didn't happen."

Head coach John Fox and defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio aren't about to reveal how they will replace Harris, arguably Denver's best cover corner this season. The Broncos will likely try several looks, but Carter could be in the spotlight.

"We need everybody that's going to be up, corners, safeties that are involved and that get a uniform," Del Rio said. "We need him to help us win, help us play well. I wouldn't isolate on any one guy. I think we've got a number of guys that will be up and used in different combinations and the guys that play need to play well."

When the Broncos line up in their base defense, Brady will likely see veteran Champ Bailey lining up opposite Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie. But when the Broncos find themselves in the nickel package, with five defensive backs, Bailey will likely be asked to shift inside to cover the slot receiver and Carter will line up as the other outside corner.

Carter's promotion would come at the expense of Quentin Jammer, who struggled against San Diego after Harris was injured. Jammer was beaten twice on the

opening drive of the fourth quarter, including a 16-yard touchdown pass to Kennan Allen that cut Denver's lead to 24-14.

But Carter has had his share of high-profile miscues. He was essentially benched after Denver's 51-48 victory over the Dallas Cowboys on Oct. 6 when Tony Romo torched the Broncos for 506 yards passing. When the Broncos lost 34-31 in overtime to the Patriots on Nov. 24, wide receiver Wes Welker tried to wave his teammates off a Patriots punt. Welker's call came late and the punt bounced off Carter, allowing the Patriots to recover the ball and kick the game-winning field goal.

And not to be forgotten is Carter's role in last year's playoff loss to the Ravens. Everyone remembers the sight of the flailing Rahim Moore allowing Jacoby Jones get behind him for a miracle 70-yard touchdown pass that tied the Ravens-Broncos playoff game late in regulation. But it was Carter who was supposed to jam Jones near the line of scrimmage, then cover him down the sideline. Neither happened.

Now Carter gets a shot at redemption — against Brady, one of the all-time greats.

"That's why you are a professional football player. You always have to be ready to play and do your job at the best of your ability," Carter said. "He's one of the best quarterbacks to play this game, so you've just got to be prepared 100 percent. He doesn't make many mistakes. As a defense, we're going to have to come out and execute and just be on top of our game, because he doesn't make many mistakes."

# Healthy Broncos, slight favorites, hold final practice before Patriots

By Patrick Saunders  
The Denver Post  
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The Broncos took the field late Friday morning for their final full practice before Sunday's AFC championship game against the New England Patriots.

The Broncos, who are 4 ½-point favorites, don't have any players listed on their injury report.

The Patriots, who had an early practice Friday, are scheduled to fly out to Denver on Friday afternoon.

During a media session before the Patriots left New England, quarterback Tom Brady was asked if he was excited to visit Denver, the first NFL city where recreational marijuana use is legal.

Brady quipped back: "Are you excited about that?"

He also said he's unconcerned with teammates falling to pot's temptation while in the Mile High City.

"Hopefully not," Brady said. "This is a very important game for us and it's a business trip."

Patriots coach Bill Belichick had little time for the matter.

When asked if there had been any specific advice to the Patriots players to avoid the now-legal recreational marijuana in Denver, Belichick said, "I think we know what the NFL policy is on that."

For the record, marijuana is still considered a banned substance by the NFL, regardless of the city the players are in.

# Tight end Julius Thomas catching attention with Denver Broncos

By Irv Moss  
The Denver Post  
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Julius Thomas is on the fast track.

It's too early in his NFL career with the Broncos to say where the track will lead, but the possibilities are wide open as he continues his development into one of the league's best pass-catching tight ends.

The next stop is Sunday's AFC championship game against New England. Thomas had a huge role in getting the Broncos this far in the playoffs. With Denver nursing a seven-point lead against San Diego last Sunday and trying to run the last 3:53 off the clock, quarterback Peyton Manning and Thomas teamed up on a clutch pass play that has become the talk of the postseason. It was third-and-17, the Broncos were deep in their territory, and San Diego was on the verge of a historic comeback.

"Sometimes you just see the ball floating in the air and you're like, 'I'm out here all by myself.' A lot of things go through your head," Thomas said. "You're trying to get leverage on a defender or get a guy off you. You focus on your technique, getting two hands on the ball and trying to make sure you get both feet down in bounds."

Three plays later, Thomas caught a third-and-7 pass for a game-clinching first down that allowed the Broncos to run out the clock.

"Sometimes I have to remind myself that he hasn't played a ton of football," Manning said of Thomas. "You can tell that (offensive coordinator) Adam Gase believes in him. You certainly know that I believe in him. He has answered the bell each week. He's going to be an outstanding player in this league for a long, long time."

Thomas, a third-year pro, said members of the Broncos' passing game believe in each other.

"I think he just takes what the defense gives him," Thomas said of Manning. "It's extremely tough for a team to have every single person on offense covered. He's going to look for the guy that's open and he's going to read the defense, and that's what allows him to distribute the ball so well."

Wide receiver Eric Decker said members of the Broncos' offense complement each other.

"Across the board there are so many weapons, whether it's receivers, running backs or tight ends," Decker said. "Everyone has a different skill set and they do it well. When defenses try to take away a couple of us, the other guys step up, and that's what is so great about this team. For us, it's being in the right position because 18 (Manning) is going to get us the ball."

Denver's record-setting offense dished out at least 65 catches this season to Decker, Demaryius Thomas, Wes Welker and Julius Thomas, and all four had at least 10 touchdown receptions.

"I think he has grown week to week throughout the season," Broncos coach John Fox said of Julius Thomas. "He wasn't exactly a household name to start the season, and he has worked very hard to earn the trust of his teammates. There has been some classic tight ends in this league. It's kind of a unique position because you have to block and be a receiver. That's a unique physical body to find, with that athleticism. I think they're hard to find."

Thomas has been found. He's all football now, but he remembers when he was a 6-foot-5, 215-pound basketball player at Portland State who decided to give football a try.

"I could jump off the ground and hang in the air for a while," he said. "I'm definitely a football player that gets to play basketball every blue moon in the offseason."

# Marquice Cole impresses Broncos' John Fox during short practice week

By Irv Moss  
The Denver Post  
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Broncos coach John Fox had more to say Friday about the weather forecast for Sunday's AFC championship game against the New England Patriots than he had to say about his injury report issued 48 hours before the game.

Aside from the assorted bruises and pains mentioned almost weekly, every player was listed as probable for consideration to play against the Patriots. As usual Fox didn't go into which players might be on the inactive list for Sunday's game.

Defensive back Rahim Moore remains on the injured reserve/designated for return list with a leg injury and probably won't be available against the Patriots.

Only receiver Demaryius Thomas was listed as limited in practice with a calf injury, but he is probable for the game.

Fox said that newly acquired defensive back Marquice Cole has had an excellent showing in practice after the Broncos signed him as a free agent on Tuesday. The Broncos secondary was hit hard by the knee injury to Chris Harris in last week's game against the San Diego Chargers.

"He (Cole) has picked up our system fast and has had an excellent week," Fox said of Cole.

Fox senses that the Broncos are treating Sunday's game as "any other game. It happens to be a home game."

The forecast for Sunday is calling for temperatures in the 50s with clear skies.

"I've learned in my three years in Denver, it can change quickly," Fox said. "We'll see what the weather is when we get there."

# Hochman: It's Wes Welker's super chance to shine for Broncos

By Benjamin Hochman  
The Denver Post  
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This is his everything.

He won't tell you much about it. Wes Welker seems to get cruel kicks from answering questions. His quotes are so brutally banal, they should play his interviews to captured terrorists. ("Tell us the truth — or we'll make you listen to Welker!")

But for this Broncos slot receiver, this one game is his everything.

His chance to beat Bill Belichick and the New England Patriots — who didn't make a strong push to re-sign him — and do so in the AFC championship game.

His chance to stick it to those New England fans who think he's replaceable.

His chance to redeem himself after an awful game at New England this season, in which he was a nonfactor ... until his punt-return blunder that led to the Patriots' win.

His chance to go to another Super Bowl.

And his chance to win his first.

After snoozing through a dozen questions at a news conference this week, Welker finally, inexplicably opened up upon being asked if he talks to young players about the difficulty of reaching the Super Bowl.

"I try to tell them about when I went in 2007 — we were undefeated and we lost," Welker said. "And I was thinking we'll be back next year, and we'll be back the next year and the next year and we are going to win one. You don't realize how hard it is to get there. You've got to appreciate it and seize that moment — and you have to take advantage of it."

These moments slip through hands like a Tom Brady pass, and Welker can vouch for this simple simile both figuratively and literally. He botched a catchable throw late in his second Super Bowl, and later Brady's wife, a woman by the name of Gisele Bundchen, was caught on camera muttering: "My husband cannot throw the (bleeping) ball and catch the ball at the same time."

Welker can make one wary. He's back, but is he back? He returned last Sunday from his hiatus following two concussions in 22 days. He wore an oversized padded helmet that made him look like a Lego. He scored a touchdown, but he also dropped two passes and a third thrown his way was nearly intercepted when the timing seemed off between Welker and his quarterback, Peyton Manning.

But he's fortunate he already got to play a game post- concussion.

And he's fortunate he already got to play these guys. Got it out of his system. There won't be any of that first-time-seeing-such-and-such to cloud the day. But there's no question he'll be smothered by pressure. And his postseason past looms.

Besides @DenverPost and @KateUpton, I believe my favorite follow on Twitter is @ESPNStatsInfo. My kind of nerds. Here were two Welker-y stats they pointed out:

- Since making his first playoff appearance with Patriots in 2007, Wes Welker has nearly twice as many postseason drops as any other player.
- Since 2006, Wes Welker has dropped 4.2 percent of regular-season targets and 11.1 percent of playoff targets.

Right away, these make me think of two buzz words that are staples in sabermetric and statistical debates: sample size and clutch. As for sample size, yes, the playoffs are the playoffs, the most intense competition we've got, but they're really just a handful of games so how much credence do those stats have? And, as for clutch, many forward-thinking sports researchers say that clutch doesn't exist, and that over the course of time — thus, a larger sample size — averages will even out. Many fans don't buy it.

They don't have time for a large sample size. Their sample size is Sunday. They expect Wes Welker to make big catches, win the game and then say brutally banal quotes about going to the Super Bowl.

I, for one, see Welker making a bigger impact in this game than in the previous Broncos-Patriots game, if only because this is his everything.

# Broncos receiver Eric Decker comforts Arapahoe High students

By Benjamin Hochman  
The Denver Post  
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Eric Decker has lived it, hidden in a dark library closet, quarantined by fear. The Broncos wide receiver has felt it, that feeling to which the students at Arapahoe High School can now relate. Sadly, they are not the only students who can relate.

"We didn't know what to think," said Decker, who hid for 45 minutes after the 2003 shooting of two students at his Minnesota high school. "Every girl was crying, every guy was trying to stay calm, and when they came and got us, we had to go across the street to the elementary school with our hands up. You see snipers on the top of the buildings, it's just surreal. That moment, you'll never forget.

"It changes your life in a second."

In the days after the Dec. 13 shooting at Arapahoe High, Decker recorded a video message to the school's students.

It was shown at an assembly, in the cafeteria and on the school's website. He spoke of unity, of grieving, of perseverance. Decker is a Bronco, but to many, he's now an Arapahoe Warrior.

"I just felt a connection," said sophomore Mitchell Pennetta, who, as Decker does for the Broncos, wears No. 87 for the Arapahoe football team. "It's been kind of hard to go through this — you never think it's going to happen to your school, but then it does. And to know that somebody else, especially someone as famous as Eric Decker, has gone through something similar, it felt comforting."

Feeling connected

Happiness comes cautiously these days at Arapahoe. But when the principal announced at an assembly that she had a video message from Decker, "Of course, all the girls are freaking out (because of his looks)," senior Grace Marlowe said, "and all the guys are freaking out for different reasons.

"It was nice because a lot of people are trying to relate to us — and it's really hard, and I get that — but to have someone really get it, to have made it though something (similar) and to offer words of encouragement and advice? It was very welcomed and very needed at that time. It was also kind of like another note of

optimism for all of us — he's doing great, so we'll be OK. We'll move on from it, and it's not going to be what people remember about us."

On Dec. 13, Decker was driving home from Broncos headquarters, listening to the news on the radio — a student had shot another student at Arapahoe.

"It brings back flashbacks," he said. "The library. Running out of the cafeteria. The gymnasium. You start praying for people."

Decker recalls the voice of his friend, as the two fled the cafeteria to the library, ran past the gymnasium and spotted the chaos: "That's my brother!"

On Sept. 24, 2003, a student shot and killed two other students at Rocori High School in small-town Cold Spring, Minn.

Decker was connected to both victims — one was a former teammate on the baseball team, the other the brother of his close friend, Jesse Bartell.

Decker was eating lunch with Bartell in the cafeteria when there was a sudden announcement. Code red. The two started sprinting, and that's when Bartell saw his younger brother, Seth, sprawled on the gym floor. The gunman, a disgruntled student, had also shot classmate Aaron Rollins.

Decker and 11 other classmates hid in the library closet. Meanwhile, gym teacher Mark Johnson had heard a loud sound, which he at first thought was a light fixture falling to the floor. If only it had been. Johnson came into the gym and saw bloodshed at the hands of a boy. Freshman John Jason McLaughlin stood there, armed, "and I started walking toward him," Johnson said. "He raised the gun at me and I stopped, took out my right hand and I just said, 'No!' I'll be darned, he discharged the remaining shells on the gym floor and dropped the gun."

Why did Johnson walk toward the gunman when so many people would run away?

"It's just one of those things I just reacted to," he said. "It happened so quickly. I don't know why I started walking toward him, but I did. And once he raised the gun at me, that's when I stopped. So I don't think I became a threat to him; that's the only thing I can think of. But he could have (shot me); he had seven more shots in the gun at the time. I grabbed the gun right away, and then I grabbed him."

Soon after, Johnson tried to revive Decker's friend Rollins.

"I can't get his eyes out of my mind," Johnson said. "We were doing CPR on him. But that didn't work. He was already ..."

For 1 minute and 55 seconds, the Arapahoe students were transfixed on Decker's words.

Welcome distraction"

You never imagine being in that situation," the Broncos star said in the video. "But through tough times like this, you've got to stick together — be it a shoulder to cry on, an ear to listen or a person to be able to hug if there's ever a grieving moment. And understand that everyone grieves at different paces."

At Arapahoe, the Broncos matter. Denver is Broncos Country, sure, and the city is clamoring for the kickoff to Sunday's AFC championship game against the New England Patriots, with a berth in Super Bowl XLVIII going to the winner. But for the members of the Arapahoe family, as the student Pennetta explained, "It's just a big deal to sit and watch our home team do well. It helps take your mind off all the events, all the news, all that kind of stuff."

For many, No. 18 is their favorite player. But at Arapahoe, No. 87 is their warrior.

# Ex-Bronco Rod Smith gushes about Denver's jaw-dropping offense

By Benjamin Hochman  
The Denver Post  
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Rod Smith, who spoke with the media Friday, is the Broncos' honorary captain in the AFC championship game, which prompted Post writer Mike Klis to deadpan: "So Rod, you thinkin' heads? Tails?"

Later in the news conference, Smith was asked about the 1998 Super Bowl Broncos, who scored 501 points.

"We thought we were pretty good," Smith said, which prompted the next part of the reporter's question: did he ever think he'd see a team score 600 points, as Denver did this season with 606?

"Oh man, that's ridiculous — it's almost like no one is playing defense, but they are," Smith said. "It just happens so fast with the way that offense is played. Now honestly, I have to give it up to Peyton Manning. He keeps those guys in a play where there are some positive yards. Most people don't realize that in the NFL, 3.5 yards is all you need — 3.5 yards a play and you pretty much score every time. It's not those big bombs. It's the 3.5 yards. When the defense has a good call, Peyton gets them in a play to get them 3.5 yards, so it's second-and-7 a lot. Rarely is it first-, second-and-10. That is huge. When you've got a mind and an athlete like that, it's hard to stop him from scoring 600 points."

# Eric Decker: From ballroom dancing in high school to the Denver Broncos

By Benjamin Hochman  
The Denver Post  
January 17, 2014

I can totally see this happening: Eric Decker, Super Bowl receiver, and his wife Jessie James both on "Dancing With The Stars."

Not just because this would be the ultimate "them" thing to do, but also because of this tidbit I procured from Decker's high school teacher, Mark Johnson.

"Something a lot of people don't know is that I started a ballroom dance class at the high school, and Eric was in my very first ballroom dance class," said Johnson, who taught at Rocori High School in Cold Spring, Minn. "So you get some of the athletes in there, and man, I tell you, everybody came out (to join the class). The class is still going on today. He was good – he was physical, he would flip the girls. We did a little swinging, we did the waltz, a little tango, a little rumba. So he's a well-rounded individual, you can put it that way."

(I mentioned this tidbit on Twitter, and the fans quickly pondered: how could someone trained to have such graceful footwork trip twice in games against San Diego, ruining sure touchdowns?)

Johnson gushed about his former student's work ethic. For all the glamour of Decker's life, seen on their reality show on E!, he's really a hard-working small-town guy. Orange-and-blue-collar.

"Being in a smaller community, you see the kids in activities, and even in elementary, you knew that he had something special," Johnson said. "I mean, my God. He was just so talented that you knew things would look pretty good for him later in the future. But I don't think people really understood how hard he worked. He worked extremely hard to get to the level that he's playing. He had great ability, but man, he put in the time. And it's paying off for him."

Johnson remembered one anecdote that summed up Decker's persona — all-star, yet grounded.

"He played in the all-star football game here in Minnesota, and when there was a stoppage of play, he'd run out there with water for his players," Johnson said. "Just a good leader, and an all-around good kid. I'm really proud of him — the whole

community is proud of him. It's fun to watch him. Hopefully the Broncos can get past Tom Brady."

I thanked Johnson on the phone for his time, and he said before hanging up: "Hey, give him a little grief about that dance class."

Done.

# Denver police on alert for violence after Broncos-Patriots game

By Sadie Gurman  
The Denver Post  
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Sunday's AFC Championship game is also game time for Denver police, who will be out in force to keep post-playoff revelry in check.

The department has no way of knowing whether a Broncos win or loss against the New England Patriots will impact officers' workload when it comes to violent crime, but some are hoping for a victory not just because they're fans.

Researchers who studied NFL games, including those involving the Broncos and Patriots, found that when the home team loses in an upset, police see a sudden and brief uptick in domestic violence. The more pivotal the game and the more heated the rivalry, the sharper the spike.

Victims' advocates say the outcome of a football game is no reason or excuse for domestic abuse, but Denver police are aware of the possibility of more family violence — and crime in general — as a result of the game.

With the Broncos favored to beat the Patriots, police say they want to be prepared for anything.

"It's definitely something we're concerned about, and we pay attention to it," said Cmdr. Paul Pazen, whose District 1 station encompasses Sports Authority Field at Mile High. Without revealing specifics, he said extra officers will be on hand inside and outside the stadium to deal with the influx of problems that naturally arise when more than 76,000 fans pack the stands — and thousands more party in bars and parking lots nearby.

Officers who patrol the rest of the district will get a roll-call reminder of the possibility of more domestic disputes and how to calm them.

Police were particularly concerned after the San Diego Chargers beat the Broncos at home in December but didn't see a rise in domestic incidents, Pazen said. Still, three people were stabbed in a parking lot outside the stadium that night, an attack sparked by a minor fender-bender. A man was killed outside Arrowhead Stadium after the Broncos beat the Chiefs in Kansas City two weeks before.

David Card and Gordon Dahl, researchers who studied football and police reports from 1995 to 2006, looked specifically at the games' impacts on domestic violence.

"The main thing we found was Sundays with football games are typically pretty bad for domestic violence," said Card, an economics professor at the University of California, Berkeley. "Part of the reason is that people are home, drinking."

They considered Las Vegas odds, which predict which team will win and by how much. Upset losses, the most painful kind, led to an 8 percent increase in police reports of domestic violence against women in the home, the study found.

The incidents happened in the hours immediately following the game and occurred across various levels of socioeconomic status and other external factors, suggesting, Card said, that "it's a completely emotional stimulus. It's not like they're poor, it's not like something bad happened to them. It's that a stupid football game turned bad."

The domestic violence incidents were more likely among families with "risk-factors," such as a husband with a violent temper, simmering tensions over something totally unrelated to sports or prior fights, Card said. Alcohol was often a factor.

"In the background are these other factors," he said. "Events like a football game that, say, that one of the partners is really paying attention to really set the stage for a small incident to become a major issue."

But Victoria McVicker, chief executive officer of SafeHouse Denver, which serves domestic violence victims and their children, said the argument that a sporting event could prompt abuse is wrong and lets batterers off the hook. She said she has seen no evidence of the problem.

"By saying those things, it just perpetuates this whole myth that if it wasn't for that, they wouldn't be abusers," McVicker said. "It's excusing the behavior. It's almost like a hall pass, when the games are going on. It's not about, 'oh, I just lost control,' or 'oh, I have anger management issues.' It's about power and control. These guys don't need any more excuses."

And a victory won't ensure peace. Hundreds of raucous fans ignited bonfires, smashed store windows and overturned cars downtown after the Broncos beat the Green Bay Packers in the 1998 Super Bowl, drawing tear gas from police. A man was shot to death in a Colfax Avenue parking lot, though police at the time couldn't say whether the killing was related to the celebration.

Similar havoc happened after the Broncos' second Super Bowl victory the next year against the Atlanta Falcons, when downtown revelers looted stores, set fires, and ripped down traffic signs and used them as battering rams to break windows, among other bedlam. Officials estimated \$180,000 worth of property damage.

"The big game can be a trigger for unexpected events, including riots, property destruction and harassment," said Robert D. McCrie, professor of security management at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. "At such a time, particularly in the home territory, the police should cancel leaves that might be on the docket and have a strong force, but also talk about the psychology of successfully dealing with interpersonal disputes, including domestic issues."

Crime analysts study the incidents that arise after games for patterns, so that police officials know where to put manpower in the future, Pazen said. Though their studies haven't linked game outcomes to violence, they do show that crime is more prevalent at night games.

So, as a crime-fighter, would Pazen rather see a win or a loss?

"As a born-and-raised Denver resident, I am always hoping for victory," he said. "Would it be easier on the police department if we didn't have to plan for the AFC championship game? Yes. But it's great for the city."

# Denver Broncos playoff ticket trade offers run the gamut

By Ryan Parker  
The Denver Post  
January 17, 2014

Denver Broncos fans still hoping to score tickets to Sunday's AFC Championship game are offering more than just money.

There are numerous offers on Craigslist — from people who have tickets or who want them — suggesting all sorts of trades.

Some of the more interesting offers are: Hunting and fishing supplies, shatter & wax, hard labor — as in “build me something,” Xbox One, a keyboard, amps, an airline buddy pass and use of a Vail condo.

Denver police and the Broncos stress that fans who buy tickets on the secondary market be cautious as counterfeits are commonplace for title games.

# Peyton Manning's "Omaha" referenced in Greater Omaha Chamber video

By Joe Nguyen  
The Denver Post  
January 17, 2014

Peyton Manning's pre-snap signal calls, particularly "Omaha," have attracted national notice and spurred local business.

Now the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce is joining the fun.

The chamber released a video on YouTube Friday referencing Manning's now famous pre-snap call and offering some love to their neighbors to the west.

A message at the end of the video reads: "Best of luck, Denver. XOXO Your neighbor, Omaha."

Check out the video below.

# Patriots, Broncos overcame plenty of obstacles

By Arnie Stapleton  
The Associated Press  
January 17, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — Embarrassing headlines. Sidelined superstars. Retooled offenses. Shredded defenses. It's a wonder the New England Patriots and Denver Broncos made it this far.

Bill Belichick's smarts and Tom Brady's tenacity always seems to trump tribulation.

This season, they brushed aside the Tim Tebow distraction and overcame Aaron Hernandez's arrest and the losses of Rob Gronkowski, Wes Welker, Vince Wilfork and Jerod Mayo to put the Patriots (13-4) into the AFC championship for the third straight year.

"I'm sure every team is probably at this point overcome a lot," Brady said. "I know Denver has done a lot of those things, too. They've overcome a lot of things and injuries and so forth. It's just part of the NFL football season.

"To get out there and play 16 weeks and really see where you stand at the end of those 16 weeks, getting to the playoffs, play the best teams and see if you can advance. It's certainly not easy to do. It's very challenging."

Nobody does it better than Brady and Belichick, the best quarterback/coach combo in history with a record 18 playoff wins.

After last year's stumble against Baltimore in the playoffs, John Fox and Peyton Manning also steered the Broncos (14-3) through a minefield to send Denver to its first conference championship in eight years.

"That shock of what happened against the Ravens contributed to this team being able to be as flexible as it has been and survive the adversity that it's gone through," said Hall of Fame quarterback John Elway, who led the Broncos to back-to-back Super Bowls in the late 1990s and now leads them from the front office instead of the huddle.

After losing Elvis Dumervil in the infamous fax fiasco when his renegotiated contract didn't reach team headquarters in time, Elway hit the jackpot in free agency by signing Welker and Louis Vasquez on offense and Shaun Phillips, Terrance Knighton and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie on defense.

They helped the Broncos weather an injury epidemic that claimed Von Miller, Kevin Vickerson, Rahim Moore, Derek Wolfe and Chris Harris while rendering captains Champ Bailey and Wesley Woodyard backups for most of the season.

Fox overcame his own heart operation that sidelined him for a month and even a player quitting on him at midseason, and Manning set a slew of records, including throwing for 55 TDs and 5,447 yards, to help the Broncos become the first 600-point team in league history.

The Broncos did it despite losing exceptional blindside protector Ryan Clady in Week 2 and being anchored by a converted guard who hadn't played a full season at center in 14 years.

So, Manning sits just one win shy of returning to the Super Bowl just two years after he was jettisoned by the Indianapolis Colts following four neck surgeries that strengthened his resolve but weakened his throwing arm.

"You don't take it for granted," Manning said, "especially when you've been through an injury, been through a major change and you're in the home stretch of your career."

Both the Patriots and Broncos have quarterbacks known as grinders, who elevate the play of those around them because of their meticulous preparation.

The head coaches have very different reputations.

Belichick is known as a mostly dour mad genius — even Manning called him "the best coach that I've ever competed against," and Brady has high praise for the tone he sets.

"We're challenged here on a daily basis by Coach Belichick to show up, do the right thing, always put the team first and I think that's what this team has always been about," Brady said.

Fox is the ultimate player's coach whose bounce-off-the-walls energy and enthusiasm were very much needed after Josh McDaniels' troubled tenure — and Elway suggested those qualities only increased after he had his aortic valve repaired in November.

"He's got more energy than anybody I've ever seen," Elway said. "That, to me, is the definition of John Fox: the energy level that he brings. He brings it to the practice field, and it's contagious. I think that's why he was a perfect fit for us."

Rod Smith, who helped the Broncos win back-to-back titles in the late 1990s and will serve as their honorary captain Sunday, said he's not surprised these are the

two AFC teams left standing, battered though they may be, rendering this game in many ways a skirmish among subs.

"Honestly, you have two of the best organizations in football," Smith said. "You have to give it up to Mr. (Robert) Kraft and you have to give it up to Mr. (Pat) Bowlen."

The Patriots lose players left and right, but with Belichick they're always playing for trophies.

Elway has the Broncos doing the same thing again.

"Everybody thought it was a huge, horrible, financial disaster gamble with Peyton Manning," Smith said. "And he's got those 92 touchdowns in two years. ... So, the organization has done a masterful job."

# Del Rio has Broncos primed for Patriots

By Pat Graham

The Associated Press

January 18, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — Jeremy Mincey has no bitter feelings toward Jacksonville for dumping him late in the season, only big thanks.

After being jettisoned from the Jaguars for chronic tardiness, the defensive end wound up with the Denver Broncos.

He's making the most of his fresh, baggage-free start, playing a big role in getting his new team to the AFC championship game against the New England Patriots (13-4) on Sunday.

Mincey isn't the only former Jaguar turning things around in the Mile High City. There's also defensive lineman Terrance "Pot Roast" Knighton, who signed with Denver as a free agent, and, of course, defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio, fired after nearly nine seasons as head coach in Jacksonville.

Their task is now simple: Stop Tom Brady to earn a spot in the Super Bowl.

Well, maybe not so simple.

"We're doing all we can to get ourselves prepared to go out and play our best," said Del Rio, whose 0-7 coaching record against the Patriots includes this year's loss when he was serving as interim for John Fox, and playoff losses in 2005 and '07 with the Jaguars. "That's really all that you can do."

Del Rio's no-nonsense approach was one reason Knighton wanted to reunite with him in Denver and why Mincey landed here after his release.

"The same fire he had as a player is the same fire he has as a coach," Knighton said. "When teams score on us, he takes it personally. When people talk bad about our defense, he takes it personally."

Del Rio was a rock for the Broncos (14-3) earlier in the season when Fox was sidelined after undergoing open-heart surgery.

The team went 3-1 with Del Rio patrolling the sideline. About that time, rumors swirled about Del Rio being in the running for the head coaching job at Southern California, his alma mater.

Didn't sidetrack Denver. Didn't deter Del Rio, either.

"He's just a cool and mellow fellow," said Mincey, who played four seasons in Jacksonville with Del Rio as his head coach. "He's a firm guy and believes in hard work and hard workers, and that's good."

Mincey needed a fresh start after things fell apart with the Jaguars. He takes full responsibility for being late to practice that ultimately led the team to release him on Dec. 13.

He was so frustrated by the situation, though, that he was actually contemplating a possible retirement rather than a return to the NFL. He certainly had enough in his life to keep him busy — overseeing a restaurant and a recording studio.

But the Broncos were too good of an opportunity to pass up and he signed four days later.

"I was tolerated in Jacksonville, but not wanted," said Mincey, who had a sack last weekend in a win over San Diego. "Denver put a new battery in me. They welcomed me with open arms."

Now, they're hoping Mincey can wrap his arms around Brady, something the Broncos struggled to do in a 34-31 overtime loss at New England on Nov. 24.

Brady threw for 344 yards and three TDs that night, most of the damage coming in the second half after the Patriots fell behind 24-0.

He's definitely expecting a different look from the Broncos, especially with Mincey in the rotation and cornerback Chris Harris Jr. out with a knee injury.

"Every team has a little different game plan so every week seems to be a little bit different," Brady said. "I'm sure this week will have a different flavor than what last week had."

Last weekend in a 43-22 win over Indy, the Patriots relied less on Brady's arm and more on bruising running back LeGarrette Blount, who rushed for 166 yards and four scores.

At 250 pounds, he's a load for anyone to bring down.

"He's not bigger than me," the 335-pound Knighton proudly claimed.

Few are.

Knighton has been quite a run stuffer for Denver this season, a good fit for a defense run by Del Rio, who likes wide bodies in the middle.

Asked when he knew Knighton could be quite an asset for this defense, linebacker Wesley Woodyard chuckled and said: "When I stood behind him and I saw his hips in the 'A' and the 'B' gap."

Knighton insisted he's the same type of player he was while with the Jaguars, but it's showing up more in Denver with a cast that includes Peyton Manning running the offense.

"When you're surrounded with Pro Bowlers and have an offense that stays on the field, it makes it a lot easier for you," Knighton said. When I'm on the field, I don't try to do too much. Sometimes in Jacksonville, I didn't know who was playing behind me. It's hard to trust guys.

"I feel like for five years I've been in the league, I've been one of the premier guys at the position. It's been hidden because of team success. Now that we're winning, people are starting to see it."

# Super Bowl would be a highlight for Champ

By Eddie Pells  
The Associated Press  
January 17, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — The highlight reel for Champ Bailey doesn't run long.

For the first 14 years, that was because quarterbacks didn't throw his way and there weren't many plays to make.

For the last four months, it was because he was rarely on the field.

And nowhere among any of it is there a clip of him playing in a Super Bowl.

The Denver Broncos can help him change that Sunday. But if they beat the Patriots and Bailey finally makes it to the big show, he won't consider himself having filled in the last missing piece of his resume, even if others will.

"I don't worry about my legacy," Bailey said. "All those things will take care of themselves."

Essentially, they already have.

He's a three-time, first-team AP All-Pro, a 12-time Pro Bowl pick. He was named to the NFL's All-Decade team for the 2000s. Though he's had fewer opportunities than most, his 52 interceptions are still fourth most over his 15 years in the league. For all of that, he has earned the lasting respect of his peers and teammates.

"If you're a cornerback, you have to be a fan of Champ Bailey," said Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, who starts at right corner for the Broncos. "Anytime a guy does that for a period of time he did it, 14 or 15 years, you've got to watch him."

There hasn't been much to watch this year. A lingering foot injury has limited his time in the lineup. Inactive for 11 games, mostly a bit player in the rest, frustrated through all of it.

"My most frustrating, probably because I'm living it right now," he said when asked where this season ranks. "The only thing I care about now is I'm back on the field. I'm ready to go. I feel good."

The timing is good. Bailey is needed as much as ever in the wake of the season-ending knee injury cornerback Chris Harris Jr. suffered last week. It figures to put

Bailey in the mix more against New England, whether it be at starting left cornerback, or in the slot where he played last week against the Chargers.

Since he was chosen seventh in the 1999 draft by the Redskins, Bailey has been among that rare group — Ronnie Lott, Darrell Green, Deion Sanders — who quarterbacks simply avoid.

As the years have passed, quarterbacks have tested him more.

Last year, in the playoff game against Baltimore, Bailey got beaten twice for long touchdowns. The offseason talk centered on whether it was time for Bailey to slide gracefully over to the slot, or to safety. Before the injury, Bailey wasn't ready to go there. Given the way this season has gone, and knowing he's one win away from the Super Bowl, he's willing to do whatever is needed.

"That's the way I've played it since I came back from the injury," Bailey said. "I don't want to force anything. But I feel like I'm ready for whatever is thrown at me."

The last time Bailey got this close to the Super Bowl was in the 2005 season. In the divisional playoff game, he intercepted Tom Brady and returned it 100 yards down the sideline. He got chased down a yard short of the touchdown. But it was a game-changing play and the Broncos won. They had home-field the next week and lost to Pittsburgh.

"It was disappointing at the time and frustrating," Bailey said. "But that was eight years ago. It's not like it was two years ago."

Since then, Bailey and the Broncos have had their chances to part ways. They came closest after the 2010 season when the Broncos front office — in transition after the firing of Josh McDaniels — first made an offer, then withdrew it, and Bailey went as far as to put his house on the market.

Once Broncos Executive Vice President John Elway came in to run the personnel department, he didn't think twice about keeping Bailey in Denver.

"Champ could still play, still can play," Elway said in an interview last year. "The number-one domino, in my mind, was to get him back in."

Two more wins might make this a perfect closing chapter for Bailey, who, at 35 and now coming off injury, will almost certainly have to accept a new role if he sticks around.

Or almost perfect.

Super Bowl or no, he knows this has not been the sort of season that fits a Hall of Famer's resume.

"It'd be nice but you can't take back what's happened this year," he said. "I'm living in the moment. You've just got to roll with the punches."

Notes: WR Demaryius Thomas (calf) was added to the injury report Friday, limited in practice but listed as probable for the game. ... Former Broncos WR Rod Smith will serve as honorary captain for the Broncos on Sunday.

# Patriots vs. Broncos: The key matchups

By Barry Wilner

The Associated Press

January 18, 2014

Matchups for the AFC championship game Sunday between the New England Patriots and Denver Broncos at Sports Authority Field:

When the Patriots (13-4) have the ball:

Run, baby, run.

The Patriots? Yep.

While all four remaining teams in the playoffs have solid ground games, New England has ridden the backs of its backs the most effectively. Sure, QB Tom Brady (12) is among the best ever and is seeking a fourth Super Bowl ring, but he's also among the smartest ever. Brady knows that if his trio of runners — LeGarrette Blount (29), Stevan Ridley (22) and Shane Vereen (34) — are gouging the opponent, it's the best approach to keep at it.

Blount has been unstoppable recently, rushing for 431 yards and eight TDs in the last three games. He scored four times in the rout of Indianapolis last week and is the power back the Patriots have lacked for a while.

That they've gotten such production behind an offensive line that entered the season with some uncertainty has been impressive, too. Left guard Logan Mankins (70) and left tackle Nate Solder (77) anchor the group, which has allowed only six sacks in the last four games.

Give Brady time and it's a recipe for defeat for the opposition. So Denver has a dilemma: Would it rather force the clutch-passing Brady to go to the air or deal with the run game?

The Broncos' defense was staunch for most of the divisional round win over San Diego, but it has lots of holes. It ranked 19th this season, is without its best player, injured LB Von Miller, so there's vulnerability.

Losing CB Chris Harris (25) to a knee injury won't help, either. A hefty burden will be placed on the front seven to bottle up the run and get some pressure on Brady when he throws. That would make things much more comfortable for DBs Champ Bailey (24), and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie (45).

Although Brady's crew of targets was significantly downgraded this season by the departure of WR Wes Welker — to Denver, of all places — and Brandon Lloyd, injuries to TE Rob Gronkowski, and the arrest of TE Aaron Hernandez on murder charges, he's made the best of it. In fact, he's helped turn Julian Edelman (11) into another Welker.

Danny Amendola (80) is another pint-sized wideout, and the rest of the receivers have contributed in spots.

Not having to deal with Gronk should make Denver LBs Danny Trevathan (59) and Wesley Woodyard (52) more available in all defensive areas. If the line, led by DT Terrance Knighton (94) and end Shaun Phillips (90) gets some penetration and slows the running game, it will make the Patriots more one-dimensional.

Then again, is that such a good thing when Brady is chucking the ball?

When the Broncos (14-3) have the ball:

Things are a lot more simple on Denver's offense. Sure, RB Knowshon Moreno (27) has been a mainstay and had a career-best 224 yards on a career-high 37 carries in a November loss at Foxborough. And rookie Montee Ball (28) can be a significant contributor.

But everyone knows this attack is all about QB Peyton Manning (18).

Manning broke Brady's single-season marks with 55 TD passes and 5,477 yards in the air, and the Broncos established an NFL record with 606 points. It would be the caper to one of the greatest careers in league history for Manning to get his second championship, and he has the supporting cast to do so.

The main problem is that New England has had his number. Manning is 4-10 against Brady, and the defenses schemed by Patriots coach Bill Belichick often have puzzled him.

The Patriots' defense, sparked by DE-LB Rob Ninkovich (50), DE Chandler Jones (95) and LB Jamie Collins (91) really has come on late in the season as Belichick kept plugging in new faces when regulars went down with injuries. That New England lost its best two defenders, DT Vince Wilfork and LB Jerod Mayo, and prospered is somewhat amazing.

Belichick will instruct his DBs, led by Devin McCourty (32) and Aqib Talib (31) to be extra-physical from the outset. It's a plan that has worked for New England for a few decades, going back to the 2002 Super Bowl upset of a similarly high-powered offense, the Rams' "Greatest Show on Turf."

So the ability of receivers big — Demaryius Thomas (88), Eric Decker (87) and TE Julius Thomas (80) — and small (No. 83 Welker) to avoid those bumps and remain on their routes will be critical for Denver. Manning has to hope the officials also aren't particularly lenient in what they allow the Patriots to do on defense. It has happened before — often.

Welker's contributions will be of the highest interest, because the Patriots know his game inside-out. Denver's best matchup through the air could wind up being tight end Thomas, particularly if he draws coverage from a linebacker such as Collins or Dont'a Hightower (54).

### Special Teams

Denver PK Matt Prater (5) broke the NFL record with a 64-yard field goal and might have the strongest leg in the league. But New England's Stephen Gostkowski (3) is no slouch. Both are reliable in tight situations and from distance; in Denver's thin air, that's important.

Ryan Allen was sidelined with a right shoulder injury in the victory over Indianapolis, so their punting situation is somewhat uncertain. Of course, they hope they never have to punt the ball back to Manning.

Denver's Britton Colquitt (4) is among the NFL's top punters.

The only game-breaker among the kick returners is Denver's Trindon Holliday (11), who must show he can hang onto the ball. Blount has done well on kickoff returns, including an 83-yarder.

New England's coverage units are strong, while Denver's are not nearly as stingy.

### Coaching

Belichick bested John Fox when Fox was coaching Carolina in the 2004 Super Bowl. Obviously, Belichick is seeking a fourth Super Bowl title, rare territory, and hasn't won it since the 2005. He'll come up with something on both sides of the ball that will trouble Denver.

Fox, who missed a month of the schedule after heart surgery, is a strong motivator, too, and is smart enough to keep the reins very loose on Manning. His background is in defense, but that's where the Broncos have struggled under him this season, in large part because they lost five defenders to IR and injuries to Woodyard and Bailey made them backups for most of 2013.

### Intangibles

Start with Brady having lost his last two Super Bowls and not playing particularly well in either of them.

Add in Manning seeking his third trip to the big game — and an emphatic stamp of approval as a championship QB.

The Broncos also are spurred on by their meltdown late in last year's playoff loss to Baltimore at home. New England is driven by no championships in nearly a decade.

Neither side will forget the regular-season meeting, either. Denver wants to replicate the first half in which it forced a slew of turnovers and went ahead 24-0. New England wants to carry the momentum from its second-half surge to victory.

# Pre-Super Bowl star power abounds in semifinals

By Dave Campbell  
The Associated Press  
January 18, 2014

The Super Bowl needs a ratings boost like a racecar could use more horsepower.

No program in television history has lured more viewers. No single sporting event is capable of commercially generating more hype.

This time, the NFL's annual national holiday has some competition for the attention, drama and intrigue. The challenge has come from within: the league's semifinals.

The conference championship games set for Sunday have all but guaranteed a popular pairing for the title game in New Jersey on Feb. 2, but the peak of this postseason could actually be reached this weekend.

"It's hard to find a better set of four. Really, any combination you come up with for the Super Bowl is going to be a great matchup," said CBS Sports announcer Jim Nantz.

In the AFC, the Tom Brady-Peyton Manning rematch in the New England-Denver game is an epic qualifier for the Super Bowl. The NFC, though, features fierce division rivals, two of the best under-27 quarterbacks around, and a prickly relationship between head coaches with the San Francisco-Seattle game. The Seahawks are so good at home and CenturyLink Field is so loud that the stadium is a story in itself.

Then there's the fact both contests Sunday will be played outside, raising the possibility of unpredictable weather to help prepare the winners for, well, unpredictable weather.

The decision to subject the Super Bowl to potential cold, wind and snow for the first time in history put the league in position for criticism if the title tilt were to be influenced by, say, a fumbled wet ball or a gust-guided missed field goal.

With two of these remaining teams on stage, however, the weather will be hard-pressed to make the headlines. The NFL, this carefully cultivated cultural magnet and money-making machine, has managed to top itself yet again with these conference championship matchups.

Sure, Brady and Manning have squared off for a spot in the Super Bowl twice before. Three straight Dallas-San Francisco games in the 1990s were memorable. But recalling a better set of matchups than this? Good luck. These four teams combined for a 50-14 record in the regular season.

"If you're a football fan, it can't get any better than this week," Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson said. "You think about the NFC championship game, us versus the 49ers, and you think about the AFC side and the Patriots versus the Broncos, that's as good as it gets."

Brady already beat Manning this season when the Patriots overcame a 24-0 halftime deficit to defeat the Broncos 34-31 in overtime. This will be the 15th time they'll play against each other, and Brady has already won 10.

"This is tantamount to Ali-Frazier one more time. This is Palmer-Nicklaus. This is Bird-Magic," Nantz said. "I'm not trying to create some sort of synthetic drama here, but this is what it is. This is as big as it gets. We're going to savor it, because you don't know how many more times we'll get it again."

If the Patriots win, they'll tie Dallas and Pittsburgh for the most Super Bowl appearances with eight. Brady, who has already won three but none since the 2004 season, would also set a record with his sixth trip as a starting quarterback.

Manning has made two, winning one. Despite leading the Broncos to the most points in NFL regular-season history in his second season back from the neck injury that ended his tenure in Indianapolis, the chatter that he hasn't won enough in the playoffs has persisted. Brady is immune with a record 18 postseason victories in 25 starts.

Don't forget about the coaches in this drama, either. Bill Belichick would match Tom Landry's all-time mark with 20 postseason wins and Don Shula's record of six Super Bowl appearances if the Patriots triumph. Then there's Belichick's offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels, no stranger to Denver. He had two tumultuous years as head coach of the Broncos and is not remembered fondly by the orange-and-blue clad fans.

The coaches are more central to the narrative on the other side.

Pete Carroll famously and angrily asked Jim Harbaugh, "What's your deal?" in 2009 after Stanford ran up the score in a win over Southern California, which Carroll left for the Seahawks the following season. Harbaugh departed the college ranks the year after to take over the 49ers, and their teams have been fighting over the NFC West since.

Leading run-first, defense-fueled teams, millennials Wilson and Colin Kaepernick are from a different mold than Brady and Manning of Generation X. But they're more than capable of taking the baton.

The all-time series is tied at 15. This will be their first meeting in the playoffs, but likely not the last.

"I think it's the best rivalry in football right now," Fox analyst Troy Aikman said.

With a pretty good one in the AFC game, too.

# Broncos don't want (recent) history lesson

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
January 18, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Even as two teams that won 12 and 13 games, respectively, in the regular season fell all over themselves to try to be the underdog this week -- even John Elway himself offered that "no one thought" the Broncos would "get by" San Diego to even get this far -- the topic of the Denver Broncos' Nov. 24 trip to Foxborough, Mass., has come up more than once in recent days.

Come up in the framework of whether or not the New England Patriots' 34-31 overtime victory in a game the Broncos led 24-0 at halftime has any bearing on Sunday's AFC Championship Game.

The Broncos rushed for 280 yards in the game, Patriots quarterback Tom Brady threw for 344 as both teams played half a game that was decided when a punt hit Tony Carter's leg and put the Patriots in position for the game-winning field goal.

"Again, just like I'm sure they're doing, you look at things, you look at matchups, you look at schemes," said Broncos head coach John Fox. "But that game will have little-to-nothing to do with this game. Typically, they're always different."

Well, yes and no.

Certainly, Patriots head coach Bill Belichick is known for rarely attacking a problem the same way twice. Or at least twice the same way in such a short period of time, and some of the names have already changed in the weeks since.

Whether it was the frigid conditions -- 22 degrees at kickoff with wind gusts of up to 40 miles an hour -- or Belichick's usual crafty ways, the Patriots held Peyton Manning to 150 passing yards.

That was by far a season low in a game where the Broncos spent virtually the entire game in their three-wide receiver look -- every snap but two. The Broncos did not have tight end Julius Thomas in the lineup that night -- it was one of two games Thomas missed this season with a knee injury -- and the Patriots did well in doubling Wes Welker and forcing Manning away from his usual favorites.

Eric Decker finished that game with just one reception, and Demaryius Thomas and Welker, who had three drops in the game, had four receptions each. Overall, it was the worst outing of the season for the Broncos' pass-catchers as they finished with a season-high seven drops.

"And you have to clean those things up," Decker said. "If you have opportunities to make plays, you have to make them."

Defensively, the Broncos will not face do-it-all tight end Rob Gronkowski this time around -- he's now on injured reserve -- so the Patriots' offense will look vastly different, at least as far as intent. The Patriots have been far more run-first in their approach in recent weeks as Brady has completed 14, 14 and 13 passes in the past three games, respectively.

In the last meeting, Brady used Gronkowski to get back in the game -- Gronkowski had seven receptions for 90 yards and a touchdown -- and Julian Edelman finished with 110 yards on his nine receptions, including two touchdowns. The Broncos figure to use veteran cornerback Champ Bailey, who did not play in the Nov. 24 game, at least some against Edelman.

"They came out and played a great second half of football, there is no doubt about that," said Broncos linebacker Danny Trevathan. "There is nothing else to say. They just came out and played -- they fixed what they needed to fix, and we didn't adjust well to what they fixed. We have to be able to, when we're up, stay up, and if we're down, get up on them and keep them down."

The Broncos also fumbled five times in November, losing three on a night when the teams lost a combined six fumbles.

But in the end the Broncos closed out the week neither wanting to remember that sliver of history all that much nor be doomed to repeat it. They have chosen to look at Sunday's game as its own set of circumstances with a chance at the Super Bowl at stake.

"Every game is a learning experience, but that one really taught us something," Trevathan said. "It is a different day, a different attitude and a different mindset. We're going to go out here and do what we have to do to get a win."

"You look at it, but they've been through a lot to get this far, we've been through a lot to get this far," Bailey said. "And a month is forever and that was a month ago, almost two months. We're on to this one, and you don't need any more than that."

# Plummer: Broncos will handle the moment

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
January 17, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Somewhere, this week, in the expansive quiet that is northern Idaho, there was a man going through his own preparations as the clock winds down toward Sunday's AFC Championship Game.

"I've got to make sure we're all ready to go with the (satellite) dish, I don't want to miss a play," said one Jake Plummer.

Plummer, who was the Denver Broncos' honorary captain before last Sunday's divisional round win against the San Diego Chargers, just happens to be the last Broncos quarterback before Peyton Manning this past Sunday, to win a divisional round game and get to the AFC Championship Game. That 2005 Broncos team had stumbled into a home game for the conference championship when the Pittsburgh Steelers had upset Manning and the Indianapolis Colts the week before. Those Broncos certainly didn't make the most of it, the Steelers led 24-3 at halftime and went on to win, 34-17, on their way to a Super Bowl XL win.

Cornerback Champ Bailey is the only current Broncos player who played in that game.

For his part, Plummer has seen the Broncos plenty this season and having prepared to face New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick -- the Broncos defeated Belichick's Patriots in the divisional round following the 2005 season -- Plummer sees a few important items on the Broncos' to-do list.

Things like:

Get running back Knowshon Moreno going. Moreno had a career-best 224 yards rushing in the Broncos' Nov. 24 loss to the Patriots on a career-high 37 carries. The Broncos rushed for 280 yards overall, working almost exclusively out of a three-wide receiver set.

"I think at times Knowshon can quite possibly be the MVP of that offense in the kind of situations you get in the playoffs," Plummer said. "Peyton's going to throw it in the red zone, he's going to get his touchdowns, but Knowshon is huge for them to

keep things going.

"Knowshon is so good in the passing game, as a blocker in there and as a receiver, but if they get Knowshon going, then they have play-action, it keeps the rush off Peyton and when Peyton has the option of play-action, defenses, man, they don't know what to do with that offense then. Because they can come at you in the same action up front, run or pass, and Peyton sees those guys on defense coming up, he's going over the top."

Be ready to adjust. While every coach before every game talks about taking away something the opponent wants to do, Plummer said Belichick is simply one of the best at doing it.

"He's just always focusing in on stopping what you do well and then see if you have anything else in your back pocket, he almost never lets you beat him with what you do best," Plummer said. "With his own guys, he takes players and finds their strengths, rather than just trying to jam everybody into a system ... he has a way of getting those guys where they need to be and knowing how to shut down what you do well and seeing if you've got anything else in your repertoire. There will come a time in the game when the Broncos have to have other people make those plays.

"If the Broncos open it up a little bit, like they like to do, I could see Belichick attacking Julius (Thomas) and Montee (Ball) in the passing game. That could give them a little bit of trouble. I could just see Belichick, in search of a matchup, shift some things around to force Julius and Montee in to a tough choice in pass protection, where they're 1-on-1 with a defensive end or a linebacker. Julius, man, that guy is a superstar waiting to happen, but right now he has some things blocking that need some work and if they get the chance Belichick will try to create an issue there so the Broncos will have to have an answer."

Manage the moment. Plummer's former teammate, Broncos Ring of Famer Rod Smith said Thursday he didn't think some of the Broncos handled that end of things in the loss to the Steelers eight Januarys ago.

"We didn't have to go to Indy, Pittsburgh had to come to us and everybody was excited about that," Smith said. "And I'm like 'no, you gotta go play.' It's not about being excited about playing at home, it has nothing to do with it. You've got a football game ... and honestly I kind of saw a lot of our younger guys got lost in the fact we had a home game instead of getting lost in the fact of getting in that playbook, getting focused in, being disciplined on the things we need to do as a team and we didn't play well and we lost."

But both Plummer and Smith see players, such as Manning and Bailey, as key in the effort to keep their teammates dialed in. Smith said last January's loss should still sting the Broncos players who lived it and Plummer said it's often the team that handles that early-game emotional swirl the best is the one that plays closest to the form that got it this deep into January in the first place.

"You're asking me like I'm a pro, I went once to the AFC Championship," Plummer said with a laugh. "But the whole thing changes. ...The pressure is huge, but you have to try to approach it like any other game, it is just a football game, it's the same thing you played in Week 1. There's just so much more riding on it. You're one game away from the game everybody starts the season wanting to get to. The pressure mounts. There's no way to not feel it, but the guys who stay calm and do what they do best that's the key. With Peyton back there I kind of feel like, whatever storm New England brings, they'll come out on top and move on to New York."

## D. Thomas limited in practice, will play

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
January 17, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The Denver Broncos added wide receiver Demaryius Thomas to the injury report Friday, but the team's leading receiver is expected to start and play his usual allotment of snaps in Sunday's AFC Championship Game.

Thomas, who practiced fully on Wednesday and Thursday, was limited in Friday's workout because of a calf injury. Thomas is believed to have felt some tightness in the muscle earlier in the day.

The Broncos formally listed Thomas -- who led the team with 92 receptions, 1,430 receiving yards and 14 touchdowns -- as probable for the game and Thomas participated in significant amounts of Friday's practice. All of the other players on the Broncos' 53-man roster participated fully in Friday's workout.

And all of the players listed on the injury report are listed as probable and are expected to be available to play. The Broncos wrapped up their week's worth of practice with their usual Friday schedule. When asked to summarize the week, Broncos head coach John Fox said: "Outstanding."

The forecast for Sunday remains postcard-worthy. Temperatures are expected to near 60 degree with no chance of rain and light winds.

"What I've learned in my three years in Denver it can change quickly," Fox said. "The forecast is what it is and we'll see what the weather brings when we get there."

# Broncos' 606-point offense an inside job

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
January 17, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- In his time as the Denver Broncos' chief football decision-maker, John Elway has routinely offered what he believed the first step was to get from the 4-12 team he joined in January of 2011 and the one that will play in the AFC Championship Game on Sunday.

As a player, Elway spent over two decades in locker rooms, either at Stanford or with the Broncos, and he didn't like the one he saw a floor below when he moved into his office three seasons ago.

"I think, No. 1, we had to clean up the locker room," Elway said. "We had to get the locker room right ... and get the right mentality in that locker room because that is really life bread of what the organization is all about. How that locker room fits is the most important thing. If that doesn't fit -- what we're all doing really is not that important because you can't make it work."

The foundation principle, Elway says, is to "stack those drafts, get the guys, right from the start, we want as Denver Broncos, to build our mentality, our culture, from within." During a sitdown with several folks Thursday Elway added, "I've always said if we can find somebody better than we have, we have to find them. And if they're out there then we'll sign them."

And that is the story, in particular, of the Broncos' record-setting offense. Start with Peyton Manning, not just a signing in free agency, but the signing of the free-agency era. By anyone.

He has been every bit the raise-all-boats guy, a future Hall of Famer who changed everything the minute he walked through the door at the Broncos' suburban complex.

Add in Wes Welker and right guard Louis Vasquez, who signed as free agents last March. They have been everything the Broncos had hoped they would be. Vasquez (6-foot-5, 335 pounds) signaled a transition in personnel philosophy up front; he's 60 pounds heavier than some of the Broncos' linemen were a decade ago. He helped lock down the middle of the Broncos' offensive line.

But the rest of the Broncos' 606-point touchdown factory is largely a homegrown

affair. And that's likely the only way it could happen.

"I enjoyed coaching this group," said Broncos head coach John Fox. "They come to work, they're accountable and they care about each other ... and you can get some things done like that."

A team couldn't buy five players in free agency who were good enough to finish with at least 10 touchdowns each. A team couldn't buy five players to have at least 60 receptions, no matter who the quarterback is. And the Broncos didn't.

Demaryius Thomas (2010), Eric Decker (2010), Julius Thomas (2011) and Knowshon Moreno (2009) are all Broncos draft picks. Ryan Clady, the Broncos' Pro Bowl left tackle on injured reserve, was Mike Shanahan's last first-rounder in 2008. Orlando Franklin (2011) and Zane Beadles (2010) are Broncos' draft picks as is Montee Ball (2013).

Center Manny Ramirez was signed to a futures contract in 2011 -- the NFL's version of an NBA 10-day deal -- and signed an extension this season after becoming a starter. And Chris Clark, who has filled in for Clady, was claimed off waivers by the Broncos in 2010.

"People say it's about win now, it's about now on," Elway said. " ... Then you get a guy like Peyton Manning. Now it's about trying to find all the pieces together and obviously I said now on, but we're not just trying to find young guys. We're going to find guys that fit, young and old guys, that fit together."

Whatever becomes of this season, whether the Broncos move on to the Super Bowl or not, they will face some decisions in the coming weeks about some of those home-grown players. Decker, Beadles and Moreno are all pending free agents this year with Demaryius Thomas set to be up after the 2014 season. But those are all topics for other days.

In the end the Broncos didn't get what they wanted on the field until they shored up the team off of it.

# Double Coverage: Patriots at Broncos

By Jeff Legwold and Mike Reiss

ESPN.com

January 17, 2014

And then there were two -- two teams that know most of what there is to know about each other, two future Hall of Fame quarterbacks who add to their legacies with every pass, all with a Super Bowl trip on the line.

The Denver Broncos and New England Patriots, who have faced each other in each of the past three seasons and in the divisional round of the 2011 season, took it to overtime Nov. 24. The Broncos let a 24-0 halftime lead get away, and the Patriots won 34-31 after a punt bounced off Broncos cornerback Tony Carter's leg in overtime on a frigid night in Foxborough, Mass.

ESPN.com Broncos reporter Jeff Legwold and Patriots reporter Mike Reiss discuss Sunday's AFC Championship Game in Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Legwold: Peyton Manning and Bill Belichick yet again. Do you think, in all your time around Belichick, that he tries to bring something new to the table every time he faces Manning? Or does he assume Manning has done the homework and put his efforts into getting people in the right position?

Reiss: I'd say there's always a new wrinkle or two, Jeff. Belichick has said in the past that Manning is too smart to just do the same thing over and over again -- both within a game and from matchup to matchup. Part of that discussion is also the state of the Patriots' personnel entering the matchup. A player like rookie linebacker Jamie Collins, for example, might give Belichick the flexibility to introduce something unique based on his breakthrough since the Nov. 24 meeting between the teams.

The weather forecast looks promising for Manning. No icy cold forecast. How do you think he approaches this game compared to the Nov. 24 contest? Do you think he will be less reluctant to hand the ball off?

Legwold: It will be a postcard day Sunday with temperatures expected to be about 58 degrees with zero percent chance of rain and light winds. So any decisions the two teams make on offense will have to do with what's in front of them on defense only. Manning will be inclined to hand the ball off if he sees the Patriots in some of those lighter personnel groupings deployed to handle Denver's three-wide receiver look. Offensive coordinator Adam Gase has a run option built into most things

Manning can change into at the line of scrimmage. The Broncos certainly like how Knowshon Moreno and Montee Ball are trending in the run game. They have split carries down the stretch, and both run with tackle-shedding power.

Gase, with coaching DNA that includes his time with Mike Martz, is an aggressive sort. With the next-generation numbers the Broncos offense has put up this season, it's easy to forget they still averaged 28.8 carries per game and topped 30 carries per matchup nine times this season. If they get a look from the New England defense that calls for a run, the Broncos will be inclined to pound away.

Where is Tom Brady's game and the offense right now after some rough moments early in the season? Has Brady benefited from a run-heavy approach down the stretch and into the postseason?

Reiss: The biggest benefit for Brady with the run-heavy approach has been how it opens play-action opportunities. Danny Amendola's 53-yard catch in the divisional round is one of the best examples. Also, part of the reason the Patriots have gone so run-heavy is that it's the area where they have their most assets. They are limited when it comes to pass-catchers who create consistent separation at tight end and receiver. As for Brady's game, there have been no signs of decline in arm strength, accuracy or decision-making. The main reasons for the struggles early in the year, from my view, were more about the changes around him. That's not to say Brady didn't make his mistakes, but it's sort of interesting to look back on some of the media-based discussion around Weeks 6 to 8 about how maybe Father Time had caught up to him.

Now that we're a full season in, how would you sum up the Wes Welker signing? Just as the Broncos hoped for? Better? Worse?

Legwold: Welker finished the regular season with 73 catches for 778 yards and 10 touchdowns. His presence in the slot, along with Julius Thomas at tight end, is part of the reason why the offense had a historic season. With the Broncos lining up in a three-wide receiver set the majority of the season -- every snap of the win over the San Diego Chargers -- they force defenses into some difficult choices. Thomas is often in the slot on one side of the formation, and Welker is in the slot on the other side. When Thomas missed two games earlier this season with a knee injury, both the Patriots and the Kansas City Chiefs (Dec. 1) elected to double-team Welker. He missed three games after suffering his second concussion in a four-week span Dec. 8 against the Tennessee Titans but played last week against the Chargers without issue.

Welker did have some spells this season when he had a cluster of dropped passes -

- three against the Patriots on a frigid night to go with drops against Washington and San Diego in the regular season. Overall, he was exactly what the Broncos hoped he would be in their offense. He meshed with Manning quickly and was a big part of the plan right from his nine-catch performance against the Baltimore Ravens in the season opener.

The Patriots did not face Thomas in the Nov. 24 meeting. Do you think they will try to match up Collins on Thomas this time around?

Reiss: That seems like the natural matchup, especially after seeing Collins splitting out wide on Colts tight end Coby Fleener on Saturday night and playing very well. Collins is unique in that, at 6-foot-3 and 250 pounds, he is fast enough to be competitive down the field in coverage (e.g. fourth-quarter interception versus the Colts) but powerful enough to play in the box and deliver a blow in the running game and as a pass-rusher. The Patriots' top draft pick in 2013, selected 52nd overall out of Southern Mississippi, he is an intriguing player that Patriots fans really got their first extended look at Saturday as he played every snap against the Colts. He had been groomed behind the scenes up to that point, playing just 25 percent of the defensive snaps on the season in more of a reserve role.

Thomas may not have played in the first game between the teams, but Von Miller did. How does Miller's season-ending knee injury affect the Broncos defense?

Legwold: Of all the players who were signed in the weeks after the initial league-wide binge in free agency, the Broncos' signing of Shaun Phillips was easily one of the best. Denver signed Phillips to a one-year, \$1 million deal during the draft weekend in April, well over a month after free agency had opened, a deal that didn't have a signing bonus but did have some incentives based on sack totals.

Phillips was initially how the Broncos planned to deal with the loss of Elvis Dumervil in free agency. When Miller was suspended for the first six games of the year, Phillips had 5.5 sacks in those games to lead the way. He finished the regular season with 10 sacks to lead the team. In Sunday's win, with Miller on injured reserve, Phillips had two sacks against the Chargers. He is the single-most important player in the Broncos pass rush in Miller's absence. Denver may have to take more risks without Miller on the field, and that's always a tough choice against someone like Brady who can easily find the holes in coverage. But if Phillips can consistently create pressure -- with both sacks on three-man rushes against San Diego -- it allows the Broncos to move things around a little more and cover more of the bases.

Did Belichick make a conscious effort to get big backs like LeGarrette Blount and

Stevan Ridley in the lineup when he knew he would get smaller defensive personnel against the team's passing attack?

Reiss: That's fair to say, as the Patriots pride themselves on creating those matchups during the game, with coordinator Josh McDaniels finding his groove in recent weeks. They refer to themselves as a "game plan" offense because they tailor their plan weekly based on what they perceive to be the weakness of the opposition. They'll shuttle in different personnel groupings early -- multiple receivers, two backs, two tight ends, etc. -- to get information on how the opponent is matching up and then focus on the one they like best. This week, what's fascinating to me is that I think they probably see vulnerability in the Broncos' secondary, but I wonder how they feel about their own personnel in being able to exploit it. So that could keep them grounded.

The Patriots have been running the ball very well. How is the Broncos' run defense?

Legwold: In a year when the Broncos have been forced, by injuries and Miller's suspension, to mix and match on defense, their run defense has likely been more consistent in comparison to some of the other issues they've had. When defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson went to injured reserve Nov. 27 with a hip injury, they did wobble a bit, surrendering 159 yards rushing to the Chiefs and 177 yards rushing to the Chargers in two of the three games that immediately followed.

They have regained their balance a bit since, moving Paris Lenon into the middle linebacker spot in the base defense, and rookie defensive tackle Sylvester Williams has played better each week. Overall, the biggest issue for the Broncos will be how they defend the run if the Patriots get them in nickel or dime personnel on defense and then run the ball at the smaller looks. The Broncos safeties will have to tackle and tackle well to make it work.

Belichick has always tried to make "other" people beat him and take away an offense's front-line players. How do you think he would rank the Broncos' threats in the passing game, and where do you think the one-on-one matchups will be?

Reiss: One insightful point that ESPN analyst Tedy Bruschi made in his weekly chat was the idea of defending the Broncos from the inside-out. Manning is still an accurate marksman, one of the greatest of all time, but I'm guessing that even he would agree that some of the downfield and outside-the-numbers throws he used to make don't come as easy to him. So it makes sense that the Patriots would focus more resources on the inside part of the field, where it would seem we would most likely see Welker and Thomas. With this in mind, I could envision the Patriots matching up cornerback Aqib Talib with Demaryius Thomas on the outside and

cornerback Alfonzo Dennard with Eric Decker and taking their chances that those one-on-one matchups will be competitive. Trusting those cornerbacks in those one-on-one matchups would allow the defense to focus extra attention/personnel to the inside part of the field.

Any X factors or special-teams contributors we should keep on the radar?

Legwold: The Broncos have usually been lockdown tight on special teams -- opening the season with two touchdown returns and two blocked punts, one of those returned for a score, in the first four weeks of the season. Those normally reliable units, however, have wobbled plenty down the stretch. The Chiefs' Nile Davis had a 108-yard kickoff return for a touchdown, the Titans' Leon Washington had a 95-yard kickoff return, and the Texans' Keshawn Martin had a 51-yard punt return. Toss in the first blocked punt of Britton Colquitt's career in Oakland to go with Trindon Holliday's occasional adventures catching the ball and it's been an unpredictable stretch. But Holliday is always a threat to uncork a return because of his breathtaking speed. The Broncos used wide receiver Decker as the primary punt returner against the Chargers last week, and he had a 47-yarder. So the Broncos have the potential to pop one at any time, especially in Denver, where Holliday returned both a kickoff and a punt for touchdowns in last January's playoff loss to the Ravens.

Predictions

The final word on Sunday's matchup at Sports Authority Field at Mile High:

#### MATCHUP ANALYSIS

Mike Reiss: If the Patriots can keep the Broncos to a 50 percent or less success rate in the red zone, where Denver ranked No. 1 in the regular season, I think they win the game because of their ball-control, power-running approach. It's a tall task, but in a season in which they've surprised at almost every turn, I think they'll find a way.

Patriots 27, Broncos 24

Jeff Legwold: This game has it all, from the future Hall of Famers at quarterback on down. But in the end, the Broncos' offensive line makes enough room for Knowshon Moreno and Montee Ball to be the difference. Broncos 31, Patriots 27

# Elway eyes future issues, but talks will wait

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
January 16, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – Even as the Denver Broncos are poised to play Sunday with a Super Bowl trip on the line, the team's executive vice president of football operations John Elway knows he already has two fairly significant meetings on his calendar in the coming weeks.

One with head coach John Fox and one with quarterback Peyton Manning.

Fox would be heading into the final year of his original four-year contract in 2014 and that's usually not a situation either the coach or the team wants to be in if both sides like where things are heading. The Broncos have gone 34-14 in three regular seasons under Fox (Fox missed four of those games this year) with three AFC West titles.

Fox signed a four-year contract, believed to be worth between \$3 million and \$3.5 million, in January of 2011. Fox replaced Josh McDaniels, who was fired with four games remaining in the 2010 season.

"We're going to wait until this year is over and then sort of talk about that," Elway said Thursday.

Fox missed four games in a leave of absence this season after open-heart surgery. Since his return Fox, who will turn 59 next month, has consistently said he "feels better than I have in the last 20 years."

Elway said he will sit down with Manning following the season. The quarterback is going to decide about 2014 after a physical exam at the end of the season, including a look on his surgically-repaired neck. The pair held a similar meeting a year ago when Manning had a physical that kicked in two additional seasons of guaranteed money after doctors gave the quarterback a favorable report.

Manning finished the season with 5,477 passing yards and 55 touchdowns -- both NFL records -- and the Broncos also set a new single-season record with 606 points.

"We'll sit down after the season and find out where he is and what his thinking is," Elway said. "But to be where we are right now and talk to him about the future, I don't think is productive right now."

Elway said he believed Manning has publicly referenced the potential end of his career more and more in recent weeks because the 37-year-old quarterback was simply trying to make a point about how players should appreciate, and take advantage of, playoff opportunities when they arrive.

"I still think he's young and playing well," Elway said. "But that's going to come down to Peyton, it's going to come down to what he wants to do. Having been a football player before when you leave this game you want to leave it on your last leg and try not to leave anything on the table. Anybody that's a competitor, that's kind of the way you want to leave the game."

Asked if he believed Manning still enjoyed the game, Elway said;

"I can't imagine him not throwing 55 touchdowns," Elway said. "I guarantee you if I was in his shoes I would enjoy it. I'm sure he is still enjoying it and he's on a good football team which late in your career is so crucial."

Manning's contract runs through the 2016 season.

# W2W4: Five things for Patriots-Broncos

By Peter Lawrence-Riddell

ESPNBoston.com

January 17, 2014

It was a safe bet that the buildup to this Sunday's AFC Championship Game was going to include substantial talk about Tom Brady vs. Peyton Manning, the two quarterbacks involved.

But this week has involved so much more, as the two best teams in the AFC have provided no shortage of storylines this season in distancing themselves from the rest of the conference.

Talk has ensued about how the previous matchup between the teams will play into Sunday, how the game will impact the legacy of Brady and Manning, and how much of a factor familiarity between the two teams will be.

In the end, however, Sunday will dictate only one thing for sure, and that is which team will represent the AFC in Super Bowl XLVIII.

A win would make Brady the first quarterback in NFL history to start six Super Bowls, and would also tie Bill Belichick for the most postseason victories of all-time.

The Denver Broncos enter the game as a favorite according to the point spread, but the New England Patriots are looking to carry their strong play over the past three games into a triumphant effort on Sunday.

Here's what we'll be watching for.

1. Patriots' offensive approach: If the Patriots want to stick with what has worked over the past three games, then hammering the Broncos on the ground seems like a strong bet. LeGarrette Blount and the stable of backs have been dominant behind an overwhelming offensive line. The Patriots are a game plan offense, however, always aiming to attack a defense's weakness, and with recent injuries factored in, the Broncos are a better defense against the run than the pass. Will the Patriots try to pick apart a secondary playing without its best cornerback? Or, perhaps, will the ground game set the tone?

2. Slowing Denver's passing attack: Back in Week 12, the Patriots' defense was able to limit Manning to a mortal effort, holding him to 150 passing yards on 19-of-36 attempts. Some of that might be attributed to the wind, but the secondary also

showed it has what it takes to go toe-to-toe with the best offense in football. A key player who was not on the field during that matchup, tight end Julius Thomas, will be available this Sunday, giving the Patriots one more player to account for. He joins the trio of Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker and, of course, Wes Welker to form a unique set of weapons for Manning.

3. Building the run D wall: In the last meeting, Denver rushed for 280 yards, with Knowshon Moreno accounting for 224 of those yards. The Patriots were likely happy with keeping the Broncos' passing offense under wraps in Week 12, but they have repeatedly said this week that they can't afford to let Denver run the ball the same way again. From a personnel standpoint, the insertion of Sealver Siliga as a starter at defensive tackle has appeared to pay off, as the Patriots have held two of their past five opponents under 100 yards rushing.

4. Allen and Dobson's health and status: They have flown under the radar a bit after Brady missed Wednesday's practice, but both punter Ryan Allen and wide receiver Aaron Dobson have practiced on a limited basis this week. Allen left last Saturday's game with a shoulder injury, and while that won't likely impact his punting, it could be a factor in him handling snaps, both as the holder and punter, as we saw what a high snap can do on a given play last week. For Dobson, who hasn't played since Week 17, a return would give the Patriots their biggest receiver in the lineup and a potential red-zone target. Should the Patriots aim to test a beaten up Denver secondary, Dobson could give them a vertical presence on the perimeter.

5. Altitude, crowd noise, "Omaha!", etc. It's hard to gauge just how much the thin air of Denver impacts players' stamina on the field, but one area where it does often have an impact is in the kicking game. Don't expect many kickoff returns on Sunday, though it does shorten the field for offenses, who can attempt field goals from greater distances. Denver is a loud venue, and the Patriots' offense will be tested by the crowd noise. As we saw in the Broncos-Chargers game, Manning is a master at drawing opponents offside (he used the cadence "Omaha!" 44 times during the game), and the Patriots must be disciplined in their pre-snap movement. Especially against this offense, giving away free yards (which can potentially extend a drive) is something a defense must avoid.

# Aaron Dobson (foot) questionable

By Field Yates

ESPNBoston.com

January 17, 2014

Wide receiver Aaron Dobson, who did not play in the New England Patriots' divisional round win over the Indianapolis Colts as he dealt with a foot injury, is listed as questionable for Sunday's AFC Championship Game against the Denver Broncos.

The rookie out of Marshall suffered his second foot injury of the season in Week 17, an injury that held him out of practice for two weeks before his return Wednesday.

"I don't really know what my situation is going to be this weekend, but I'll go out there today, see how it feels, and go from there," Dobson said Friday before the team's morning practice.

Dobson said he's stayed mentally sharp by taking "mental reps" but acknowledged it was tough not being able to play last Saturday against the Colts.

"It was hard just to watch my team battle without me," said Dobson, who had 37 catches for 519 yards and four touchdowns this season. "They pulled it out, so I'm glad to get another opportunity to hopefully get back out on the field this Sunday."

Rookie receiver Kenbrell Thompkins is questionable after suffering a concussion last Saturday.

Punter Ryan Allen, who left Saturday's game with a shoulder injury, is also questionable after practicing each day this week. The Patriots did not try out or sign any punters this week, pointing toward Allen playing Sunday.

Linebacker Steve Beauharnais, who did not practice Friday, was said to be sick and has been ruled out for the game. Linebacker Dont'a Hightower (ankle) and wide receiver Danny Amendola (groin) headline a list of six players who are probable.

Information from ESPNBoston.com's Mike Reiss was used in this report.

# In playoffs, it's all about defense (not QBs)

By Alok Pattani

ESPN.com

January 17, 2014

Much of the focus heading into Sunday's Conference Championship games will be on the quarterback play, particularly with future Hall of Famers Tom Brady and Peyton Manning facing off for the fourth time in their postseason careers.

But if recent playoff history is any indication, it's not the quarterbacks who will have the most impact on which teams get a trip to MetLife Stadium, but rather the defenses' ability to stop those quarterbacks that will make a bigger difference.

Just looking at the past few Super Bowl champions, quarterbacks who rated outside the top half of the league in Total QBR through the Divisional Playoffs have led their teams to championships, including Eli Manning in the 2007 season, Ben Roethlisberger in 2008 and Joe Flacco just last year.

What those quarterbacks had in common was a defense on the other side that could control opposing quarterbacks, each ranking in the top quarter of the league in terms of QBR allowed. Even the recent Packers and Saints title teams, which had elite quarterbacks, paired them with Top-3 defenses in terms of opponents' QBR.

An examination of all playoff games back to 2006 (as far back as QBR goes) shows that although quarterback play seems to carry over from game to game in the regular season, that correlation decreases in the postseason.

And conversely, the ability of a team to contain opposing quarterbacks seems to have a greater impact on how quarterbacks perform – and as a consequence, who wins – in the playoffs.

The details of our study

This analysis looked at how two components entering each game – the quarterback's QBR for the season and the defense's QBR allowed on the season to that point – related to the quarterback's Total QBR in the game as well as the final result.

To ensure each of those numbers were representative, the only games analyzed were those in which both the quarterback and the defense had at least 100 action

plays entering the game, and in which the quarterback had at least 15 action plays within the game.

The first graph below shows how well a quarterback's QBR entering a game does in terms of "predicting" QBR within that game, with separate trend lines for regular season and playoff games.

The regular-season trend shows a decent amount of regression to the mean, as quarterbacks with extreme QBRs entering the game have less extreme performances, on average.

But the general trend of good quarterbacks having above-average games and bad quarterbacks having below-average ones is clearly present with the upward trending line.

On the other hand, the trend line for the playoffs is pretty wacky. This is what happens when quarterbacks like Mark Sanchez, Tim Tebow and Joe Flacco have games of 90 or higher QBR, and Tom Brady, Philip Rivers and Matt Ryan each post games with a QBR less than 20.

Now, contrast that picture with the one below, which looks at how strongly the opponent's QBR allowed entering the game influences the quarterback's play in the game.

The regular season trend is almost flat, showing that defensive quality has minimal impact on how well a quarterback plays in those games.

But look at the postseason trend – while clearly not perfect, there seems to be a stronger impact on QBR by defense entering the game in the playoffs. The elite defenses mentioned above flexed their muscles in the postseason, limiting opposing quarterbacks as they had earlier on in the season.

A more rigorous analysis using multiple regression shows that the quarterback's QBR entering the game is still significant in the postseason, but the defense's QBR allowed becomes more predictive in the postseason. The small sample size of the postseason means that this pattern might be due to random fluctuation, but the trend is still something worth keeping an eye on.

We can go one step further and look at how impactful these pregame QBR values are in terms of actually winning the game. A look at the chart below shows that the pattern is similar to that with the actual QBR in the game.

Having a starting QB with a better QBR entering the game gives you a solid chance to win in the regular season, but the team with that advantage is just 44-40 in the postseason since 2006. Conversely, teams that have a better QBR defense than the opponent are 51-33 in those same playoff games, including 6-2 so far this postseason.

Looking ahead to this weekend, perhaps we can de-emphasize Peyton Manning's 22-point advantage over Brady in QBR and instead focus on the defenses that they line up against.

As it works out, though, the Patriots and Broncos have very similar, mediocre opponent QBR values to this point: 48.3 for Denver, 50.5 for New England. So there isn't any clear advantage there.

In this regard, the more interesting matchup is out in Seattle. Both defenses in the 49ers-Seahawks game rank in the top five in terms of QBR allowed, but the Seahawks are ahead of all other NFL teams at 29.5.

In each of their past seven games, the Seahawks have limited the opposing quarterback to a QBR at least 20 points below what he came in averaging entering the game, including their last meeting against Colin Kaepernick in Week 14.

If the Seahawks can keep up their own trend of shutting down opposing quarterbacks and the similar bigger-picture pattern that has emerged over the last several postseasons, they should give themselves a good chance to win this weekend.

And even though the road would go through Brady or Manning, the trend of strong defense carrying over more in the playoffs gives Seattle a pretty good chance of taking home the Lombardi Trophy in early February.

# AFC title will be won in the trenches

By Tedy Bruschi and Mike Reiss  
ESPNBoston.com  
January 17, 2014

Every week leading into the Patriots' next game, ESPN NFL analyst Tedy Bruschi and ESPNBoston.com Patriots reporter Mike Reiss preview the matchup. This week, it's Sunday's AFC Championship Game against the Denver Broncos at Sports Authority Field at Mile High (CBS, 3 p.m. ET)

**Mike:** Let's start with the Patriots returning to the conference championship game for the eighth time in Bill Belichick's 14 years as coach.

**Tedy:** It's unheard of. The percentages of being in the game that gets you to the Super Bowl are pretty high in New England. It's something we never took for granted in the locker room, because the AFC Championship is special. Most of the time, you're fighting in the regular season to get that bye, and when you get that and then win one game, it puts you into the game that could send you to the Super Bowl.

**Mike:** You always say the goal is to get three sets of hats and T-shirts each year -- division, conference, Super Bowl. Bring us inside the locker room to what a week like this was like.

**Tedy:** Honestly, it really wasn't much different than any other week, and the more I've thought about it, that's a testament to Coach Belichick's approach. No matter what point of the season it is -- the offseason, preseason, regular season -- you notice him this time of year in the locker room and coaching the team, and it's not much different than you've seen every day over the course of the entire season. I think that helps a lot of young players deal with the pressure. When you're playing in the regular season and the emphasis is so strong and at such a high level, Bill doesn't have to up his intensity for the postseason, because it is already been at that point. When you lose during the regular season, at any point -- whether it was to end a 21-game winning streak or any loss -- there is hell to pay. So everything is emphasized from Day 1 to a championship level. So once you get to those championship games, the pressure isn't really felt by players.

**Mike:** It's hard to believe this will be the Patriots' first road playoff game since 2006, the AFC Championship Game at Indianapolis. There are some common threads there: The offense didn't have big-name receivers, and players were battling some illnesses leading into that game. The extra hand-sanitizing stations have been set up in the team's locker room this week, and the noise has been turned up at practice.

**Tedy:** It will be a new experience for a lot of these players, playing in the playoffs on the road. But it still goes to the previous point. It doesn't matter that it's on the road, because when have you ever heard Coach Belichick, in a news conference, saying the team needs the home fans to be really loud. You don't often hear players

talk about it either. That would de-emphasize the importance of the job that needs to be done by each individual person. To say it's tougher because you'll be on the road goes against his coaching style. So the emphasis is that everything inside the locker room, and inside of the team, is greater than the situation, greater than the location where the game is played, greater than what it is on the line. What's most important is how you do your job, and that takes away some of the pressure.

When you're sitting there as a player, and you're in a Wednesday meeting, then Thursday and Friday, do you think Bill even mentions that it's the AFC Championship Game? All he's talking about is assignment football. It puts you in a mindset of, "Is that all I have to do? Well, that's easy."

**Mike:** Would he mention the higher stakes at all?

**Tedy:** Maybe Saturday night, after you've had your meal and you go into the team meeting before you break up as a unit and positional meetings, that's when Bill could bring everything full circle and give you a little bit of a taste of what's on the line if he feels it's appropriate. There have been years before AFC Championships and Super Bowls where he's done that and mentioned the magnitude of the game you're about to be in. Just a touch. He doesn't want to put too much pressure on because he knows it goes back to what's most important, and he'll bring up specific players and a specific job that needs to be accomplished on offense, defense and special teams. But during the week, the magnitude of the game will be de-emphasized. I mention this because I played in five conference championships under Belichick, six overall, and sometimes I have to remind myself that I did. It surprises me because going through that experience, it was almost like they weren't AFC Championship Games. To this day, they weren't. It was just a game.

**Mike:** A big part of this game will be how the Patriots defend Peyton Manning and a passing attack that is as deep as any in the NFL. At this point, is it about new wrinkles or more a case of Manning knowing what's coming and simply having to execute.

**Tedy:** I don't know if the Patriots have the personnel or the flexibility right now to do things that, say, the San Diego Chargers were doing on defense. A safety like San Diego's Eric Weddle, when you watched him in the regular-season matchup against the Broncos and some in the playoffs, he's the type of safety who has the knowledge, freedom and comfort level to move everywhere on the field. So he could line up in the deep left part of the field, come down to the left part of the box and then move over to the right side all the way over to the receiver, and then drop back into coverage to disguise a slot blitz that is coming from the left. I'm not sure if Devin McCourty and Steve Gregory have that type of freedom for the Patriots, or if they want McCourty to be that guy because he's needed as the last line of defense. So basically, the Patriots will disguise if they can. But this is also a defense where there are so many moving pieces they first want to know what they are doing and they are where they are supposed to be. So the work Peyton has to put in to figure out what they have to do might be less. Thus, he's probably going to know what you're in and it's all about defending it well. There might be more points scored in the first quarter of this game than the entire NFC Championship Game.

As a defense, you can get certain tendencies from the Denver formations: the stacked receivers, anticipating the rub route or the quick wide receiver screens, the double-ins. The Z-delay, which is what we used to like to call it, is when the No. 2 receiver runs up the field and the No. 1 receiver will run a little delay off the line of scrimmage and sprint across the formation for a quick shallow crossing route. Those are things you know you'll see every single time you play Peyton. Having said all of that, and having Manning and Tom Brady on the other side of the ball, what's interesting to me is that the team that runs the ball and stops the run is going to be the big difference.

**Mike:** It's interesting you say that, because in our weekly "Hot Button" segment, the point was made that run defense might be more important than pass defense. Let's get into that a little bit.

**Tedy:** Go back to when we were previewing the Nov. 24 game between the teams. At the time, I said that Broncos center Manny Ramirez was a liability along the offensive line. But after that game, and watching it further, I was wrong about that. The Broncos dominated on the line of scrimmage, especially in the run game up the middle. So, for the Patriots, the biggest factors in this game are how defensive tackles Sealver Siliga, Chris Jones and Joe Vellano will play. Siliga didn't play in the Nov. 24 game because he was still on the practice squad. Ramirez really manhandled Jones and Vellano. How you can tell, when watching on TV where you see the sideline angle, is when you can easily spot the No. 66 and you read the numbers on the back of jersey. That happened in the first matchup, when Ramirez got his hands on Jones or Vellano, and turned them to the sideline where you could see the 66 and "Ramirez" on the back of his jersey. That's a clean read for running back Knowshon Moreno, and that's where he is going to take the ball, because Ramirez is turning the defensive lineman and putting him in a gap where he wants them to be. As my fellow analyst on "NFL Live," Mark Schlereth, likes to say, that's called dispensing justice. So that's what the battle is to me. And that's where I think the Patriots want the battle to be also. Once again, I think they're OK with allowing 200 yards rushing rather than Peyton going off for 350.

**Mike:** Manning was content to hand the ball off that game, in part because of challenging windy conditions, and the Broncos rushed for 280 yards. But given the result and a weather forecast that calls for temperatures in the 50s with light wind, it seems fair to wonder if he might approach things a little differently.

**Tedy:** An interesting aspect of this is how much does he trust his defense. This might be another game of each quarterback trying to play keep-away, or each of them trying to protect their defense. Do they take the approach of scoring points in a shootout, or control the clock by running the ball. I think both of these teams will try to do the latter. The most glaring weakness to me, based on the first game with the Patriots, is that run defense. The Patriots can't bring another guy down in the box to stop the run because that could open things up for Demaryius Thomas, or Julius Thomas, to get a quick 20-30 yards in one chunk.

**Mike:** Julius Thomas didn't play in the Nov. 24 game, so it's a swap of tight ends. The Patriots had Rob Gronkowski that day but don't have him. The Broncos get Thomas back. That's advantage, Broncos.

**Tedy:** The addition of Thomas obviously makes this much tougher on the Patriots. It's going to take a big part of the emphasis off the receivers. They're going to want to defend from the inside-out, and when you hear Belichick talking about Julius Thomas at his news conference about how he's 6-foot-6 and the threat that he is, you almost get the sense he's going to do something to try to take him away. That's an emphasis that the Patriots didn't have the last game.

**Mike:** That could be where rookie linebacker Jamie Collins becomes a key piece in the Patriots' game-plan. We saw him split out wide on Coby Fleener in Saturday's win over the Colts and he can run well. You give Manning another weapon, and it's almost like it isn't fair.

**Tedy:** After the 2006 AFC Championship Game, I went up to Peyton after the game, hugged him, congratulated him, because that's when I finally knew they had it. It was the first time they beat us in a meaningful game. I told him, "You earned it, and you deserve this." That's how much I've always respected him as a competitor. He's the most dangerous opponent I've ever gone up against, the most respected opponent I've ever played against. There is no one else that can challenge you mentally, intellectually and physically. You rarely get that. Pre-snap, you have to think, "What's the down and distance, what's the situation, what's the formation, what's he saying? Does it matter?" And once the ball is snapped, he has the ability to do whatever he chooses.

**Mike:** There's been plenty of media-driven talk about the Manning versus Brady storyline this week, but the way the Patriots have been winning lately isn't necessarily with Brady's arm. So will it be ground-and-pound again? Or do the Patriots try to exploit what looks like a vulnerable secondary? I wonder if they feel like they have the weapons to get consistent separation to do the latter.

**Tedy:** We started this year talking about the new stars of the Patriots offense being the offensive line. That's right where we are now to finish this thing out. To get to the Super Bowl, this is who they have to be. At the beginning of the season, the running game had to buy time for Gronkowski to get back and Danny Amendola to be available again and to give these young receivers time with Brady. They did that. The passing offense took off once Gronkowski came back, and now he's gone again. It all comes down to physical football now. This team is doing its best 2004 imitation that it possibly can.

The run game is what it's all about. For the Patriots to win offensively, it's going to be about running the ball. Logan Mankins has to be the MVP of this game -- not only as a direct point-of-attack blocker, but also as a puller on the power-O plays. When he comes around and meets Danny Trevathan or Wesley Woodyard in the hole, he has to win. There were times in the last game when he planted Trevathan on his back. There were times in the last game when Trevathan stood him up in the hole. Mankins is a focal point. Center Ryan Wendell also has to come up big.

**Mike:** If that line can protect Brady and give him time, he might also see some favorable matchups in the passing game. The Broncos are thin at cornerback, which led them to sign former Patriots defensive back Marquice Cole this week.

**Tedy:** The Chris Harris injury is big. He was one of their best players in the secondary, with the ability to play inside and out, and also left or right. That's rare. His teammates marveled at his ability and coverage skills. He's well respected. That's almost like the Patriots losing someone like Rob Ninkovich because he does so many things -- off the line linebacker, edge-setter in a 3-4, a 4-3 defensive end getting to the passer. That type of versatility and flexibility, that's what Harris brought. So now I ask the question, "Will Denver be less multiple?" The Patriots will have to make a sideline adjustment once they see how the Broncos are matching up and they look for the guy they want to attack. Not having Von Miller is a big difference for them compared to Nov. 24. But not having Gronkowski is a big difference for the Patriots.

**Mike:** I think we should finish with special teams and coaching. The Patriots ranked No. 1 in the annual special teams rankings compiled by Rick Gosselin of the Dallas Morning News, while the Broncos were 29th. Those are hidden things that can often be overlooked. Also, the Patriots were one of the NFL's least penalized teams this year and the Broncos were one of the most. Something to consider. As for the coaching, what do you think?

**Tedy:** I'm still interested to see Fox in a pressure situation. Offensive lineman Zane Beadles mentioned it this week, how the Broncos won last week's game against the Chargers with the ball in their hands -- third-and-17 and finishing the drive. If it's close in this one, what decisions does Fox make late in the game?

**Mike:** As for Belichick, one of the questions some have asked if this is his best coaching job in his 14-year tenure with the team.

**Tedy:** When I think back, 2001 was a good one. Matt Cassel in 2008 was pretty good; 2006 was a pretty good job. Know what? I'd put this one up there at the top. I tried to explain this last week on NFL Live -- how he was coaching a team in constant transition. Many coaches will say "We need you to do this within our scheme and do it the best you can." But Bill caters to his players' strengths and will adjust the way he attacks teams. This offense has reinvented itself multiple times this season based on the strength of the players. On defense, you saw things like using linebacker Brandon Spikes as almost another defensive lineman after the season-ending injury to Vince Wilfork in late September. And how he's coached up others. So I want to say, "Yes, this is his best coaching job." The second would be the year Cassel came in (2008). An underrated one to me is the 2007 team. Why I say that is because it wasn't scheme-wise, but that year was the best year I ever saw him apply mental pressure on a team to continue to be great. He knew what he had and he knew the obstacle was going to be staying focused and not allow complacency to set in.

**Mike:** Let's wrap it up with our predictions. If the Patriots can keep the Broncos to a 50 percent or less success rate in the red zone, where Denver ranked No. 1 in the

regular season, I think they win the game because of their ball-control power-running approach. It's a tall task, but in a season in which they've surprised at almost every turn, I think they'll find a way. Patriots 27, Broncos 24.

**Tedy:** The Brady versus Manning matchup has been overplayed this week. To me, it's Manning versus Belichick and Brady versus Fox. Bill has always come up with a winning plan versus Peyton and if the ball's in Tom's hands at the end of the game he will find the answer. See you in New York, Reiss. The Patriots will get their second set of hats and T-shirts. Patriots 37, Broncos 34.

# Patriots will fly to Denver on Friday

By Field Yates  
ESPN.com  
January 17, 2014

As has been customary for the Patriots in the past when traveling west for a game that will be played two time zones behind East Coast time, the team will fly to Denver later today, coach Bill Belichick confirmed Friday morning.

The Patriots conducted their media availability before practice this morning rather than after so as to expedite the departure process as they head out for the AFC Championship Game versus the Denver Broncos (Sunday, 3 p.m. ET).

"I think everybody's excited. Obviously, it's a great opportunity," Belichick said. "It's what we've worked all year for, to play in games like this."

There are a variety of reasons for the team to travel a day early, led by the extra night to acclimate to the time change, as Denver is two hours behind East Coast time.

Team in good health: The Patriots will take the field briefly on Friday for their final practice of the week, and the team is largely healthy, with just five players limited during Thursday's session.

Earlier in the week, quarterback Tom Brady and long-snapper Danny Aiken came down with a bug that resulted in each being sent home Wednesday morning.

The two returned Thursday -- and, based on his news conferences, Brady seems to be fully past it -- and Belichick was asked if there were any lingering concerns about the bug leading up to the game.

"We'll do all we can on that," he said. "I don't know, I can't see the germs; if I could, we'd stamp them out. We've got to do the best we can to take preventative measures and just in general take good care of our health."

# Super storylines around the corner

SB XLVIII promises plenty of intrigue, regardless of who advances this weekend

By Adam Scheffter

ESPN.com

January 17, 2014

By now, the championship game matchups have been broken down every which way and sideways. Tom Brady has been compared to Peyton Manning, while Colin Kaepernick has been measured up against Russell Wilson.

New England's offense has been contrasted to Denver's, while San Francisco's and Seattle's defenses have been dissected.

Conversation will continue all the way up until Sunday's kickoffs, 3 p.m. ET for the AFC Championship Game, 6:30 ET for the NFC Championship Game. Yet as much discussion as there has been about the four teams this week, it will pale in comparison to the debate surrounding just two teams over the next two weeks.

But why wait. Let's get it started it now with a look at what those potential storylines would be with any of the four potential Super Bowl XLVIII matchups.

- **New England vs. San Francisco:** This would be a matchup of two of the NFL's most decorated and winning franchises, the team from the 2000s vs. the team of the 1980s. Brady would be facing his hometown team, chasing some of the records established by his boyhood idol, former 49ers quarterback Joe Montana. And here would come all the stories of how the 49ers bypassed Brady in the 2000 draft, selecting Hofstra quarterback Giovanni Carmazzi in the third round with the 65th overall pick, 134 picks before the Patriots drafted Brady in Round 6.
- **New England vs. Seattle:** From 1997 to '99, the Patriots' head coach was Pete Carroll. But after he compiled a 27-21 regular-season record with a 1-2 postseason mark, New England had seen enough. It fired Carroll and hired Bill Belichick. So the Patriots' only two head coaches over the past 17 seasons would be facing off for a world championship. And it would give Belichick a chance to make history. With a win in Super Bowl XLVIII, Belichick would pass Tom Landry and his 20-16 postseason record for the most postseason wins by a coach in NFL history.
- **Denver vs. San Francisco:** A rematch of Super Bowl XXIV, one of the worst Super Bowls in history, when San Francisco obliterated John Elway and the Denver Broncos 55-10. This would be Elway's chance at revenge, his chance to add a Super Bowl as an executive to the two he won as a quarterback. But it also would be a chance for San Francisco to get revenge against Denver for signing Manning away

from it. Just think how different the 49ers would be if they had landed Manning and not turned over their team to Kaepernick. Could have happened. Easily.

- Denver vs. Seattle: Two former AFC West rivals revisit what used to be one of the NFL's great underrated rivalries. These teams were probably the most popular preseason picks to meet in Super Bowl XLVIII. Interesting part is, the two squared off in August in what turned out to be one of the more intense and entertaining preseason games in recent memory. And just as San Francisco missed out on Manning, Seattle didn't even get a sniff. The Seahawks sent their private plane to meet with Manning, and he declined to even step aboard without a meeting set up in advance. But in this matchup, the Seahawks finally would get to meet Manning.

First-hand knowledge: For as much as everyone has learned this week about the 49ers and Seahawks, one man might know those teams' rosters better than any other. One man has had a hand in building each roster.

Scot McCloughan served as the Seahawks' director of college scouting from 1999 through 2005. He then moved over to the 49ers' front office, with the final job being general manager, until March 2010. A few months later he returned to Seattle as a senior personnel executive.

Personal issues forced him out of his job in San Francisco, but professional expertise helped land McCloughan back in Seattle, where the Seahawks knew his talents well.

During his first stint in Seattle, McCloughan helped draft 25 players who were on the roster that won an NFC championship after the 2005 season and advanced to the Super Bowl against Pittsburgh.

Later, McCloughan was instrumental in San Francisco selecting players such as running back Frank Gore, offensive tackle Joe Staley, and linebackers Patrick Willis and Ahmad Brooks, and signing players such as defensive lineman Justin Smith. McCloughan helped provide a foundation that current 49ers general manager Trent Baalke expanded on and grew into one of the top teams in football. This season the 49ers had eight players selected to the Pro Bowl -- six whom McCloughan brought in.

Then McCloughan joined Seattle, where he assisted Seahawks general manager John Schneider and was part of the decisions to draft players such as Wilson and linebacker Bobby Wagner.

McCloughan is the tie that binds, the one man who has bridged the rivalry between the franchises. He knows the guts of these franchises as well as anyone. He has a well-regarded eye for talent and can figure out what players will rise and sink on draft day better than most.

Despite his fingerprints being all over the two best NFC teams that will square off in Sunday's conference championship game, McCloughan still has not gotten another GM job, at least not yet. The Dolphins called him about their GM opening, but the Seahawks denied McCloughan permission to talk, according to a league source. Tampa Bay has not even called McCloughan about its GM opening.

McCloughan very well may get another chance. But his resume speaks for itself. His resume will be on display Sunday, when the two franchises that have employed him since 1999 will battle for the NFC championship.

Blount force in New England: During the past year, the running back trade that garnered the most attention was Indianapolis sending a first-round pick to Cleveland for Trent Richardson.

But during the April draft, the Patriots traded a seventh-round pick and running back Jeff Demps to Tampa Bay for running back LeGarrette Blount in a deal that has had a greater impact than the one that involved Richardson.

Blount has established himself as the Patriots' lead back and a football force. In the regular-season finale against Buffalo, in one of the great performances in franchise history, Blount racked up 334 total yards, a single-game franchise record that shattered the 51-year-old mark that Larry Garron set on Nov. 3, 1962.

In New England's next game, a Saturday night divisional playoff win over Indianapolis, Blount did something Walter Payton, Emmitt Smith and Barry Sanders never did. He became the first player in NFL history to rush for at least 125 yards and four touchdowns in a postseason game.

The Patriots, once again, plucked off another player who had worn out his role in another city and revitalized him in New England, just like it had done with Corey Dillon, Randy Moss and others.

New England needs more from Blount, who suddenly and unexpectedly has become one of the NFL's biggest offseason pickups.

# NFL's best take center stage

Sunday's championship pairings are tough to top; vastly different games likely

By John Clayton  
ESPN.com  
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For those wanting the playoff-seeding format tweaked, it's hard to fault the 2013 results.

The best teams made it to the conference championships. The Denver Broncos and New England Patriots are the top two seeds in the AFC. They meet Sunday in Denver in what promises to be yet another memorable matchup between Peyton Manning and Tom Brady.

Since the beginning of the season, Seattle and San Francisco arguably have been the best teams in the NFC, if not the NFL. What has become the best rivalry in football is featured in the NFC Championship Game on Sunday at CenturyLink Field.

The salary cap has made it hard to sustain dynasties or to construct dominating teams. Good teams have to juggle their rosters to keep as many top players as possible, but ultimately, they have to make sacrifices. As we saw during the regular season, rosters are close enough in talent that even the best teams have to pull out victories in the fourth quarter.

Championship Sunday is historic, possibly going down as one of the greatest championship pairings in NFL history. Under the current playoff format, it's only the fourth time the four teams playing on championship weekend each had at least 12 regular-season wins. The last time that happened was 1998, when John Elway took the Broncos to their second straight Super Bowl victory.

Some critics of the system believe wild-card teams should be seeded higher than division winners with worse records. The 49ers proved good teams can overcome the rigors of the road and make it to the championship game.

The NFL got it right this year.

Here are the top 10 trends from the championship round:

1. The over-under for the weekend: In Denver, everyone expects a high-scoring shootout. In Seattle, the odds favor a low-scoring, physical game. Las Vegas defines the differences in these conference championships. The over-under for the New England-Denver game is 56. The over-under for Seattle-San Francisco is 39½. For the first time since the merger, one conference title game has two teams that

finished in the top three in scoring offense while the other conference has a pair of top-three scoring defenses. The Broncos and Patriots are built around their quarterbacks. The Seahawks and 49ers are built in the old style of football that goes back to the 1960s and '70s. Defense and running the ball are the themes for these teams. Two games. Two styles. Fascinating stuff.

2. Ultimate test for the Carroll formula: When asked about his struggling pass offense, Seahawks coach Pete Carroll says he's not concerned. Carroll sites a formula for winning. Each Monday, Carroll meets with quarterback Russell Wilson to go over the formula for that week's game. Ultimately, the formula comes down to not committing turnovers. Carroll reviews the opponent and tells Wilson his thoughts. He has a defense that surrenders only 14.4 points a game. Carroll will tell Wilson that his defense can hold down the score, and as long as Wilson doesn't turn over the ball, the Seahawks should win. The formula has won 24 regular-season and two playoff games over the past two years, but Sunday's game against the 49ers will be the supreme challenge. Niners QB Colin Kaepernick is getting better with the passing offense now that Michael Crabtree has come off the injured list. Over the past five games, Wilson is averaging only 13.6 completions on 24 attempts for 157.6 yards. Twice in the past three games, he has passed for fewer than 110 yards. Wilson said he needs to fix a few things to be more accurate.

3. Impact of injuries: Percy Harvin's concussion is the biggest injury concern, and it doesn't look good. The Seattle receiver is going through the concussion protocol, but there seems to be doubt about his status. Harvin had to be taken to the locker room twice in the divisional round win over New Orleans for concussion tests. The Seahawks need him. Harvin's pure speed was on notice against the Saints. He gained 9 yards on a "fly sweep" run in the second quarter. On the next play, Saints defenders positioned themselves to stop him, but Marshawn Lynch got the ball and ran for a touchdown. If Harvin plays, his role will be limited. It's pretty clear his body isn't ready for a lot of hitting after he missed all but two games because of a sore hip. Other than Harvin, the injury lists aren't bad. After missing two games, 49ers cornerback Carlos Rogers has returned to practice and may be able to play despite hamstring problems. The Seahawks may have linebacker K.J. Wright back after foot surgery. The 49ers suffered a scare when fullback Will Tukuafu suffered a knee injury last week, but he's practicing. New England punter Ryan Allen has a sore shoulder, but he should be all right. The Broncos cleaned up their injury list by putting defensive end Derek Wolfe and cornerback Chris Harris on injured reserve.

4. Official report: The NFL informed officials to do the best they could to limit the number of penalties, and the result has been exciting playoff games. The Seahawks may benefit from having Gene Steratore as the NFC championship referee. The Seahawks stress man-to-man, press coverage. They like their hands on offensive pass-catchers. Steratore called only 13 defensive pass interference penalties in 15

games this year. Tony Corrente, the AFC ref, had a crew that called 26. Overall, officials have been letting defensive backs play. Only six defensive pass interferences have been called in the first eight playoff games. But blockers in the Denver-New England game have to be on guard for holding penalties. Corrente ranked eighth among the 17 referees and crews with 42 offensive holding penalties. Don't expect games in which a lot of flags are littering the field.

5. The pressure is on Manning: This matchup between Manning and Brady will further define the legacies of these two future Hall of Fame quarterbacks. Brady is 10-4 against Manning, including the Patriots overcoming a 24-point deficit in Week 12 to beat the Broncos. Manning is 10-11 in the playoffs and would invite harsh criticism if he loses in the postseason for the second straight year despite having home-field advantage. Manning chose to play in Denver because he thought -- like Elway -- he could finish his career with a Super Bowl ring or two. Manning has always had trouble in his matchups with Brady because he also has to face Bill Belichick, who usually does enough to throw Manning off his game a little. In their three meetings in the postseason, Manning has only one win, averages only 18.3 points a game and completes only 56.6 percent of his passes.

6. Bringing back the running game: It's not surprising Frank Gore and Lynch have done well. Niners coach Jim Harbaugh and Carroll emphasize the run. It's the impact of the run on the AFC that turned out to be the surprise. Manning works out of a three-receiver set, but he has made sure not to forget the run. Knowshon Moreno got 23 carries against San Diego last week and rushed for 224 yards against the Patriots in Week 12. Belichick didn't start featuring the 250-pound LeGarrette Blount until the final weeks of the regular season, but his power running has been important. In his past three games, Blount has eight touchdown runs. He had 189 rushing yards in the regular-season finale against Buffalo and 166 yards last week against Indianapolis. The Patriots have averaged 39.3 points in the past three games. The trend in the playoffs is to use the run more. The 45.8 run percentage is the highest in the playoffs in more than a decade. The 265 combined rushing yards a game in the first eight games of the playoffs are the second most since 1997.

7. Getting a rush on Kaepernick: After the Seahawks' pass rush faded during the stretch last year, Seattle added Cliff Avril and Michael Bennett to the defensive line and moved Bruce Irvin to linebacker. Add Chris Clemons to the mix, and the Seahawks have four key pass-rushers to disrupt an offense. That's important because it gives defensive coordinator Dan Quinn plenty of options in trying to pressure Kaepernick. According to ESPN Stats & Information data, Kaepernick is blitzed 39 percent of the time he drops back to pass, most in the NFL. The Seahawks don't have to blitz him. Against Seattle's four-man rush the past two seasons, Kaepernick has completed only 49.3 percent of his passes for a 6-yard

average and has five interceptions. The Seahawks are very familiar with his running style, too. They know how he prefers to run to his left.

8. Playing the slots: When he was with the Patriots, Wes Welker enhanced the value of receivers working out of the slot. He'd catch more than 100 passes a year for Brady and move the chains with first-down receptions. When the Patriots didn't want to pay him \$6 million a year, he moved on to Denver to help Manning. The slot is where a lot of the action will be Sunday in the AFC Championship Game. Belichick signed Danny Amendola to replace Welker, but it turned out that the replacement was already on the roster -- Julian Edelman. Edelman ranked fourth in the league catching 53 passes for 497 yards from the slot. Welker was third with 57 catches for 688 yards. Both teams are loaded with slot options. Brady has Edelman and Amendola. Manning has Welker and Eric Decker. Amendola caught 42 catches for 501 yards from the slot. Decker caught 33 for 362 from the slot.

9. Expect close games: Even though the 49ers and Kaepernick have been blown out in their past two trips to Seattle, expect a close game that will be decided in the fourth quarter. The past six NFC Championship Games each have been decided by seven points or fewer. Four of the past five AFC title games have been decided by five points or fewer. Kaepernick has shown he's fearless on the road. He's 3-0 in playoff road games. He's in rare company. Brady is 3-2 in road playoff games, Joe Flacco is 6-4, and Eli Manning is 5-1. It will be interesting to see how Kaepernick does after three quarters. Crowd noise affected him in his first two games in Seattle, and if he gets into a close game that's decided in the fourth quarter, the crowd could force a few mistakes. That happened to Drew Brees last Saturday.

10. Pace of the game: What will be interesting is how Manning and Brady manage the game. Both quarterbacks love to work no-huddle offenses at a fast pace. As a result, Manning averages 72.2 plays a game and Brady averages 71.1. That's No. 1 and No. 2 in football. The more plays each quarterback can run off, the greater chance there is to get more running plays. Last year, Brady did a masterful job of using the pace to mount a running attack. They averaged 74.4 plays a game and there were enough running plays to get Stevan Ridley to more than 1,200 yards. In 2013, the Broncos averaged 28.8 running plays per game, the Patriots 29.4.

# Injuries could derail Denver

Absence of Harris, Miller will badly sap Broncos' pass defense

By Tom Gower

ESPN.com/Football Outsiders

January 17, 2014

For Sunday's AFC Championship Game, the Denver Broncos will be missing two key defenders who played in the 34-31 loss to New England in Week 12. Linebacker Von Miller tore his ACL in Week 16, while cornerback Chris Harris tore his ACL in last week's win over the Chargers. What kind of impact might the loss of each player have in the rematch? How good exactly have the Broncos been with and without Miller, and which defenders might the Broncos be forced to rely upon in Harris' absence?

The answers to those questions may determine which team pushes through to the Super Bowl.

The good news is that by this point of the season the Broncos should be more than used to playing without Miller. Between his six-game suspension to start the year and the torn ACL, Sunday will be the ninth game the Broncos have played without their star third-year pass rusher, which will match the number of games he actually suited up for this season.

That does not mean the Broncos have played well without Miller. While they took down the Chargers, by Football Outsiders' DVOA ratings (explained here), Denver's defensive DVOA without Miller is 10.8 percent, which would have ranked 27th over the course of the season. Their actual full-season DVOA was minus-0.2 percent, good for 15th, so it is apparent Miller's presence made a significant difference.

The good news is the Broncos still played excellent run defense without Miller. In the games he missed, they actually had a better run defense DVOA (minus-20.6 percent) than they did with him in the lineup (minus-11.4 percent). That included limiting the Patriots in the first meeting to only 116 yards on 29 handoffs, plus forcing fumbles by both Stevan Ridley and LeGarrette Blount that earned them quick trips to the bench. The Broncos' run defense also played well against the Chargers last week, recording a DVOA of minus-31.2 percent.

It is against the pass where the Broncos have struggled without Miller. With him, they had a pass defense DVOA of minus-9.9 percent, which would have ranked sixth for the season. In the games he has not played, their pass defense DVOA is 28.1 percent, worst in the league.

Given that Miller had 18.5 sacks in 2012, the obvious answer is that without him, the pass rush is lacking. A look at sack data, however, suggests this is not the case. The Broncos' Adjusted Sack Rate, which accounts for opportunities and the quality of opposing offenses, was 6.7 percent with Miller in the lineup and 6.3 percent without him. Given that Adjusted Sack Rates around the league ranged from 5.3 percent to 9.5 percent, that is a virtually indistinguishable change.

The Broncos also hurried the opposing passer slightly less frequently with Miller in the lineup, even though they brought five or more rushers more often with him active. Whatever has caused the Denver pass defense to play worse without Miller seems to be completely in the coverage and how opposing teams attack the Broncos, not in a decline from the pass rush.

Wherever and whenever, Chris Harris was a key part of that Broncos coverage. That was especially true in the areas the Patriots attack frequently.

The aerial attack Tom Brady leads is a horizontal stretch passing offense, attacking all three short areas of the field -- left, middle and right -- while rarely throwing downfield. Of Brady's passes this season, just 18 percent were thrown more than 15 yards downfield in any direction. We saw this in the first Broncos-Patriots game. Only eight of Brady's 50 attempts were downfield shots, while he threw at least 12 passes into each short area of the field.

Over the course of the season, Harris was the Broncos' most-targeted defender on short passes. He was very effective there, recording an excellent Success Rate of 62 percent (defined here) and only allowing 5.3 yards per play in coverage according to Football Outsiders game charting. He was also the Broncos' only defensive back to be active in all three short areas, with at least 16 targets each listed as left, middle and right.

By comparison, Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, whose absence from the second half in Week 12 seemed to key New England's comeback, performed nearly as well in coverage on short passes (65 percent Success Rate, 5.4 yards per play), but only had three plays in the regular season in coverage in the middle of the field. The short middle area was the province primarily of linebackers Wesley Woodyard (who was good) and Danny Trevathan (who struggled).

That speaks to the broader question of how the Patriots choose to play the Broncos, and vice versa. The Patriots used three or more wide receivers on only 15 of their 72 offensive snaps against the Colts after doing so 55 percent of the time in the regular season. Against the Broncos, the Patriots used three wide receivers 54 percent of the time, although it is worth noting they played three wide receivers only 47 percent of the time when they came back in the second half and overtime.

In the Week 12 matchup, the Broncos defender in coverage most frequently was Woodyard, whom we have listed in coverage on 12 passes. He did well on passes over the middle, but the Patriots took advantage of him on the outside. Following that game, the Broncos made a lineup change. Woodyard played every snap that game but now plays only in the nickel, with Nate Irving and Paris Lenon getting snaps in the base 4-3.

Neither Irving nor Lenon has performed particularly well in coverage by our metrics, albeit in small, unreliable sample sizes. The Patriots could probably have even more success attacking them in the pass game than they did Woodyard in Week 12. Alternatively, the Patriots could play three wide receivers, force the Broncos to play nickel, and perhaps attack Kayvon Webster, whom Brady exploited after Rodgers-Cromartie went out, or Quentin Jammer, who struggled against the Chargers. Either way, the Patriots should be able to find a favorable matchup to exploit through the air, and they will probably need to, given the quality of Denver's run defense even without Miller.

# Broncos' Champ Bailey back to do whatever it takes in AFC Championship Game

By Lindsay H. Jones  
USA TODAY Sports  
January 17, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – Champ Bailey has seen hundreds of teammates signed and cut, and two head coaches fired in the eight long years since he was last in this situation.

Eight years since the Broncos played in the AFC Championship Game, eight years since the Broncos lost to the Pittsburgh Steelers, eight years since the Broncos last had a chance at the Super Bowl.

"I never thought it would take this long," Bailey told USA TODAY Sports Friday afternoon after his team's final practice of the week.

Bailey's 2013 season has been a nightmare, the most frustrating of his career. He struggled for months to return from a foot injury he suffered in the second preseason game. He made two failed comeback attempts before pain in his right foot forced him back to the sidelines. When he finally returned for the final two weeks of the regular season, he was used in a limited role.

For three games, the Broncos have had Bailey on the football equivalent of a pitch-count. After starting all but one of the first 218 games (including postseason) of his career, Bailey was a situational player, on the field for roughly half of Denver's defensive snaps as the slot corner.

That will change Sunday against the New England Patriots.

"[The pitch count] doesn't exist this week," Bailey said. "Whatever it takes."

Bailey's expected return to the starting lineup at his familiar left cornerback spot is the most logical solution for a Denver defense desperate to replace Chris Harris. The third-year corner tore his ACL in last week's divisional round win against San Diego.

In a season that has been defined by chaos for the Broncos defense, Bailey's return has been a welcome change. This is a defense that played the first six games without its best pass rusher -- Von Miller -- who was serving a drug-program-related suspension. Later, Denver lost starting defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson

(hip), defensive end Derek Wolfe (illness), safety Rahim Moore (lower leg) and Miller (ACL) to injuries.

"You know when he's out there because he talks to you real smooth, and lets you know everything is alright," linebacker Danny Trevathan said of Bailey. "When you're out there with Champ, you just get a good vibe from him. It's an honor to play with a guy that is going to be in the Hall of Fame."

Bailey, 35, remains under contract with the Broncos through next season. He will be in the final year of the four-year, \$42.5 million contract he signed in 2011. But just as quarterback Peyton Manning didn't want to talk about his legacy or future plans this week, Bailey dismissed any questions about anything beyond Sunday's game.

"All I care about is winning the game in front of me – all those things will take care of themselves," Bailey said. "If I don't take care of what is in front of me, then nothing else will matter, because I would probably go out there and have a bad game. When I'm done, I'll look back then."

Perhaps no Bronco would appreciate an AFC Championship more than Bailey, the team's longest-tenured player. He arrived in Denver in a blockbuster trade with Washington in 2004, for running back Clinton Portis, and re-signed before hitting free agency in 2011.

Longtime Broncos receiver Rod Smith, who will serve as an honorary captain Sunday, was Bailey's teammate for four years, including in 2005 when they last advanced to the AFC Championship Game. Smith has remained in Denver since retiring in 2007 and stayed close with Bailey.

On Friday, Smith said he believes Bailey's return is critical to the Broncos' current playoff run.

"That guy has instincts like no other corner," Smith said. "He's shut down some of the best receivers in the NFL. That's going to be evident come Sunday. Whoever he's on ... his job is to just do what Champ Bailey knows how to do."

# With other QB rivalries 'not even close,' Manning and Brady square off again

By Nancy Armour  
USA TODAY Sports  
January 17, 2014

When a neck injury forced Peyton Manning to sit out the 2011 season, Tom Brady was one of the people who missed him most.

Never mind that the quarterbacks are rivals. Or that one has sometimes blocked the other from reaching the goal that drives them both, as will happen Sunday when the Denver Broncos and New England Patriots play for the AFC Championship.

Brady and Manning have become forever intertwined by more than a decade of wins and records. They are accidental touchstones, each one's accomplishments defining the other's career as much as his own.

"They have great respect for each other," said Brady's father, Tom Sr. "They understand each other as well as anyone can understand.

"It's pretty special when you have that kind of a relationship. You want to beat the heck out of each other. But you have great respect for one another."

It's a sentiment some of the NFL's other great quarterbacks — Bart Starr, Roger Staubach, Terry Bradshaw, Steve Young, Troy Aikman — know well.

"I think you can have that good competition when you're playing, admire and respect each other," Bradshaw, the Pittsburgh Steelers Hall of Famer and current FOX NFL analyst, said. "Now, we can't compete against each other, but we can respect each other and like one another."

Look at the greatest names across sports, and odds are there was a rival who pushed him to be better, to go further, to refuse to settle for mere success when greatness was within reach. Nicklaus and Palmer. Ali and Frazier. Magic and Bird.

It's tougher to find those iconic rivalries in the NFL, simply because of the dynamics of the game. Players at the same position don't face each other head-to-head, and a quarterback-linebacker rivalry, or a wide receiver vs. a cornerback, just doesn't have the same pizzazz.

"There was never really one. The teams we went against, the quarterbacks changed," Hall of Famer Joe Montana told USA TODAY Sports, referring to when he played for the San Francisco 49ers. "Probably the biggest one was with the (New

York) Giants and Phil Simms. ... (But) it never seemed like it was about us, going head to head. You don't look at it like that."

There are those precious rare instances, however, when timing and talent align, and it inspires everyone — including the guy on the opposing sideline — to elevate his game.

"I've been around the game long enough to know that Brady doesn't play Manning and so on. But that duo, they have to match each other," said longtime NFL analyst John Madden, who, as coach of the Oakland Raiders, had a front-row seat for Ken Stabler's epic matchups against Bradshaw's Steelers.

"Both teams know that the other can score a lot of points," Madden told USA TODAY Sports. "You're not going to play Peyton Manning and then not score a lot of points. And you're not going to play Tom Brady and not score a lot of points.

"So they go in against each other and they become very aggressive."

Bradshaw gets best of Staubach

The Raiders and Steelers faced each other in the playoffs every season from 1972-76, with the AFC title at stake in their last three meetings.

In contrast, Hall of Fame quarterbacks Bradshaw and Staubach only played a handful of times because their Steelers and Dallas Cowboys were in different conferences. But they were the premier quarterbacks of their generation, leaders of teams that were the best thing going in the NFL in the 1970s, and that alone would have been enough to create a rivalry.

"We got in the Super Bowls five times in the '70s. I was quarterback for four of them. We were 2-2, and I wish we were 4-0," Staubach told USA TODAY Sports. "And Terry never lets me forget he was 4-0."

That the Super Bowls in which the two faced each other were among the best ever only added to their shared legacy.

Pittsburgh won both times against the Cowboys, but by a total of just eight points. And while Staubach's most vivid memories are of Pittsburgh's "Steel Curtain" defense — "(Jack) Lambert was a mean son of a gun" — he is quick to give Bradshaw his due.

"Bradshaw just made plays when he had to," Staubach said. "He made big plays."

Rules changes spotlight quarterbacks

Montana and Simms were considered quasi-rivals. The Buffalo Bills' Jim Kelly and the Miami Dolphins' Dan Marino are often mentioned in the same breath. But the closest the NFL came to a truly great rivalry in the years between Bradshaw-Staubach and Brady-Manning was that of Dallas' Aikman and San Francisco's Young.

The Cowboys and 49ers were the class of the NFL in the early 1990s, with the NFC Championship Game serving as the de facto Super Bowl. The teams met in the NFC title game from 1993-95, with the winner going on to victory in the Super Bowl each time.

Much like Brady and Manning, Aikman and Young were charismatic, as appealing off the field as they were on.

But those were different times.

Rules have since changed in an effort to give quarterbacks and receivers more protection. As a byproduct, it has helped usher in the golden era of offense.

Offenses were already beginning to open up. But with more time to throw, quarterbacks are more prolific. Look at the list of highest single-season passing yardage, and all but two of the top 12 spots is occupied by a current player.

At the top of the list? Manning, whose 5,477 yards passing this season was a yard more than the mark set in 2011 by Drew Brees of the New Orleans Saints.

VIDEO: AFC Championship Game preview

"The rules were different," Staubach said. "I think my last year, '79 or '78, was when you're not supposed to hit receivers past five yards. Before, you could hit them all over the field until the ball was in the air. So we didn't throw as much; they really intentionally opened the passing game.

"The most I ever threw it in one game was 49 times, and that was because we were behind. Usually it was around 25," Staubach added. "I'd love to be able to throw the ball 50 times."

Frequency of games make rivalry

As the passing game has taken center stage, so have the guys running it. Before Adrian Peterson snapped the streak last season, a quarterback had won MVP five consecutive years, and in nine of the previous 11.

Only once since the award began in 1957 — 1966-70 — had quarterbacks won five in a row.

Add the increase in endorsement opportunities and proliferation of the media — new and traditional — and the Brady-Manning rivalry has drawn a spotlight like no other.

"This is the greatest quarterback rivalry in the history of football," Simms, who will call Sunday's game for CBS, told USA TODAY Sports. "Bradshaw and Staubach had it there for a while, but nothing as sustained and long and compelling as this one.

"Not even close."

It helps, of course, that Brady and Manning have played each other so often. Sunday's game will be their 15th meeting since 2001, and fourth in the playoffs. It's the fifth time they will play each other twice in the same season.

"I don't know if there ever will be another rivalry, or has been another rivalry, when looking at the numbers that I've seen, with Brady and Manning," says two-time Super Bowl-winning quarterback John Elway, now Manning's boss. "There wasn't, as far as I was concerned in my career, a rivalry that I got to see on the field as much as those guys got to see each other."

But the frequency of Brady's and Manning's meetings has meant inevitable — and often unfavorable — comparisons.

Brady has gotten the better of Manning in their matchups, winning 10 of the 14 games, including New England's comeback from 24 points down to stun the Broncos 34-31 in overtime in November. Manning has more MVPs (four), but Brady has more Super Bowl titles (three).

"I just think that they're two of the very best ever," Brady Sr. said. "And to be able to enjoy that. ... Tommy has even said at different times, 'It's too bad people have to compare us instead of just appreciating our different styles.' "

Said Bill Polian, who drafted Manning first overall when he was general manager of the Indianapolis Colts: "The rivalry itself over time has grown and taken on almost mythical proportions."

But the players involved recognize it for what it is. Both insist the importance of this game — and all the others — is because of the teams playing and what's at stake, not a personal matchup. (Manning says the same thing when he plays little brother Eli and the Giants.)

Like the great rivals of old, however, Brady and Manning appreciate the role the other has played in his career.

Montana mentioned reminiscing with Simms. When Bradshaw lived in Dallas, he and Staubach's paths would cross "quite a bit," Staubach said. And Bradshaw

recalled missing the start of the second half of the Pro Bowl one year because he was catching up with former San Diego Charger Dan Fouts, another member of that era's quarterback fraternity.

Although Brady and Manning don't make a show of it, they have become friends over the years, and those closest to them expect that bond could get even stronger when their playing days are done.

"At the end of the day, they're friends now. And I'm sure they'll be better friends in the future," the elder Brady said. "So when they're grandfathers and great grandfathers, they'll appreciate even more what a great ride it has been."

Contributing: Jarrett Bell, Jim Corbett, Lindsay H. Jones, Gary Mihoces

# Ramsey: Expectations always higher for legends like Peyton Manning

By David Ramsey  
Colorado Springs Gazette  
January 17, 2014

The burden of greatness.

This is the weight on Peyton Manning's shoulders. I've heard from readers who believe it's unfair to say Manning has won "only" one Super Bowl title or to refer to his losing record (10 wins, 11 losses) in the playoffs or to wonder why he's so dominating in the regular season and sometimes not-so-dominating in games that matter most.

My answer for all the legion of Manning fans is this:

The questions that surround Manning are, really, a compliment. While he terrorizes defenses during the regular season, he also raises expectations. Those expectations are his curse, but only a truly great athlete could construct such expectations.

Nobody ever wonders why Kyle Orton has never won a Super Bowl.

Manning resides in a strange place. He will run on the field at Mile High Sunday as The Lead Dog in American sports after winning 13 or more regular-season games for the sixth time in his career. He's captured the nation's admiration and imagination after conquering a severe neck injury. He's revived a Broncos franchise that had fallen after a journey to the 2005 AFC title game.

Still, doubts surround him. He still, after his mountain of victories and honors, has much to prove. His brother, Eli, owns more Super Bowl rings. So does Peyton's arch-nemesis, Patriots quarterback Tom Brady. Sunday's game is about much more than the Brady-Manning rivalry, but what gives this game such delicious, enormous weight is this one-on-one matchup.

Only one of the quarterbacks will walk into football history as the ultimate winner of the early 21st century. And recent history leans heavily toward Brady.

Manning, the emperor of the regular season, trails Brady, Otto Graham, John Unitas, Bart Starr, Terry Bradshaw, Joe Montana and, yes, John Elway on the list of all-time greats in the playoffs. Elway walked into the sunset with a 14-7 playoff record, including a 5-1 record in AFC title games.

Manning's burden, I realize, does not seem fair. But this is the same burden that followed basketball's Wilt Chamberlain for two decades. He scored 100 points in a game. He averaged 50 points a game over the course of a season. He revolutionized the game. And yet ...

Wilt failed to win a title at Kansas. He struggled in his historical rivalry with center Bill Russell, the ultimate team warrior who won 11 titles in 13 seasons. Wilt, the superior talent, won "only" two.

I sat in a big room when Manning arrived in Colorado for his introductory news conference. Questions surround him now. Questions surrounded him then. He had undergone four surgeries on his neck and there was speculation he never would recreate the dominance of all those Indianapolis afternoons.

Manning has since admitted he wondered, too. He struggled, mightily, to overcome the limitations of his battered body. He lost three of his first five games as Broncos starter, and his passes often resembled wounded vultures.

Since then, he's won 24 of 28. He's become a Colorado folk hero. He's shown the sheer power of stubbornness when he refused to surrender to his injury. He's delivered Sunday afternoon thrills to millions of Broncos fans.

I understand if this mountain of accomplishments might seem enough. I understand those who ask why anyone would dare question Manning if he fails to deliver a victory on Sunday against Bill Belichick and his marauding Patriots.

I understand.

But that's Manning's burden. A rare burden, one only a few athletes must carry.

The burden of greatness.

# Championship Game Rankings: It doesn't get any better than this

By Jason La Canfora  
CBSSports.com  
January 16, 2014

Well, we got what we wanted.

As a pure football fan, this championship weekend is about all we could ask for. Sure, if you are a fan of one of the 28 other teams that participate in the National Football League, you still might be stinging over the end of your club's season. And, it stands to reason you might have a pretty good hatred going for one of the four teams still playing football. But come on, dig deep into your heart, understand that this great sport of ours is about to go hibernate for about half a year, and recognize this for what it is.

All of these teams deserve to be here. No flukes. All have compelling quarterbacks. As much as parity is the buzzword of football, and plenty of No. 6 seeds have provided wild rides to the Super Bowl, there is something to be said for chalk, or close to it. It didn't take a hot December or a couple of quirky breaks to get the Seahawks, 49ers, Broncos or Patriots into this postseason; they all earned it, over the course of the season, and, frankly, they stayed among the most consistent teams in the NFL for the better part of the entire regular season.

Think about this for a minute -- the longest losing streak any of these teams had was two games. That's it. In fact, between the four of them, there were just two losing streaks, total, of that length -- both by the 49ers and both coming before Thanksgiving. So, these four teams are all "hot" to one degree or another, and all battle tested, and very, very good, and in every way earned their way to this point.

Take it a step further:

- The only teams the Seahawks lost to -- Colts, Cardinals, 49ers
- The only teams the 49ers lost to -- Colts, Seahawks, Panthers, Saints
- The only teams the Broncos lost to -- Colts, Patriots, Chargers
- The only teams the Patriots lost to -- Bengals, Panthers, Jets, Dolphins

So of their collective 14 losses, only three came against non-playoff teams (Jets, Dolphins and Cards; Miami and Arizona just missed the postseason). There were no losses to a sub-.500 team among the entire group. And of those 14 defeats, 10

came to teams that reached at least the divisional round of the playoffs. So let's savor what we have here, which is really the best teams, many peaking at precisely the right time, all of whom can and should be equipped to handle performing in the first cold-weather, outdoor Super Bowl. You gotta love all of the above.

New England at Denver

Sunday, Jan. 19, 3 p.m. ET (CBS & CBSSports.com)

Why to watch: I'm going to let you in on a little secret, that, well, really isn't much of a secret at all. But I have a hunch that a year ago, there may have been esteemed executives at my beloved CBS who were hoping to see this matchup in the AFC Championship Game. And if not for a Joe Flacco desperation Hail Mary and then a Baltimore overtime win in Denver, then, well, this would be a rematch game. Instead the Ravens, and not Peyton Manning and the Broncos, went to New England, beat Tom Brady and the Pats and went on to snatch the Lombardi Trophy. And this year, we are all treated to these two old goats -- both of whom could make the case for being The GOAT -- meeting with a trip to the Super Bowl on the line. That's about as good as it gets. Manning is going to end Brady's season or Brady is going to end Manning's season. No two ways about it. Manning's playoff futility will either hang over him like a dank, half-emptied bottle of Bud Light leaking onto some stale Papa John's pizza stuck to the cardboard box, or, well he'll be headed for a third trip to the big game with a chance to cement his legacy. Will Brady, the playoff golden boy, add to his ridiculous postseason pedigree? Or will we hear about the no rings since Spygate talk and how Peyton has been to two Super Bowls since Tom won his last one, and all of that stuff? Sunday settles all of that, at least temporarily. In what may have been Bill Belichick's greatest coaching job ever -- which is truly saying something -- it will require his defense curtailing what has been the best passing attack in NFL history to get there. It's almost not fair to have so many subplots tied to one three-hour explosion of football goodness.

Experts' ViewWatch: AFC championship preview

What to watch for: Amid all of this star power, I am going to be paying particular attention to a cat they call Pot Roast. Denver run stuffer Terrance Knighton was a beast last week against the Chargers, refreshed coming off a bye, and aided by the fact Chargers feature back Ryan Mathews barely got on the field due to his injury issues. But man will that change this week with the Pats' three-headed rushing monster of Shane Vereen, Stevan Ridley and LeGarrette Blount headed straight for him. With Derek Wolfe and Kevin Vickerson long ago ruled out of the game, Knighton is going to have to anchor that Broncos defensive line, and Blount's massive frame and determined attitude in particular will be a unique challenge (who would have predicted, say, back in October, that I'd ever be writing that sentence?). ... Denver's loss of top CB Chris Harris is a big deal. Few are as adept

at picking on an injury replacement and finding the best matchup as Brady, and whether it's veteran Champ Bailey (who has barely played all season) or a youngster, Brady and Belichick and offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels will work to get a trusted vet like Danny Amendola or Julian Edelman on him. ... Edelman's ability to flip field position on punt returns could prove vital. ... You don't think Wes Welker is a little extra fired up to face the Pats, do you, after his falling out with them over his contract in the offseason? He has had some crucial drops in big games in the past. ... Does Belichick move top corner Aqib Talib around, getting some time with TE Julius Thomas and WR Demaryius Thomas and maybe even WR Eric Decker, or does he leave him on one side of the field? This will be a real test for the Pats' linebackers in coverage regardless. My guess is a steady dose of Cover-2 or quarters and Belichick will happily give up long, churning drives on the ground to RB Knowshon Moreno. Belichick's ability to have the right red-zone calls in place may be the difference in the game, especially if he culls Manning into checking into a ton of run plays between the 20s against a barren box at the line of scrimmage. ... Can Shaun Phillips continue to turn back the clock and spearhead the Broncos' pass rush? If he can, it certainly aids their chances here.

San Francisco at Seattle

Sunday, Jan. 19, 6:30 p.m. ET (FOX)

Why to watch: These teams hate each other. Period. It's a real rivalry and they hit incredibly hard and despite what their coaches were trying to make you believe during the news conferences last week, they can't stand each other, either. So now, with the 49ers and Seahawks meeting for the third time in four months, with everything on the line, it's not too much to expect a classic game. Of course, it might be a classic throwback, with these teams all about power running and punishing defense. We all remember how the 49ers got humiliated early this season in their last trip to the Pacific Northwest. While both of these teams have changed and evolved since then, and San Francisco got some revenge at home late in the season, the 12th man is a very real factor at play here. This is the best home-field advantage in football, if not all of professional sports. Colin Kaepernick's ears will be ringing and it will difficult to have any semblance of normalcy on offense. Given how emotional these two teams are and all the bad blood, one can only wonder if we get the kind of jawing and shoving that flared up repeatedly during warmups last week when the Seahawks hosted the Saints. It stands to reason we could have fireworks well before kickoff. Really, this game is lacking nothing, and for all of those who want to ridicule or deride or minimize the impact of this new breed of quarterbacks, well, come Sunday night, either Kaepernick is going to a second straight Super Bowl or Russell Wilson is going to his first. And, man, no matter how this game goes, the handshake at the end -- if there is a handshake -- between Jim Harbaugh and Pete Carroll could be worth the price of admission itself.

## Experts' View/Watch: NFC championship preview

What to watch for: This is a violent game and there will be no shortage of haymakers here. Setting the early physical tone is a big part of what these clubs do, and I'm sure that will be emphasized again Sunday. The 49ers, in particular, need to find a way to take some of the air out of this manic crowd and keep this game from getting lopsided. What better way to do that than to come out running the ball up the gut and sending a message on defense? It's not exactly the most evolved thing in the world, but let's not pretend it's not part of football. ... 49ers WR Anquan Boldin was pretty much losing his mind at various times last week, and now he goes against the most physical (did I use that word again?) group of defensive backs in the NFL, led by world-class corner and trash-talker Richard Sherman. Yeah, um, we're probably going to have an incident or two. ... The Seahawks' pass rush has been too hit or miss recently; they badly need a big game from Bruce Irvin, which could salvage what has been a tepid second season. ... Seattle's offensive line looked more vulnerable down the stretch, and look for Aldon Smith and Justin Smith to play some inside-outside games and mess around with some stunts to complicate things. San Francisco defensive line coach Jim Tomsula will have a few tricks up his sleeve. ... Which quarterback takes off running more, and which team calls more designed runs? Either one of these teams gets to 120 yards or so rushing, no matter in what fashion, and I figure they win this thing. ... Can the Seahawks get Percy Harvin on the field at all? If he is cleared from his concussion, that, more than anything else, could bring some unpredictability and pop to what has become a stagnant passing game. ... Seattle needs some flash from Golden Tate on special teams and as a downfield receiver. When he is on, there is a totally new dimension to that offense. ... Dare I say the read-option plays some role in deciding this thing? ... Any chance Harbaugh can creep all the way to the opposing sideline during a play this week? He's certainly trending in that direction.

# Ten things that intrigue me in Sunday's NFL title games

By Pete Prisco  
CBSsports.com  
January 17, 2014

Patriots QB Tom Brady vs. Broncos QB Peyton Manning: Does it get any better than seeing these two matched up for a shot at the Super Bowl? They've met three times in the playoffs, and Brady leads 2-1. Manning won the last playoff meeting. Can he make it two in a row? Or is Brady going back to his sixth Super Bowl?

Which of the two will be patient with the run? They are smart quarterbacks so when teams back off they both will check to a lot of runs. Can they be that patient in a game of this magnitude? Will one give in to the temptation against two-deep looks and try and attack down the field?

What will Bill Belichick throw at Manning? Belichick is a master at throwing different looks at quarterbacks. He's had some success at home against Manning in the playoffs. But Manning got the best of him at home the last time they met in the postseason.

Which young quarterback, San Francisco's Colin Kaepernick or Seattle's Russell Wilson, shines brightest on the big stage? They are both playoff tested, so that shouldn't be a factor here. But they are both facing top defenses. Who can limit the mistakes?

The Patriots' interior three vs. Denver defensive tackle Terrance Knighton: If the Patriots want to run the ball, they have to get Knighton blocked. He is a force against the run game and holds up well against doubles. Center Ryan Wendell will be key.

Seattle LT Russell Okung vs. San Francisco DE Justin Smith and OLB Aldon Smith: The 49ers have a fierce side of their line to attack the quarterback when the two Smiths come after you. Okung is a good left tackle, but right guard Michael Bowie was inserted into the lineup last week. They have to work together to handle the stunts of the Smiths.

Can San Francisco block Seahawks DT Brandon Mebane? He is disruptive to any run game, but when teams want to get their guards out to lead, he's even more disruptive if he gets penetration. Jonathan Goodwin has to have a big day at center for the 49ers.

Will the officials call it tight on the Seattle secondary? The Seahawks grab and hold as much as any secondary in the league. But they get away with a lot of it. So it's not a penalty if it's not called. How will the officials call it in this one?

How will the Seahawks use Richard Sherman? They have used him to mirror Anquan Boldin at times against San Francisco, but with Michael Crabtree back that might not be the case here. Sherman loves man-to-man challenges, but the Seahawks love to play a lot of Cover-3 looks.

What type of impact will Denver WR Wes Welker have against his former team? Welker missed time with injuries this season, and is playing with a special helmet because of concussion problems, but he is still a big part of what the Broncos do on offense. His ability to win in the slot will be critical for Manning.

# Six for Sunday: Expect lower scoring, fewer penalties, higher intensity

By Pat Kirwan  
CBSsports.com  
January 17, 2014

The divisional round of the NFL playoffs may have been the most enjoyable because we had four quality games but this weekend's action is to get to the Super Bowl.

Lose this round and a few months from now no one will remember who lost.

Win this weekend and the world championship is on the line. I talked with the two head coaches of the home teams this week, John Fox and Pete Carroll. Both men led their teams to the best record in their respective conferences and earned the right for the big game in their house, but it sure will not be an easy task to get the victory and a trip to New York for the first cold-weather Super Bowl. Both the New England-Denver and San Francisco-Seattle games should draw well over 40 million viewers each, and the slightest mistake by any team could cost a team the win.

Cam Newton said he learned last week that playoff football is played at a much higher level than a regular season game, and he's right, but this conference championship weekend is at even a higher level than that and in two weeks the Super Bowl will make the rest of the playoffs feel like preseason football. Here are a few things to look for during the two conference championship games.

## Expect lower-scoring games

Over the past six years the conference championship games have produced five road winners and seven home winners. Home field is nice to have and both Denver and Seattle are 8-1 this year at home, but there is little guarantee that will be enough to win. When it comes to how many points will be scored in these games, think lower than usual. Over the past six years the 12 games averaged 44 total points between the two teams in each game. Only three of the 24 teams participating ever got to 30+ points and no team scored more than 32. Ten of the 24 teams never made it past 20 points.

## Where each team wants to run

All four of the teams have been running the ball well lately and will rely on the ground game. There are many ways teams want to run the ball, but here are a few things to keep in mind. New England wants to run the ball behind left guard Logan Mankins. Many of the running plays go to the left side even if they start out to the

right. When the Pats want to run right they like to pull Mankins in what is known as 'g' power or power-o. Keep an eye on Mankins to lead the Patriots run game. The Broncos are an 11 personnel (one running back, one tight end, three wide receivers) team that already has close to 800 snaps of no-huddle but that doesn't mean they don't run the ball. If the running back is offset next to Manning, there is a heavy dose of middle run (130 runs). Manning likes the pistol formation so he can read the defensive front and decide where to run the ball. He told me over the summer that the shotgun offset run game just wasn't effective enough when trying to run off tackle opposite the alignment of the back. Seattle is a heavy run-left team with Marshawn Lynch behind Russell Okung. Running left well sets up Russell Wilson and his bootleg game to the right. San Francisco runs the ball 59 percent of the time on first downs at 4.8 yards per run. Keep an eye on the use of two tight ends next to each other creating an extra run gap. The Niners love the off-tackle run game left and right so keep an eye on the extra tight end's alignment.

#### Caution signs

There are things in each team's recent history to keep in mind. In the last four games played by the Seahawks, Russell Wilson has been sacked an average of once every eight pass plays. The four weeks prior to that Wilson was sacked 1:35 attempts. The 49ers have to worry about turnovers when they play up in Seattle. The Seahawks defense got the ball back 22 times at home this year and come into the game with the best turnover differential in the league. In the last two road games against Seattle the Niners have turned the ball over seven times. New England has to face Peyton Manning for the second time this year. Manning lost to New England earlier and that spells trouble for the Patriots. Manning has not lost to the same team twice in a season since 2007. In the rematch games since then Manning averages 71 percent completion rate, 260 passing yards and at least two touchdown passes. The Broncos better be ready for the Patriots run game, which over the past three games has generated 643 yards and 10 touchdowns. Denver will be without Von Miller, Derek Wolfe, Kevin Vickerson and Chris Harris on defense.

#### How all four stack up

None of the four teams have a negative turnover ratio, none of them are dome teams and none of them have a losing record against this year's 12 playoff teams. Denver is 4-3 against playoff teams but their scoring average drops from 38 points a game to 28 points a game. The Patriots are 3-2 against playoff teams and only have a slight drop off from 28 points a game to 26 against playoff teams. Seattle drops from 26 points to 24 points when playing playoff teams but the Seahawks maintained their stingy defensive ways giving up just 14 points a game vs. playoff teams. San Francisco is the only team that has a 'yellow' caution flag, going 4-4

against playoff teams. All year they averaged 25 points a game but in the eight games against playoff teams they averaged 17 points a game while giving up 21 points per game. As you can see, scoring drops in games like this weekend even for the best of offenses.

More key stats

San Francisco is on its fourth straight road game but is on an eight-game winning streak. The Seahawks had 13 pass interference calls against them in the regular season, tied with Oakland for the most. Frank Gore has one touchdown against Seattle in his last six games. Marshawn Lynch has seven touchdowns in his last six games against San Francisco. New England has a 4-4 road record this year and has gone 2-4 in its last six road games. In the last three games the Patriots have averaged 39 points a game while giving up just 16 points per game and they have averaged 33 minutes of time of possession. Wes Welker has the most drops of the Broncos receivers with 10, and the guy with the least is Julius Thomas with two and he didn't play against New England the first time. Peyton Manning only threw for 150 yards in his regular season game against New England even though he called 38 pass plays. It was his lowest output in a game since 2008.

Don't expect many flags

In the conference round last year there were 15 penalties called in the two games (7.5 per game). Some people will say the best teams don't get penalized and that's why the number was low but it sure looks like the officials don't want to decide these games with a flag. During the regular season only the Patriots avoided the penalty flags. When it comes to avoiding penalties, Seattle ranks dead last in the NFL, followed by Denver (29), San Francisco (21) and New England (2). As a group these four teams averaged 7.4 penalties each per game which equates to 15 penalties per game between the two teams. Logically that means there should be 30 penalties called on Sunday in the two games. I'll bet it's a lot lower than that when the final gun goes off.

# With marijuana legal in Colorado, Belichick asked if he warned players

By Ryan Wilson  
CBSsports.com  
January 17, 2014

It is now legal to purchase recreational marijuana in Colorado. We mention this because the Patriots travel to Denver to face the Broncos in Sunday's AFC Championship game, and weed was a popular topic Friday when coach Bill Belichick met with the media.

**Reporter:** Has there been any specific advice to the players to avoid the now-legal recreational marijuana in Denver?

**Belichick:** I think we know what the NFL policy is on that.

**Reporter:** Is there an NFL policy against what is legal there?

**Belichick:** I think that's something you ought to take up with the NFL.

**Reporter:** Well, you mentioned it.

**Belichick:** I think you have any more questions about it, you should talk to the league about it. They're the ones that have the policy.

The same question was put to Tom Brady as well.

**Reporter:** This is the first time you'll be visiting an NFL city where recreational marijuana use is legal.

**Brady:** Are you excited about that?

**Reporter:** Has anyone advised the young players against it?

**Brady:** We haven't talked about that. Maybe you guys [can] tell me what that's all about.

**Reporter:** I was just wondering if it would be a temptation.

**Brady:** Hopefully not. This is a very important game for us and it's a business trip.

Running back LeGarrette Blount (coincidence, not irony) sounded a similar tone.

"It's a business trip," he said, via WEEI. "Nobody is going to care about that. Bill told us about it, he basically told us, 'Don't go out there and be stupid.' [That's] really good advice."

As PFT points out, the league's policy on substance abuse extends to places where substances, like marijuana, are legal. So there's that, as well as the aforementioned "business trip" talking points. Then again, as a wise man once noted (FYI: NSFW), "Weed is from the earth. God put this here for me and you."

And the government agrees -- at least in Colorado.

# Omaha wants you to visit because Peyton Manning says 'Omaha'

By Josh Katzowitz  
CBSsports.com  
January 17, 2014

In case you weren't paying attention last Sunday, Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning used the word "Omaha" to audible on plenty of offensive snaps. Despite the fact that it's been a major part of his on-field verbiage for many years, it's become a topic of conversation this week, because, get this, Omaha is actually the name of a city in the United States of America.

Official Omaha Info @VisitOmaha

We certainly appreciate all the love from #PeytonManning :) #OmahaOmaha  
4:22 PM - 12 Jan 2014

Apparently, Manning used "Omaha" as a pre-snap signal 44 times in the Broncos win vs. the Chargers.

And the city of Omaha would like to honor Manning while continuing to drum up recognition that Omaha could be a nice place to visit (for the record, the best steak I've ever eaten occurred in the Omaha city limits).

Manning also apparently has visited as well.

So, check out the video the Greater Omaha Chamber has sent out, via KETV. It's actually frenetic and kind of fun to watch.

And even better. According to the TV station, Omaha businesses have said they will donate a combined \$600 to Manning's charity foundation every time he yells "Omaha" vs. the Patriots.

# Where There's Smoke . . .

It's legal to light up in both Denver and Seattle this weekend, and marijuana is approved for medicinal use in some 20 states. Is it time the NFL relaxed its ban on a drug seen by many players as benign and therapeutic?

By Robert Klemko  
SI.com/TheMMQB.com

DENVER — John Fox had the floor. In a team meeting before a divisional playoff game against the Chargers, there was much to discuss. Fox's Broncos had been in the same position a year earlier and lost to the Ravens, who went on to win the Super Bowl. No obstacle would be overlooked this time, including one new potential pitfall that came courtesy of the state of Colorado.

"I know it's legal now," Fox told the team, according to players in the room, "but you still can't smoke it."

It is the issue (other than the Broncos) on everyone's mind in Denver: marijuana. Thanks to a state ballot initiative, as of Jan. 1 the sale of pot for recreational use is legal in Colorado. Denver is one of two NFL cities in which recreational marijuana use is now legal—Washington state passed a similar initiative, though retail shops in Seattle have yet to open. But cannabis remains on the NFL's list of banned substances (and is still a Schedule 1 controlled substance under federal law), and Fox cautioned his players against getting in any way involved in the city's burgeoning marijuana market. The team sent out a memo to all employees as well, reminding them of the policy against marijuana use and possession.

It makes sense that Fox and the Broncos would try to get out in front of any potential screw-ups in the middle of a playoff run, given the general consensus in league circles regarding how many players use pot. Our unscientific survey of 48 current and former players, front office execs, head and assistant coaches, agents, medical professionals and marketing professionals—all of whom either played in the NFL or work closely with NFL players—suggests that more than half of all players smoke marijuana regularly.

One agent put the number at 80%. A coach surmised 60%. A front office decision-maker said 30%. One player who retired after the 2012 season put the number of users at 70%, with 35% of players smoking every day. And one current player who doesn't smoke guessed an even 50%. If so, that would make about 1,000 members of the league's fluctuating player population of roughly 2,000.

Most respondents agreed that attitudes among the NFL's youngest players towards marijuana have shifted just in the last five years. "I can't really speak to why guys

smoke, but I'm from Southern California, so it's all around where we grew up," says Broncos safety Omar Bolden, 25, of Ontario, Calif. "You walk outside and it smells like weed. I don't see it as a big deal because that's how I grew up. I'm a product of my environment."

It's not difficult to understand why players use marijuana. Despite some of the harshest penalties in American sports for a positive test (a potential four-game ban for a first offense), the NFL doesn't conduct year-round testing for street drugs including pot. And if you're not in its program for offenders—which does involve year-round testing—you can expect not to be tested in-season. Agents and marketing firms set their watches to that schedule. Said one agent, "I know when not to bother some of my guys because they're on edge. It's the time of year when they can't smoke."

Former safety Hamza Abdullah, who last played for the Cardinals in 2011 and spent the bulk of his career in Denver from 2005 to '08, can recall several teammates who would regularly rush home from the facility to smoke. "There were guys who as soon as they left would say, 'I've got to go smoke this or else I'm gonna go crazy,'" says Abdullah, who says he tried pot in the NFL but avoided it for the stigma. "The things you go through in the NFL are not just physical. The mental aspect is number one. A lot of guys are fighting for their job, and every week they can be cut. They take the strain of that, and about 20 to 25 guys on my teams self-medicated with marijuana."

Research aligns with this rationale. In 2010, the University of California's Center for Medicinal Cannabis Research, established by the California state legislature to study the efficacy and safety of medicinal marijuana, reported that there was "reasonable evidence that cannabis is a promising treatment in selected pain syndromes caused by injury or diseases of the nervous system."

If today's players wanted to self-medicate it would be easy enough. Denver's dozen or so retail shops (there are medicinal dispensaries as well—prescription marijuana has been legal since 2000) inhabit basements underneath bagel stores, suburban office parks and storefronts in run-down neighborhoods in the shadow of downtown Denver. At the Denver Kush Club on Welton Street in Five Points, a glass door covered in metal bars opens up to a small waiting room where ID's are checked (the new law strictly limits sales to those 21 and over), and the flow of customers into the store is regulated to prevent would-be thieves from rushing the counter. There are red, green and yellow "DKC" hats and shirts for sale; among the weed offerings are Island Sweet Skunk, Golden Goat, Amnesia and OG4, a DKC original. A pierced, tattooed blonde offers explanations for each of the marijuana strains behind a glass counter. A jar full of dollar bills stands next to a sign reading TIP YOUR BUDTENDERS.

"If you're 50 and have some ailments, doctors will give you marijuana," says Abdullah. "If you're 26, 27, and play in the NFL, you can't have marijuana but they'll give you Vicodin or Percocet."

Certain types of weed, it is explained, bring about a "body high," providing relief for users suffering from arthritis and the like, and other strains offer a "head high," for those with ailments such as glaucoma or, like one customer at the DKC this week, Retinoblastoma, a cancer that develops in the retina during childhood, causing the eyes to sink into one's face. While recreational customers seemed to outnumber medical users at DKC, most of the medical users who frequent that or other retail shops, such as Dank Colorado on Elm Street or the Evergreen Apothecary on South Broadway, complain of back pain or knee stiffness or headaches.

"If you were 50 years old and had some of those ailments, if you took them to a doctor he would prescribe marijuana to you," says Abdullah. "But if you're 26, 27, and have the same ailments and you play in the NFL, you can't have marijuana, but they'll give you Percocet or Vicodin."

Several retired players suggested that marijuana is more prevalent now than when they entered the league because teams have cracked down on painkiller abuse, in response to the experiences of players who have battled addictions and spoken publicly about it, such as former Dolphins quarterback Ray Lucas. The retired players see the shift to marijuana as a positive development.

"I've got friends who were on the painkillers, and they ran out and their pharmaceutical hookup ran out and now they're struggling," says one former lineman who last played in 2007. "But the guys who were just smoking, they're fine now."

Current players see marijuana as preferable to another alternative: alcohol. Chiefs linebacker Jovan Belcher was drunk last year when he killed his girlfriend then drove to the Chiefs facility and killed himself in front of his head coach and general manager. In the seven months between last February's Super Bowl and the season opener, 10 players were arrested for drunk driving. Bolden says if a teammate were looking for advice on whether to drink or smoke to unwind, he would choose the latter.

"If anything, I think people need to be more concerned with drinking and driving as opposed to marijuana," Bolden says. "We've got a bigger problem—people are dying from cats being under the influence."

"DUIs, rape charges, fights—that all happens with alcohol. But I rarely hear of anything bad happening when guys smoke."

There is the risk of a league suspension—though given the schedule it's so hard to get caught that it's considered the idiot test. But there are failed tests at the NFL combine seemingly every year, and veterans occasionally test positive or are arrested with pot in their possession. This season 49ers linebacker Aldon Smith was arrested on suspicion of DUI and marijuana possession in September. He entered a rehab facility and missed five games. Other players have been linked to failed tests for marijuana, including Broncos linebacker Von Miller, who served a six-game suspension. And even the suggestion of marijuana use—as with Browns receiver Davone Bess's tweets this week—can create the kind of “distraction” that team front offices hate.

“If anything, people need to be more concerned with drinking and driving as opposed to marijuana,” says Bolden. “DUIs, rape charges, fights—that all happens with alcohol.”

Still, many players see marijuana use as a matter of self-control—if you can do it responsibly without getting caught, there's no harm. “Just like with anything else, if you use too much of it, it can be a problem,” says Broncos wide receiver Nathan Palmer, “but I don't really get why marijuana is outlawed. I've never seen anybody die from it. But since those are the rules, we have to abide by them.”

For how long?

Asked earlier this month about the league's stance on marijuana in light of the growing liberalization of laws around the country, commissioner Roger Goodell said, “I don't know what's going to develop as far as the next opportunity for medicine to evolve and to help either deal with pain or help deal with injuries. But we will continue to support the evolution of medicine.”

How long can the NFL tell players to avoid a drug on its way to widespread legalization; a drug being prescribed in some 20 states to treat the type of chronic pain the game engenders? Maybe Goodell and the 32 owners will see this as an opportunity to flex those once-progressive NFL muscles—the ones that transformed the way we look at sports on television and brought us the first black head coach in American pro sports (Fritz Pollard, 1921)—muscles long-since atrophied with the denial of decades of concussion truths. More than likely, though, the league will try to duck the bad PR certain to come from easing its marijuana prohibition the way it brushed under the rug the notion that the game was destroying the brains of its players. In that case, the answer to the question, “How long?” is, “Very long.”

# John Elway and Peyton Manning: Two iconic QBs, one exit plan?

By Judy Battista  
NFL.com  
January 17, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- John Elway sat up in his box last Sunday, watching the Denver Broncos' lead wither away. Elway, of course, was the architect of many Broncos victories, and his career arc remains a romantic ideal: He retired after the 1998 season as a champion, leaving the game after winning two straight Super Bowls and setting to rest, at the last possible moments available to him, the notion that he could not win on the biggest stage.

It is not lost on Elway that the same reputation has been attached to Peyton Manning with his career in the latter stages.

Manning, at 37, is the same age now that Elway was when he won his first Super Bowl, and it is impossible not to draw parallels between the two men. Elway had no comparable rivalry during his career like Manning has with Brady -- Elway mentioned maybe Bernie Kosar because they played each other three times in the conference championship game in Elway's early years, drawing laughter from reporters -- but because of their shared profession, of their uncommonly similar circumstances, Elway has a unique window into Manning's mindset as Manning prepares to face Brady for the 15th time, and for the chance to play in his third Super Bowl.

The familiar question, then, is whether Elway, the Broncos' executive vice president of football operations, suspects that Manning might follow his path to retirement should their parallel careers align again, if Manning wins a second Super Bowl to provide a neat bookend to his career.

Elway said he does not know what Manning will do -- they will not talk about it until after the season anyway -- but his own experience is telling, about what a professional athlete ponders when, as Manning has put it several times recently, they see the light at the end of the tunnel.

"I still think he's young and he's playing well," Elway said, in a meeting with a small group of reporters Thursday. "That's going to come down to Peyton. It's going to come down to what he wants to do. Having been a football player before, when you leave this game, you want to leave it on your last leg and try not to leave anything on the table. So, anybody that's a competitor, that's kind of the way they want to

leave the game. I was just fortunate to be able to be on two great football teams and be able to win world championships when my last leg broke."

In that way, the trajectories of Elway and Manning are much different. Manning spoke this week about feeling refreshed with a new offense with new teammates and coaches. He continues to enjoy the dogged preparation he has always engaged in, noting that he has often heard older players say they love playing on Sunday but no longer enjoy the work that leads up to it. He has played, remarkably, the best season of his career -- the best season of any quarterback's career -- at an age and following a neck injury that would surely have sent most of his peers to the golf course for good. His much-scrutinized arm strength has not caused his game to deteriorate, the element that Elway said ultimately drove him from the field. The soundness of Manning's neck might ultimately dictate his timetable, but Elway's history is probably instructive, too, because of the insight it offers into the way players of this stature think.

"I looked at my whole last year, and I think I missed four games my last year," Elway said. "So, could I have gotten through another year? Sure, I could have. But would it have been at the level I want to get, being at the same level, was I enjoying the game as much as I had enjoyed it? No, because it took me so long to heal. It was kind of the beginning of the body breaking down. So the combination of both and being able to run off into the sunset, made it easier for me."

There seems little doubt that Manning is still enjoying playing.

"I can't imagine him not -- throwing 55 touchdown passes and 5,400 yards," Elway said. "I guarantee you if I was in his shoes, I would have enjoyed it. I'm sure he is still enjoying it, and he's on a good football team, which also, late in your career, is crucial."

Putting that team together has been Elway's responsibility, although he was not always certain he would pursue this post-playing path. Elway said that when he retired, he wanted to get away from the game, to find out if there was something out there for him other than football. Elway has been wildly successful at nearly everything he has done -- from playing, to car dealerships, to restaurants -- but ultimately he received his answer.

"It took me two years to figure out there wasn't -- three years to really figure out that I'm built to be involved with football somehow," Elway said. "That's really what I know the best because that's what I've spent all my time on. My adult life has been in football. I had the dealerships and restaurants, but those don't have scoreboards on Sundays. When you're used to seeing a scoreboard -- even when you are 4, 5, 6, 7 years old -- on Saturday and Sunday every weekend in the fall, I don't think you ever break that."

He was charged with rebuilding the Broncos, with restoring a winning culture in a team that was trying to recover from the failed Josh McDaniels experiment. Elway praised McDaniels as a bright, young coach -- the same praise he heaped on his current offensive coordinator, Adam Gase, for whom he said he wished he could play. But he also had the unenviable task of jettisoning Tim Tebow and the more enviable job of wooing Manning.

The stunning loss to the Baltimore Ravens last postseason, Elway believes, steered the Broncos from the shocks of this season, from Von Miller's early-season suspension to John Fox's midseason open-heart surgery. When he took the job, Elway said, he never expected to face as much adversity as the Broncos have. Elway said the calls about Miller's suspension and about the arrests of two Broncos executives on drunk-driving charges ruined his summer, but the Broncos have successfully navigated it all, in addition to the more routine laundry list of injuries.

For all the success Elway has enjoyed in his second career go-around in Denver, though, there was a certain wistfulness to how he viewed it compared with his playing days.

"It's very different and it takes some getting used to," Elway said, as he sat at the head of a conference table. "I enjoy watching the regular-season games, but I was absolutely miserable last week watching this game. I mean, it took me four hours to get the pit out of my stomach after the game was over. As a player, it was so exciting to be in this because this is what you work for. So it's not nearly as much fun upstairs as it is down on the field, especially these championship games or playoffs.

"But I also am proud of being a part of it and being able to help put the team together, put the coaches together, put the personnel side and everything that comes together. I'm proud of everybody that has been a part of putting this whole thing together. So there is a lot of pride in that. It's a different feeling then -- there's more of a quiet pride than there is being the quarterback, where everyone is patting you on the back."

Both Elway and Manning have spoken about the fraternity of quarterbacks -- Manning reflexively defends all of them -- and Elway said they talk more frequently about philosophy and less about X's and O's. Manning joked that Elway does not sit in on quarterbacks meetings or get on the phone during games. But Manning has used Elway as a resource to learn even more about quarterbacking, the same way, Manning said, he learned from his father when he was younger.

At some point soon, they will talk about Manning's future. Perhaps the outcome of this season, whether it ends Sunday or two weeks from now at MetLife Stadium, will push Manning toward a decision, the way it did for Elway. But for now, this

Manning season bears little resemblance to Elway's injury-riddled final season. Except, they hope, in the final result.

"I really don't think it's hard to block that out," Manning said. "As a matter of fact, I think it's probably even easier just to hone in on what's taking place right now. I really felt that that has been my approach since the beginning of last season. Just when you go through a significant injury and a major career change, you truly do go one year at a time, and you don't look past what's going on now because you are not sure what's going to happen. Tomorrow is not promised. For a young player, sure, it can be easy to look ahead to maybe that new contract that they want to get or some career goal that they're trying to achieve. But at this point in my career, it's easy just to focus in on what's going on right now."

And here are five things to focus on as we hurtle toward Championship Sunday:

1) Can the top seeds buck a trend and advance? Since the NFL started naming No. 1 seeds in 1975, just nine Super Bowls have featured each conference's top dog. The most recent instance occurred at the end of the 2009 campaign, when Peyton Manning's Indianapolis Colts lost to the New Orleans Saints.

2) Are we witnessing a revolution in quarterback play? Colin Kaepernick and Russell Wilson do not just represent the next generation of quarterbacks, they represent an entirely different style of play. They combined for 1,063 yards rushing this season. Their older and less-nimble AFC counterparts, Brady and Manning, combined for 13 rushing yards this year -- and 1,463 rushing yards in their careers.

3) Is the NFC Championship Game an aberration or the tip of the iceberg for offensive play? Last weekend, three of the four winning quarterbacks passed for fewer than 200 yards (Manning had 230). The NFC's two best teams are also the only teams in the league that rushed on more than 50 percent of their offensive plays this season. The 49ers rushed 52.5 percent of the time, most in the NFL, while the Seahawks rushed 52.3 percent of the time. The last Super Bowl champion to rush more than half of the time was Jerome Bettis' 2005 Pittsburgh Steelers, who ran the ball on 57.2 percent of their offensive plays. The power-rushing incarnation of the New England Patriots has rushed 63 percent of the time in its last two games, a throwback to the franchise's last championship team. The 2004 Pats, with Corey Dillon leading the way, rushed 50.6 percent of the time.

4) What version of the Broncos' defense will the Patriots face? When the Patriots beat the Broncos in November, Denver had linebacker Von Miller and cornerback Chris Harris (both of whom are now out for the season), but the team was still giving up an average of 26.6 points per game. In their last three games, though, the Broncos have given up just 14.7 points per game, while allowing 120 fewer

total yards per game (almost 87 fewer passing and 33 fewer rushing) than they did in the first 14 outings of the season.

5) Can Denver avoid turnovers? Since Week 16, the Patriots are tied for the league lead in takeaways, with eight. Manning has thrown 22 interceptions in 21 career postseason games, and the Broncos' offense turned the ball over 26 times in the regular season, which ranked right in the middle of the league. Manning threw just 10 interceptions this season -- one more than his career low set in 2006 -- but he also fumbled 10 times, losing six of them. In their Week 12 win, the Patriots intercepted Manning once and forced five fumbles, three of which they recovered. Of the four remaining teams, the Broncos had the worst turnover differential in the regular season -- zero.

# John Elway: Adam Gase 'studly' for delaying interviews

By Chris Wesseling

NFL.com

January 17, 2014

The Cleveland Browns think highly enough of Adam Gase that they have been willing to delay a decision on their head-coaching vacancy until the Denver Broncos offensive coordinator is available to be interviewed.

Gase has been viewed as the Browns' top target for weeks, but he turned down all interview requests to concentrate on the playoffs.

Although John Elway hopes Gase stays in Denver, the Broncos' chief football executive is appreciative of his play-caller's team-first priorities at the most crucial time of the season.

"For him to be able to do what he did and to say, 'I want to keep my focus on the Denver Broncos, and once our season is over, I'll interview,' to me, that was studly," Elway said, via ESPN.com. "Because it was to me, I like guys that are committed to what they're doing, committed to the Denver Broncos. So I couldn't be more proud of that decision. It tells you a lot about the guy."

There's a perception in some football circles that Gase is simply along for the ride, with Peyton Manning at the controls of the Broncos' record-breaking offense. To hear Elway tell it, that couldn't be further from the truth.

"I wish I could have played for him," Elway added. "I think that he's so bright and he's working with Peyton and having been here with Josh (McDaniels) before that -- who is a very bright, young offensive mind -- he has just used all of that and learned from all that. With (Mike) McCoy here, then Peyton here and now him on his own, he's been able to put them all together and mold it as his personality and I think he's done a tremendous job. That shows up in the numbers we've put up this year."

Gase is a disciple of former St. Louis Rams coach and offensive innovator Mike Martz. People in the industry have described him to NFL Media Insider Ian Rapoport as a dynamic, young version of Chiefs coach Andy Reid.

Still just 35 years old and in his first season as play-caller, Gase has a bright future in Denver if he opts to stick around with Elway and Manning in 2014. It's not a given that he will accept the Browns' head-coaching job if offered.

# AFC title game is 'about teams, not just two QBs'

By Peter Finney Jr.

NY Post

January 17, 2014

NEW ORLEANS — The “Peyton vs. Brady” NFL quarterback case has been argued 14 times previously at various levels of the NFL judicial system, and Archie Manning, a friend of the court, has some advice for a nation of Supreme Court watchers: Sit back and enjoy.

“Honestly, maybe it’s just the parent in me, but I don’t enjoy all the hoopla about a Peyton [Manning]-[Tom] Brady matchup,” said Manning, patriarch of the NFL’s version of Duck Dynasty. “I tried to teach my kids [Peyton and Eli] that it’s not an individual game, it’s a team game. I know we have so much media now — we have so many writers and radio and TV — and it makes a good conversation.

“I think Peyton said it the other day, and I know Tom is the same way — it’s the Patriots and the Broncos. If you go out and just try to outperform another quarterback, that’s not the way the game is structured.”

The stakes couldn’t be higher for the two iconic, future Hall of Fame quarterbacks who will stare down each other in the AFC Championship Game Sunday in Denver. Brady has gotten the best of Peyton 10 times in their previous 14 meetings, but Archie said he knows from bitter experience, playing with the sad-sack Saints in the 1970s, that quarterbacks don’t always determine the outcome.

“I remember one time when I was playing here and we weren’t very good,” Archie said. “We went up to Pittsburgh and I had a good game. Well, Pittsburgh beat us in the last second. Well, the news in New Orleans was that I outperformed Terry Bradshaw. Well, baloney. I had better stats, but we didn’t win the game. I just never have gotten much into quarterback battles.”

Still, Archie and his wife Olivia are amazed by the way in which Peyton, at age 36, resurrected his career over the last two years following delicate neck surgery that sapped his arm strength and reduced him to someone having to relearn how to throw the football. Peyton will turn 38 on March 27.

Asked what has impressed him the most about his son’s record-breaking return the last two seasons, Archie said it was the way in which Peyton handled “the overall transition.”

Manning, left, and Brady, right, have met before during the past few seasons, with Brady often coming out on top. Photo: AP

"He kind of felt like he was playing out of a different body, and I think I understand what he was saying there," Archie said. "I was with him some when he first started throwing, kind of starting over from scratch again. He went to Duke and he and [former Tennessee offensive coordinator] David Cutcliffe started over again. He was 36, but it was kind of like he was 12 throwing the football.

"That was the physical part. Then you add in new team, new offense, new teammates, new city. He's had a lot of help, and it's a real blessing that he's playing again."

Archie said he and Olivia never had doubts Peyton could return to play at a high level, but they were reassured when Peyton came to New Orleans for a "face-to-face" before embarking on his offseason workouts two years ago following his neck surgery.

"I was very proud of his attitude," Archie said. "He told us he was going to work at this thing, and he was going to try to play again, but if the doctors said he couldn't, then he was going to sign off. He wasn't going to go against the doctors and wasn't going to push it if it wasn't going to work. So that gave us confidence that he was going to try as hard as he could, but if it didn't work out, it's over."

Does being 4-10 against the Patriots place even more pressure on Peyton?

"I don't think so," Archie said. "Once again, everybody has to have something to talk about. Peyton's played enough football to know that pressure just makes it hard. He says, 'Just prepare and go play.' That's always been his motto, and that's Tom Brady's motto. That's what the good ones do."

Archie said if Peyton were to go on to win his second Super Bowl ring, he doesn't think his son would do a John Elway and retire.

"I don't think he's had those thoughts," Archie said. "He wasn't healthy all year, but it wasn't his neck or his arm — he's had some ankles that were bothering him. The fact that he's played well and had a good year, I don't think he's entertained any thought of that."

# At 35, Champ Bailey still a leader on Denver defense

By Julian Benbow  
Boston Globe  
January 18, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — It's not what Champ Bailey says, it's how he says it.

The tone is different.

He doesn't scream the calls.

He practically whispers sweet nothings.

"You know when he's out there," said linebacker Danny Trevathan, "because he talks to you real smooth and lets you know everything is all right."

With all the signals howling around him, Bailey has a way of settling things down on the field, Trevathan said.

The 15 years Bailey's spent in the NFL come through in his subtle seen-it-all voice.

"He's just Champ," Trevathan said. "He's just cool. When you're out there, you want to play for that guy because you know he has your back through whatever."

For 11 games this season, the Denver defense's calming voice over the past decade was missing.

A Lisfranc injury in his left foot suffered in the preseason made most of the season miserable for the 12-time Pro Bowler.

His status all season toggled between active and inactive.

It wasn't until the final two weeks of the regular season that Bailey, 35, felt strong enough to return.

Before this season, Bailey had missed only 13 games in his career.

"It's been very frustrating — my most frustrating, probably because I'm living it right now," Bailey said. "The only thing I care about now is I'm back on the field. I'm ready to go. I feel good, and that's all that matters right now."

The Broncos went from being the league's third-best team against the pass a year ago to the sixth worst. The void left by Bailey was obvious.

Losing Bailey was just the start of the Broncos' injury issues on defense.

Four of the Broncos' opening day starters are on injured reserve: defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson, safety Rahim Moore, defensive end Derek Wolfe, and defensive back Chris Harris. That doesn't include star linebacker Von Miller, who started the

season with a six-game suspension and ended it last month with a season-ending ACL injury.

"I don't think this whole [year] we have had a consistent starting lineup," said defensive lineman Terrance Knighton.

When the Broncos faced the Patriots in November — without Bailey — Tom Brady had a field day, mostly in the second half. He was 34 of 50 passing for 344 yards and three touchdowns in New England's 34-31 overtime victory.

"Champ's pretty close to the face of that franchise, has been for the last decade," Patriots coach Bill Belichick said. "Great player, great ball skills, tremendous consistency. I think Champ is one of the players that, [what] makes him so special is he can just match up against anybody."

"[You] can put him on big receivers, can put him on tight ends, can put him on little, fast guys. You can put him on anybody you want. He's always been able to cover the top players; excellent run force player, good tackler, tough, very instinctive. He's been a great football player. He's had a great career."

It took a 337-yard yield to the San Diego Chargers in Week 15 for a battered Broncos defense to have a meeting.

In their final two regular-season games, the Broncos did not give up more than two touchdowns in a game.

Not coincidentally, Bailey returned at the same time. The Broncos held the Raiders and the Texans to less than 210 passing yards.

"You're more comfortable when you have a Champ Bailey behind you," Knighton said. "It makes things a lot easier for the D-Line — rushing the quarterback and things like that. It also makes it hard for the quarterback. They're not going to throw to his side most of the time and he basically shuts down half the field, so it helps out everybody."

With so many parts moving around because of injuries, having Bailey back re-established some order.

"He knows what's going on," said linebacker Wesley Woodyard. "You can do a lot of different things when you've got Champ on the field, as far as coverage-wise. It makes it easier for our secondary to communicate."

"He's a huge part of what goes on in that secondary. Whether he's off the field or on the field, he's always the kind of guy that's giving that leadership and that advice of what kind of plays to look for in certain situations."

When Bailey gives an order, teammates trust him.

"He is reassuring," Trevathan said. "He communicates. That's what we need out of our leaders. All of us need to communicate and be on one page so when stuff gets hectic, you don't just fall out of place."

As the cornerstone of the Broncos defense for so many years, Bailey knows how much his voice carries, especially with the younger players in the locker room.

"They listen, that's the one thing I like about our young guys," Bailey said. "They don't think they know it all. We've got a great group of young guys, and to be honest with you, we're only going to go as far as they take [us]. They're very important to us in what we do, so they definitely take all they can take in."

Since he's returned, Bailey has been on a relatively short leash. He was on the field for just 28 snaps last week.

He says he's prepared to play as big a role as needed Sunday.

"I'm ready for whatever they want me to do," Bailey said. "That is the way I prepare. I've never not prepared like that. It wouldn't be a surprise if that was the case."

Still, at 35, the injury that nagged him all season was a reminder of his football mortality.

He has played nine playoff games in his career, but the farthest he has ever gotten is the AFC Championship in the 2005 season.

In one of Bailey's great playoff moments — although not for Patriots fans — he intercepted Tom Brady in the end zone and returned it 100 yards. Bailey fumbled — thanks to Ben Watson's hustle — and the Broncos got the ball at the New England 1. They scored to take a 17-6 lead en route to a 27-13 victory. It was Brady's first loss in the playoffs.

Bailey endured a five-year playoff drought — a stretch in which the Broncos put together just one winning season — before sniffing the playoffs again.

He could have easily been another great player lost in a pile of forgotten seasons.

But he held out hope that eventually he'd get back to the postseason.

"We had some up-and-down years, but that is the reason why, when my contract was up there was no doubt I wanted to be back here," Bailey said. "Because this organization is about winning, so it wasn't going to take long until we got back to it. I feel good about what I did and am definitely glad I'm still here."

# Rod Smith, honorary team captain, sees a focused Broncos team

By Julian Benbow  
Boston Globe  
January 18, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — Rod Smith remembers the buzz the last time the Broncos hosted an AFC Championship game.

It was eight years ago, but the loss bothered him then, and to a degree it still does now.

The Pittsburgh Steelers knocked off the top-seeded Indianapolis Colts, which meant the Broncos (13-3 in the 2005 season) were the best team left in the AFC.

The Broncos hadn't won the AFC title game since 1998 and were coming off two straight seasons of losses in the wild-card round, in 2003 and 2004.

"Pittsburgh came to us, and everybody was excited about that," said Smith, who will serve as the Broncos' honorary team captain Sunday against the Patriots. "I'm like, 'No, you've got to go play.' It's not about being excited about playing at home. That has nothing to do with it. You've got a football game. You can't worry about all the other stuff."

But when he looked around the Broncos locker room, being at home seemed to be all anyone was worried about.

"Honestly, I kind of saw a lot of our younger guys get lost on the fact that we had a home game instead of being focused, being disciplined on the things that we need to do as a team," Smith said.

The Steelers took the air out of Mile High in a hurry, taking a 24-3 halftime lead and running away with a 34-17 victory before going on to win Super Bowl XL.

"We didn't play well, and we lost," Smith said.

Smith spent his entire 12-year career with the Broncos, catching 849 passes for 11,389 yards and 68 touchdowns and winning two Super Bowls.

Smith will play a small part in Sunday's game. He'll call the coin toss.

In his playing days, tails was his go-to.

"I used to lose a lot of coin tosses," he said. "We might want to call heads."

Getting up to speed

Newly signed cornerback Marquice Cole's role Sunday is still up in the air for the Broncos. Cole, who was waived four times by the Patriots since March, was signed days before the AFC Championship game.

Broncos coach John Fox said that in the little time Cole has had to get familiar with the Broncos system, he has adapted quickly.

"He's had a good week," Fox said. "He's picked up our system fast and had an excellent week."

As of Thursday, defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio hadn't seen much of Cole.

"I've been focusing primarily on the overall scheme of things but I know that he has been working," Del Rio said. "We're trying to bring him up to speed. We're getting him caught up not only with defense [but] with special teams roles as well, and we'll see where that goes."

#### Injury reports

Star receiver Demaryius Thomas (calf) was limited in practice Friday. Cornerback Kayvon Webster (thumb), tight end Joel Dreessen(knee), tackle Winston Justice (finger), guard Chris Kuper (ankle), and Manning (ankle) all fully participated, along with safeties Mike Adams (thigh) and Duke Ihenacho (knee). All were listed as probable . . . The Broncos are 6-2 in conference championship games and 4-1 when those games are at home. They are 19-17 overall in the postseason.

# Peyton Manning can't afford to wilt now

By Dan Shaughnessy  
Boston Globe  
January 17, 2014

Patriots fans think the Patriots are going to win Sunday because they are confident Tom Brady will play better than Peyton Manning in any big game.

Manning will choke.

That's the book.

A case can be made that, excluding Super Bowls, this AFC Championship is the biggest, grandest, most-hyped NFL contest of the last 50 years. It's the 15th playing of the NFL's 1812 Overture. Bill Belichick has a chance to tie Tom Landry as the winningest playoff coach in NFL history. Brady is already the winningest quarterback in postseason history (18 victories as a starter), and with one more championship, he can join Joe Montana and Terry Bradshaw in the exclusive four-ring club.

The game will be played two days before the 20th anniversary of Bob Kraft's purchase of the Patriots, and a victory by New England would give the Patriots six Super Bowl appearances in the Belichick-Brady era.

But the single reason this game is the (non-Super Bowl) Game of the Century is the presence of Manning and all the pressure he takes into Sports Authority Field Sunday afternoon.

Manning is the man America wants to see. He is Mr. "Omaha," Mr. "Cut That Meat!" He is the man with the bull's-eye on the back of his helmet.

All the pressure in this game is on Manning.

The dirty little secret of this duel is the widespread notion that Manning will somehow choke it all away and hand the game to the Patriots. A good portion of Patriot Nation thinks the Patriots will win because Manning can't win the big one — especially against Belichick and Brady.

It's amazing. Manning has morphed into Wilt Chamberlain. Despite all the awards (Sports Illustrated's Sportsman of the Year in 2013) and commercials, he is disrespected on a par with no athlete this side of Alex Rodriguez. He has amassed passing statistics that may never be broken, but he can't seem to push past the idea that he'll fail in the big moment. He cares too much. He's too nice. And you know where nice guys finish . . .

Much of this is rooted in fact. Some of it is myth.

We know the Patriots have beaten Manning's teams in 10 of 14 meetings when Brady and Manning were the starting quarterbacks. This includes the 2003 AFC

Championship game, when Manning was intercepted four times, thrice by Ty Law. Brady and the Patriots won, 24-14. One year later, in the divisional round, Brady's Patriots beat Manning's Colts, 20-3.

We know Manning is a sub-.500 quarterback in the postseason (10-11). Eight times his team was one and out in the playoffs. Manning threw the horrible, across-the-body interception to Corey Graham that closed the book on Denver's shocking double-overtime loss to the Ravens last January. In Super Bowl XLIV in Miami, Manning threw the pick-6 to the Saints' Tracy Porter that crushed Indianapolis's quest for a second Super Bowl championship.

The book is that Manning can't win in cold weather. He didn't win on that bitter night in Foxborough two months ago — a night when he was handed a 24-0 lead at halftime.

Oh, and you know the rest of it. Imagine how great Tom Brady would be if he'd had Manning's receivers through the years. Tom never had Reggie Wayne or Marvin Harrison. He never had the arsenal Manning has now.

Swell. But here's the counter to all that. Here's the myth under the avalanche of anti-Peyton propaganda:

Manning never had the defenses that Brady had in New England. Manning never had Belichick as a head coach. Manning is the guy who brought the Colts back from a 15-point first-half deficit in the 2006 AFC Championship game at Indy. That's when the Colts beat the Patriots, 38-34. A few years later, Manning is the guy who forced Belichick to go for it on a fourth-and-2. Belichick was afraid to punt the ball to Manning.

And why does Brady get credit (and Manning blame) for New England's "game-winning" drive in the freezing overtime Sunday night game at Gillette? Fact is, neither quarterback put any points on the board in OT. The Patriots scored only because one of the Broncos ran into a punt, giving Brady a first-and-10 from the Broncos' 13-yard line.

That's Brady being good and Manning choking? Tom good in cold weather, but Peyton unable to deal with a frosty night?

Manning carries extra weight, even in his new hometown. Last Sunday's Denver Post kicked off playoff coverage of its top-seeded team with a photo of Manning under the headline, "A Legacy Under a Cloud." After the Broncos hung on and defeated the Chargers, the next day's Post led with "Whew!"

Something tells me there's a crisis of confidence in Manning's own house. And no one exploits this stuff better than the Patriots. Their mere presence in this game is proof of their mental edge. It's certainly not the depth and talent of the New England roster.

Manning will turn 38 in March. He threw 55 touchdown passes this season. He threw for 5,477 yards. The Broncos scored an NFL-record 606 points in the regular season. Manning is going to be named league MVP for a record fifth time.

But none of it means anything if he loses this game. He will go down in history as football's Wilt Chamberlain — a guy with all-world numbers who was ultimately owned and dominated by the coach and MVP of the team from New England.

# Peyton Manning not distracted by legacy talk

By Julian Benbow  
Boston Globe  
January 17, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — The carpool became part of Eric Decker and Jacob Tamme's routine last season. They'd leave the team hotel and pile into Peyton Manning's car.

Usually Decker takes the backseat. Tamme rides shotgun.

"It's like a seniority thing or something," Tamme said.

They don't generally bother the radio.

"Usually," Tamme said, "just roll with whatever he's been listening to."

It's not exactly the stuff Manning's Buick commercials are made of.

"Yeah, we call Archie [Manning] 'Papa Bear' and stuff on the way to the game," Tamme joked. "'Orange cone, re-route.'"

But it's the chance for them to talk one last time as both friends and teammates before they get to Sports Authority Field at Mile High for a game.

"That's what it's about," Tamme said. "It's about the little stuff and the camaraderie of being around these guys. That's what is hard when a season ends, is you know that same group is never going to be around again. We've been blessed to get where we're at now and we've got to find a way to win this game on Sunday and keep it going."

From that point on, Manning won't look ahead or behind.

Peyton Manning's relentless attention to detail has increased during his 16-year career.

He won't think about a year ago, when a Ravens team needing a miracle ended up getting one at their expense.

He won't think about a year from now and whether he'll still want to pour himself in a game he's played for 16 years, putting up nearly 65,000 passing yards and pushing through four neck surgeries.

He won't think about contracts or career goals or legacies.

He'll think only about the opportunity in front of him.

"You realize you're driving down on Sunday, only two games are being played," Manning said. "So you kind of feel fortunate."

Two years ago, everything was changing.

Coming off a neck surgery that cost him the entire 2011-12 season, Manning wasn't sure if he'd ever be the same quarterback. Neither were the Colts, who had to make the painful decision to part ways with the quarterback that had been the team's identity for 14 years.

But coming off a season in which he set season records for touchdowns (55) and passing yards (5,477), those days seem like a distant memory.

"There is no question that we have come a long way in the two years that I have been here," Manning said. "I have certainly come a long way. A lot of people have helped me and have certainly put a lot of hard work into it, and it is very rewarding when you put [in] a lot of hard work and it pays off with the opportunity to play in a game like this.

"You don't take [it] for granted, especially when you've been through an injury, been through a major change and you're in the home stretch of your career. We're excited about the opportunity; we've worked hard to get to this point."

This will be the fourth time Manning and Tom Brady have faced off in the postseason and the 15th time their historic paths have crossed overall.

Their mutual admiration is well-documented. So are the stark differences in their careers. Manning has 167 career wins, 491 career touchdowns, 5,532 career completions, and 64,964 yards passing (all second all-time to Brett Favre), but just one Super Bowl win. Brady is the all-time leader in playoff wins (18), yards (6,147), and completions (566), is third on the postseason touchdown list (42, eight more than Manning), and has three rings to flash.

It's a track record Manning has the utmost respect for.

"I think the one thing that jumps out about Tom is just his consistency," Manning said. "I feel like he's been a better player each year than he was the year before, and that, to me, speaks to his work ethic in the offseason, his refusal to be complacent or satisfied. He always feels like he can step his game up one level higher, which [in] some of the seasons he's had you say, 'How can you get better than that?' But I think he has done that.

"The conversations that I've had with him, I can tell that's something that's always a goal and a focus of his every offseason — targeting something that he wants to work on and improve. And he's done that, and that's a real credit to him. That's just one thing. There are many, many well-deserved accolades and adjectives to describe the way he's played quarterback and the way he's competed, but [consistency is] one that's really impressive to me."

But Manning puts the same level of energy into constantly preparing as Brady puts into constantly improving.

Manning's relentless attention to detail hasn't changed. His love of minutia has probably grown the longer he's been in the league, Manning said.

"I think that's probably the challenge as you get older," Manning said. "Everybody probably enjoys the football games but I've heard players in their late years say that they enjoyed the games but they didn't enjoy the preparation and the offseason workouts and the meetings and all that.

"I still do enjoy that part of it. I think being in a new offense, being with a new offensive coordinator, having some new teammates, it keeps you stimulated. It keeps you on your toes and it keeps you constantly learning each week something new. I think that's important to enjoy the process not just the outcomes of the games.

The attitude Manning takes into every game has been as infectious in the Broncos locker room as his meticulous approach.

"It's not like you see the up-and-downs from Peyton," said veteran cornerback Champ Bailey. "Peyton is always up, because he's always ready, always prepared, and it's good to see that firsthand."

When Manning came to Denver, there was urgency in his tone.

"This is a now situation," he said at the time.

It's why he values each game — and each car ride — so much.

"When you go through a significant injury and a major career change, you truly do go one year at a time and you don't look past what's going on now because you're not sure what's going to happen," he said. "Tomorrow is not promised."

At 37, Manning is only a year younger than John Elway was when he stepped away from the game. Elway had just won the second of back-to-back Super Bowls and was able to ride off into the twilight on top.

Whether that thought has crossed Manning's mind is something Elway isn't entirely sure of.

Speaking to a select gathering of reporters, Elway said, "I still think he's young and he's playing well. That's going to come down to Peyton. It's going to come down to what he wants to do. Having been a football player before, when you leave this game, you want to leave it on your last leg, and try not to leave anything on the table.

By the time Elway retired in 1998, he no longer had a lateral meniscus in his left knee.

"Anybody that's a competitor, that's kind of the way they want to leave the game," Elway said. "I was just fortunate to be able to be on two great football teams and be able to win world championships when my last leg broke."

# Denver Broncos Quotes - 1/17/2014

By Patriots.com  
January 17, 2014

Denver Broncos coaches and players comment on their upcoming AFC Championship game against the New England Patriots during media access on Friday, January 17, 2014.

## **HEAD COACH JOHN FOX**

### **(On the injury report)**

"[s] Mike Adams, thigh, full, probable. [s] Duke Ihenacho, knee, full, probable. [CB] Kayvon Webster, thumb, full, probable. [TE] Joel Dreessen, knee, full, probable. [QB] Peyton Manning, ankle, full, probable. [T] Winston Justice, finger, full, probable. [G] Chris Kuper, ankle, full, probable. [WR] Demaryius Thomas, calf, limited, probable."

### **(On CB Marquice Cole)**

"He's had a good week. He's picked up our system fast and had an excellent week."

### **(On whether it's safe to say S Rahim Moore will be inactive)**

"Safe to say he's inactive for this game, or he's not been brought off of IR."

### **(On the offensive line)**

"I think we had a key injury (T Ryan Clady) early on. [T] Chris Clark has done a tremendous job. We lost two centers in camp, so I think [C] Manny Ramirez has filled in. As a unit, I think they've been pretty consistent both in the run game and the pass game. We'll have a huge challenge this week."

### **(On former Broncos WR Rod Smith being an honorary captain)**

"It's great to have those two Super Bowl trophies sitting in front of our locker [room] as our guys come out to practice every day. To have guys that were a part of that in the community like Rod still live here in Denver, I think it's huge."

### **(On whether he gives a speech before a big game like Sunday)**

"We treat it like any other game, actually. It's still played on the same size field. It happens to be a home game this week instead of a road game. It's just the normal nuances. Then it's about who executes, and usually that's about who prepared the hardest."

### **(On the week of preparation)**

"Outstanding."

**(On whether he's encouraged by the weather forecast for Sunday)**

"What I've learned in going on my three years here in Denver is it can change quickly. So the forecast is what it is. We'll see what the weather brings when we get there."

**SAFETY DAVID BRUTON**

**(On how excited he is for Sunday)**

"I'm ecstatic. It's a one-in-a-lifetime deal. Some guys get a chance to actually get to this game. We've been to the playoffs the past three years and I've never gotten to this game. So I'm extremely excited, happy and blessed for this opportunity."

**(On whether he hopes the game-changing play comes on special teams)**

"Oh yeah, definitely. We did it last year and we did it throughout most of the season this year. We just want to go out there and help our team win. If that means we have to go score, so be it, we'll go score. If we have to go block a punt, block a kick, that is what we're going to do. We're always looking for that big play."

**(On opportunities on special teams)**

"I feel like there is always some type of vulnerability within a unit. Somewhere, we might do something better than what they're capable of blocking or covering or whatever. We're going to take advantage of whatever little nuances they may have up, or what they've been flawed with all season. We're just going to go out there and have that attack mentality—go get it, go get it, play hard and balls to the wall."

**(On whether CB Marquice Cole will be available on special teams)**

"Every man is available. Every man is a possible candidate to be out there, dressed for us. I don't know—it's the coaches' decision what he's got going on. I know he's a very capable player, he's got experience and going against his former team and I know he's jacked about it, too."

**(On whether he has respect for Patriots WR Matthew Slater for his special teams play)**

"Oh yeah, definitely. Respect his game, respect—he's been a Pro Bowl-caliber player the past few years. And at the same time, it's competition. I go out there versus all the special teams players out there and try to prove that I'm better than them or whatnot. It's that whole mindset of a competitor and that's just what we're going to take forth charging onto the field come Sunday."

**(On whether he has studied film of P Ryan Allen punting or K Stephen**

**Gostkowski punting for the Patriots)**

"We're preparing for Ryan Allen, but we're not going to be surprised if it's Gostkowski is back there. We've just got to take that same mindset of whoever is back there is going to get our full effort and if we get the blocked punt, he's going to get the worst of it. So that's just our mentality, no matter who is back there punting the ball."

**(On potentially changing a game on special teams)**

"We look at it as it's what we can do to help the team. It's something that we have to take advantage of those opportunities to make those big plays. We had the opportunity to; we've got to capitalize on them. If somebody misses a block and we're one block away on a return, we don't want to leave that bad taste in our mouth come film study on Monday, or whatever, of the game—knowing that we could have helped the team even more than what we already planned to do. We can't let the little opportunities slip us by. Getting your block, taking care of your job, the little things, having your eyes right, eliminating fakes and stuff like that—special teams is just that one play and you've got to give it your all for that one play."

**(On treating this as just another home game)**

"It's not another home game. That's what it comes down to. It's the AFC Championship Game. It's the last game before you go to that '[Champion]ship.' It's a dream game in two weeks. We're taking it as there is added pressure to this game. Everyone wants to go out and perform well, perform to the best of their abilities. We know that it's going to be a tough game, it's a very high-caliber opponent with multiple weapons offensively, defensively and special teams. It's just going to be our best versus their best and see whose best comes out on top."

**(On finally playing the Patriots in Denver)**

"About time. Let's get loud. Let's make it uncomfortable for [Patriots QB] Tom [Brady] back there. Let's get it rocking because it was rocking last week and I expect it to be decibels higher this week since we're a lot closer. Our fans have been great so let's just keep that riding."

**LINEBACKER DANNY TREVATHAN****(On how excited he is)**

"I'm really excited. It's an opportunity for us to go out there and get one game closer to the Super Bowl. We have this game in front of us. We aren't going to do anything different. We're just preparing and staying within our realm. Just getting excited and getting motivated to go out here and try to put together a good 60 minutes."

**(On CB Chris Harris Jr.'s injury)**

"It's tough. Chris was a big part of this defense. He was in on a lot of plays and he made a lot of plays. He was a big leader on this defense. We are going to miss him. We need some guys to step up. Like we say, it's 'next-man [up]' mentality. Prayers with him, but we need some guys to step up this game and go out and compete. We are going to need them for the long road. Whatever happens, happens, but we are going to put our best foot forward. We have prepared for his for a long time. We are just trying to make the most of this possibility that we have."

**(On whether waking up was different for him this morning)**

"No, I'm just motivated. I'm just ready to go. It's another game, it's another opportunity for me to play the game that I love and be out here with my dogs. We have fans involved—we have a lot of people that are rooting for us. That just makes you wake up extra motivated. I wake up, do the same thing—eat my breakfast and come in. But in the back of my head, I'm ready to go. I'm down for whatever to go ahead and get this win."

**(On what CB Champ Bailey brings to the defense)**

"Champ is a big leader. Champ has been doing it for a long time. You know when he's out there because he talks to your real smooth and lets you know everything is alright. When you're out there with Champ, you just get a good vibe from him. It is an honor to play with a guy that is going to be in the Hall of Fame. Him being out there just adds to our leadership and our character on defense. We started out kind of slow but we're picking this up. We are trying to get to this big game."

**(On what Bailey says)**

"He is reassuring. He communicates. That's what we need out of our leaders. All of us need to communicate and be on one page so when stuff gets hectic you don't just fall out of place and stay within your realm."

**(On Bailey's demeanor)**

"He's just Champ. He's just cool. When you're out there, you want to play for that guy because you know he has your back through whatever."

**(On Patriots RB LeGarrette Blount)**

"That is a big, physical runner. He plays his game well. He knows his strengths and he knows his weaknesses, but he plays to his strengths a lot. We are going to try to keep him contained. They are going to come in here and try to run and do all that, but we are going to be prepared for whatever. It's game time. Our defense knows what time it is and our offense knows what time it is. We just have to be prepared for that."

**(On getting a lot of playing time this year)**

"I really don't think about stuff like that. I'm just enjoying this game. It is just my character, coming from the background I come from and having guys there in my life and people in my life that just want me to play ball. It is a dream come true to be right here and I want to make the most of this opportunity. Playing with these guys—this might be the last time this group of guys is together. You never know. So, you want to go out there and play for these guys and play for what you dreamed of for so long."

**(On his relationship with LB Wesley Woodyard)**

"Whoever is on the field, we're rooting for each other. That is just the way it goes. Me and Wesley have been through it for a long time. This is our second year together, but it feels like 15 years. Having that guy out there—he has really been a great role model in my life, talking to me, helping me get it together. Even though he's not on the field, he's with me in my head all the time. That's how I'm going to carry him."

**(On DE Jeremy Mincey)**

"He's energetic. He has that motor that we need. We have a lot of injuries that occurred, but a lot of guys stepped up and I think they did a good job of picking some guys up. He definitely fit well with this defense."

**(On picking the brains of veteran players)**

"When I first came in I watched them, had a year with them. Some new guys came in and I got to watch them. I kind of feed off of how they come in, how they lead, how they handle themselves off the field with the media and stuff like that. It's going to make me be a better player and a better person. Being a player is more important right now, but I'm a person inside. So, playing this game—you want to take as much away from it as you can. You never know how long you're here, so you have to make the most of whatever."

**(On why the Patriots were able to come back in the second half in Week 12)**

"They came out and played a great second half of football. There is no doubt about that. There is nothing else to say. They just came out and played—they fixed what they needed to fix and we didn't adjust well to what they fixed. We have to be able to when we're up, stay up and if we're down, get up on them and keep them down."

**(On whether he's learned from that Week 12 game)**

"Every game is a learning experience. But that one really taught us something. It is a different day, a different attitude and a different mindset. We're going to go out

here and do what we have to do to get a win.”

**(On whether it has felt like a long or short week)**

“It’s kind of flown by. But, I’ve been taking it one day at a time trying to get the most of it that I can. It could have come a little sooner, but it’s here and now. I’m ready to go. I’m down for the cause. I’m ready to go. It’s game time. We’re just going to let everybody else talk and we’re going to play.”

**(On people asking him for tickets)**

“A couple. You have to learn how to handle that stuff. Stuff is going to occur and you have to be a pro about everything you do. Last year I didn’t handle it well. This year, I’m a different man, different attitude. I’m ready for whatever.”

**GUARD LOUIS VASQUEZ**

**(On the challenges the New England defensive line poses)**

“They take advantage of any loose balls. They do a good job of creating turnovers. Their offense does a good job of keeping it to themselves. We’ve got to be on-point with our ball security, maintaining our drives and staying out of third-and-long.”

**(On if New England is one of the more challenging defenses they’ve faced this season)**

“Every team poses their own threats. I think we’ve done a good job—and the coaches as well—with our game plan. I think we’ve done a good job this week preparing and it was a good week of practice for us.”

**(On if the best way to stay anonymous as an offensive line is to keep its quarterback’s jersey clean)**

“Absolutely. We don’t ever get glory—it’s always the skill guys—but we get thanked in the locker room by the guys and that’s our reward. We feel appreciated to be out there and keeping those guys clean and upright.”

**(On putting up a 280-yard rushing performance earlier this season against New England)**

“We feel that that is their big emphasis—to stop our run game. So we’ve been grinding all week to maintain our run efficiency and that just helps out the passing game. Any time we can be balanced, our offense is clicking on all cylinders at that point.”

**(On if it seems strange that there is so much talk about the run game in a game featuring two of the top quarterbacks)**

“As an offensive lineman—and even our offensive line as a whole—we don’t really pay attention to all that. We pay attention to how we’re going to win the game, how

we're going to keep [QB Peyton Manning] No. 18 clean, our running backs clean, and open up holes. That's our main focus."

**(On if they embrace a battle in the trenches)**

"That's what we get paid to do. That's our mentality. We take it upon ourselves to win it up front. Any time we're winning it up front that usually means good things are happening in the backfield or out on the edge."

**(On how excited he is about playing in the AFC Championship game)**

"This is my first time being this far. Just talking to a few guys that have been to this level—or even the Super Bowl—their advice was play it like any other game, just play harder and longer. But just imagine it's like any other game, the outcome will speak for itself."

**DEFENSIVE TACKLE SYLVESTER WILLIAMS**

**(On the challenge of not knowing if the Patriots will run or pass)**

"At the end of the day you have to play your technique, you have to play the block that is in front of you. The linebackers have to play what they see in front of them. You just have to play football. At the end of the day, if you use good technique and do what you have to do, you'll be able to get the job done."

**(On the Patriots' offensive line)**

"They have a great offensive line. They play well as a unit. It's like they're on a string—they all play together as a group. They get the job done."

**(On the Patriots running for six touchdowns last week)**

"It isn't always about passing, especially in the playoffs. Sometimes you have to get it done on the ground and that's pretty much what they did. They have a great quarterback though. I'm sure he can throw some touchdowns, we just plan on not letting him get it done this week."

**(On the difference between what the Patriots did in Week 12 and what they do now)**

"I think the biggest thing is that their running backs are just motivated. They had some fumbles early in the year and they cleaned that stuff up. I think they're just motivated and they're on a roll—getting the ball downhill and the offensive line is blocking well."

**(On how you can see that someone is motivated)**

"You can look at the yardage that they are putting up. It's just as much them coming together as a unit and getting the job done

# Demaryius Thomas limited in Friday's practice, expected to play

By Josh Alper  
Pro Football Talk  
January 17, 2014

The Broncos have been short on injury concerns among players on their 53-man roster this week and things changed only slightly during Friday's final practice before the AFC Championship Game against the Patriots.

Wide receiver Demaryius Thomas was listed as limited in Friday's practice, his first appearance on the injury report this week. Jeff Legwold of ESPN.com reports that Thomas felt tightness in his calf earlier in the day, leading the team to scale things back a little bit.

But not too much. Legwold reports Thomas did a significant amount of work during the session and he's probable to play against the Patriots on Sunday, so the Broncos offense should be moving at full speed.

Everyone but Thomas was a full participant in practice on Friday and all the other players on the injury report — quarterback Peyton Manning, cornerback Kayvon Webster, safety Mike Adams, tight end Joel Dreessen, safety Duke Ihenacho, tackle Winston Justice and guard Chris Kuper — are also probable to play on Sunday.

# Patriots rule one out with illness, to keep germs at bay

By Darin Gantt  
Pro Football Talk  
January 17, 2014

The Patriots have already ruled one player out for Sunday's AFC Championship Game, likely to keep him away from the rest of the team on the long plane ride.

According to Jeff Howe of the Boston Herald, linebacker Steve Beauharnais has been ruled out with an illness. He probably got it from noted germ-carrier Tom Brady earlier this week.

Of course, Beauharnais has been a healthy inactive 13 times this year, so it's not a major blow.

They listed wide receivers Aaron Dobson (foot) and Kenbrell Thompkins (concussion, hip) as questionable, along with punter Ryan Allen (shoulder). But since they didn't sign another punter this week, it's reasonable to conclude he'll be available.

Otherwise, everyone else on the injury report is listed as probable. Wide receiver Danny Amendola (groin) was a full participant after being limited the previous two days.

# Pats prepare for first trip to land of legal pot

By Mike Florio  
Pro Football Talk  
January 17, 2014

Colorado is now Mile High in more ways than one. On Friday, the Patriots will be heading there for the first time since the legalization of recreational marijuana resulted in the ability of residents and visitors to buy some buds and blaze.

Patriots coach Bill Belichick was asked about the topic on Friday. As usual, he said as little as possible.

Asked if there has been any specific advice to players about smoking pot, Belichick said, "I think we know what the NFL policy is on that."

Belichick then was asked a couple of follow-up questions by reporters who apparently don't realize that the NFL hasn't created an exemption for marijuana in the states that have legalized it. And, as usual, he said as little as possible.

Quarterback Tom Brady was asked about it, too. As usual, he said a little more. And he was a little more charming. (Bill sets a fairly low bar.)

Here's the exchange.

Q: This is the first time you'll be visiting an NFL city where recreational marijuana use is legal.

TB: Are you excited about that?

Q: Has anyone advised the young players against it?

TB: We haven't talked about that. Maybe you guys [can] tell me what that's all about.

Q: I was just wondering if it would be a temptation.

TB: Hopefully not. This is a very important game for us and it's a business trip.

While the league's policy against marijuana applies even in a place where everyone else of legal age can legally buy it and legally smoke it, players who aren't currently in the substance-abuse program have a very low risk of getting in trouble. For them, the testing window doesn't open again until April 20 (yes, 4/20).

Thus, unless a bag of pot falls out of their pocket or duffel bag or fanny pack or other device for carrying stuff, there's no way of getting in trouble, since the typical way of getting in trouble (getting arrested for marijuana possession) can't happen.

The only problem could be finding a place to smoke it. The law doesn't permit marijuana to be smoked publicly, and it's probably not a good idea to smoke it in the player's room at the team hotel, with or without a wet towel at the bottom of the door.

Either way, someone from the Patriots surely will buy some legalized pot and smoke it at some point before Sunday's game. And then they'll inevitably buy a pizza from one of the various Papa John's franchises owned by Peyton Manning in the Denver area.

# Sunday's weather forecasts continue to be positive for Denver, Seattle

By Mike Wilkening  
Pro Football Talk  
January 17, 2014

Dry, temperate conditions appear likely for Sunday's conference title games.

According to WeatherUnderground.com, clear skies, temperatures in the 50s and winds of around 10 mph are on tap for the AFC Championship between the Patriots and Broncos at Sports Authority Field at Mile High in Denver. Game time is 3 p.m. Eastern.

The forecast is also favorable for Sunday's NFC title game pitting the Seahawks and 49ers at CenturyLink Field in Seattle (6:30 p.m. Eastern). Temperatures in the 40s and light winds are expected, per WeatherUnderground.com. There is a 10 percent chance of rain, but all things considered, it looks like a far better set of weather conditions than the Seahawks and Saints faced in the divisional round in Seattle, when rain and wind were material factors.

# John Elway: It was “studly” for Adam Gase to delay interviews

By Darin Gantt  
Pro Football Talk  
January 17, 2014

It would have been easy, and natural, for Broncos offensive coordinator Adam Gase to have his head turned when teams called with chances to interview for head coaching jobs.

But he impressed his boss with his ability to say no.

“He’s done a tremendous job,” Broncos executive John Elway said, via Jeff Legwold of ESPN.com. “He’s had a great year and he’s just got such a great feel, and he’s a hard worker and he’s very bright. I hope he stays but — I thought it was, to me, I couldn’t think for him to be able to do what he did and to say ‘I want to keep my focus on the Denver Broncos and once our season is over I’ll interview.’”

“To me that was studly because it was to me, I like guys that are committed to what they’re doing, committed to the Denver Broncos. So I couldn’t be more proud of that decision. It tells you a lot about the guy.”

It also tells you he’s got a pretty good gig, and a chance to learn more about coaching with one of the best quarterbacks of all time in Peyton Manning. That’s a nice laboratory in which to experiment.

“I felt like I was all-in for what we were doing here,” Gase said.

Elway said Gase’s aggressiveness while calling plays was impressive, and had him thinking back to his playing days.

“I wish I could have played for him,” Elway said. “I think that he’s so bright and he’s working with Peyton and having been here with Josh [McDaniels] before that — who is a very bright, young offensive mind — he has just used all of that and learned from all that. With McCoy here, then Peyton here and now him on his own, he’s been able to put them all together and mold it as his personality and I think he’s done a tremendous job. That shows up in the numbers we’ve put up this year.”

In his first year calling plays, the Broncos set a single-season record with 606 points, and Manning set new records with 5,477 yards and 55 touchdowns.

That kind of performance emboldened the 35-year-old Gase to hang around, rather than take offered interviews with the Vikings or Browns (though the Browns still have a vacancy).

# Never mind Manning, Brady's 7-0 against Jack Del Rio

By Darin Gantt  
Pro Football Talk  
January 17, 2014

Tom Brady always begins deflecting questions about other quarterbacks by saying he doesn't play against other quarterbacks.

Since he focuses on the other defense, the omen this week is a good one.

According to Patrick Saunders of the Denver Post, Brady is a perfect 7-0 against defenses coached by Jack Del Rio, including his time as Broncos coordinator and Jaguars head coach.

That includes a pair of playoff wins over the Jaguars in 2005 and 2007.

In those seven games, Brady is 171-of-235 passing (73 percent) for 1,771 yards, 17 touchdowns and no interceptions. That's a passer rating of 121.1 against Del Rio, which must give him nightmares.

"I just think [Brady] is a good player and prepares hard," Del Rio said. "They do a nice job with their schemes and he's an accurate passer. He's a smart guy, a competitive guy."

He then likely muttered many words under his breath which we can't print here at our family website.

The most glaring example was the most recent, coming back from a 24-0 halftime deficit to beat the Broncos in the regular season meeting.

"When you're up 24-0, we've just got to find a way to step on their throat and just put them away," Denver defensive tackle Terrance Knighton said. "We didn't do that. If we're in the same position again, we've just got to finish better."

And beating Brady once would be a good start for Del Rio.

# Rod Smith Believes in Broncos

By Gray Caldwell

DenverBroncos.com

January 17, 2014

Rod Smith, who will serve as an honorary game captain on Sunday, said he believes now is the Broncos' time.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Rod Smith has been in this situation before.

In his 14-year career with the Broncos, he went to three AFC Championship Games. He won two en route to two Super Bowl titles.

"I kind of stole this from Peyton (Manning), but I believe in it 100 percent – he said: 'Guys can't step it up right now, because then that means you've been slacking in the past,'" Smith said. "You can't step it up right now, because you should have been playing on all cylinders all year."

Now retired, Smith is still in Denver and has maintained a steady presence at Broncos practices and games.

"I was in this locker room at one point," he said. "I am outside of it now, with one foot still kind of in, and I'm just excited for those guys to get themselves to this position – just really knowing how precious it is – because everybody doesn't get to this point."

He said that watching the Broncos' receivers this season, especially, has been rewarding. First, he noted, they block for the run game.

"That, to me, is the sign of a team," Smith said.

Second, they catch so many passes that it's like "they're playing with five footballs, sometimes."

But most importantly, they play for one another.

"If you look at them, they play together and they root for each other," Smith said. "If one catches a big ball, the first one over there is the other receiver."

"It's a good feeling to know that those guys are fighting for each other every single play."

Smith has even watched some games on the sideline, which has been a welcome sight for Head Coach John Fox and his players.

"It's great," Fox said. "We have those two Super Bowl trophies sitting in front of our locker (room) as our guys come out to practice every day. To have guys that were a part of that in the community like Rod, still live here in Denver, I think it's huge."

On Sunday, Smith will serve as an honorary captain for the AFC Championship Game.

Still the franchise's records for postseason receptions, receiving yards and receiving touchdowns with 49, 860 and six, respectively, Smith knows a thing or two about what it takes to win in the playoffs.

That made last year's loss all the harder to watch -- and this year's trip to one game away from the Super Bowl all the more exciting.

"I just feel so good for those guys to get back to this moment," Smith said. "Last year was hard. It was hard for me. Honestly, as a player and being in that situation, I left the stadium, my stomach hurt bad—like somebody just took about 15 running starts and just punched me in the gut. I remember texting, actually on Twitter, Demaryius (Thomas), I said, 'Man, take about a week or two off and then get back to work.' That's the only way you can get over it. You've got to get yourself back there. Some of the guys weren't here, so the good thing is they don't feel that pain, but the ones who did, I can promise you they're out there right now dialed-in, laser-focused, so the new guys will come and say, 'Oh, I've got to be on my game because I don't want to feel what they felt.'"

And there was never any doubt how Smith thinks the game will go this time around.

"The Broncos win," he said. "Honestly, it's their time. It's time for this organization to get back on top, and you have to get through this challenge. This is probably one of the toughest challenges in the last 10 years, honestly. I believe they have the personnel in this building—not just on the field—but in this building, they have the right personnel to go and get it done. I expect it to be big."

# Gray Matter Mailbag: Formula for a Win

By Gray Caldwell

DenverBroncos.com

January 17, 2014

This week, Gray Caldwell answers fan questions on a formula for a win, Eric Decker as a punt returner and the music selection at the stadium.

#BeatThePats Mushin@metalheadmushin

@GrayCaldwell #GrayMatter I feel Knowshon should have a huge impact in this game like last time. Will a strong run game and T.O.P. = a win?

6:19 PM - 15 Jan 2014

Well, no. I don't think there's ever that simple of a formula. Even winning the turnover battle isn't a sure thing -- the Chargers won that two-to-nothing in the Divisional Round and the Broncos still won.

Looking at Denver's regular season, the Broncos were 3-1 when winning both the rushing-yardage and time-of-possession battles -- and that one loss came against the Patriots.

In the playoffs this year, only three of the eight winners in the Wild Card and Divisional Rounds won in both rushing and time of possession -- New Orleans, New England and Denver.

Knowshon Moreno said he's ready for a repeat performance from that first Patriots game when "things were just clicking," but coaches and players acknowledged that this Sunday's game will likely be nothing like the two teams' Week 12 matchup.

"That was last game," Moreno said. "We don't know what is going to happen now in this new game."

"Whatever they're giving us, whatever is working the best, that's what we're going to do."

I don't think there's a magic formula that equals a win. With so much on the line, it's likely just going to come down to who makes the most plays.

Demaryius Thomas said that's exactly what veterans like Peyton Manning, Wes Welker and Champ Bailey have been reinforcing to the team.

"They'll tell you it's going to be a 60-minute game," Thomas said. "It's going to be one play somewhere in the game, and somebody's got to make a play to change the game."

jamieandconnie@jamieandconnie

@GrayCaldwell was ball security the main reason to make Decker the primary returner? #GrayMatter

9:16 AM - 17 Jan 2014

After Sunday's game, Head Coach John Fox called it "just a little bit of a changeup."

"Their punter put a lot of air time on the ball in the first two meetings," Fox said. "We didn't get a lot of opportunities to get returns. Eric's a little bit of a rangier body, covers a little bit more ground. Just giving him the opportunity, and I think you saw some pluses in that tonight."

To that point, Decker ripped off a 47-yard punt return that he nearly took all the way to the end zone -- but he joked that he tripped over an "invisible fence" 30 yards away from paydirt.

"That was an outstanding return," Fox said. "He made a lot of good cuts and movement to get into that position. After that, maybe not so much (laughing)."

Decker said he was happy with his performance -- with the exception of falling down on that return. Keep in mind, Trindon Holliday was still a returner for the Broncos against the Chargers -- he handled kickoff duties, averaging more than 25 yards per return. He broke one for a touchdown early in the fourth quarter, but a block-in-the-back penalty negated his return score.

DenBroncos Indonesia@DenverBroncosID

@GrayCaldwell who is Denver Broncos resident DJ? the one responsible for the music playlist in stadium?

10:20 AM - 9 Jan 2014

Good question, and it's a collaborative effort. The easiest answer is that it's the ThunderVision team -- the same group that updates the scoreboard throughout the game and provides the replays also provides the music selection.

Many of the songs during pregame warmups come straight from the players. Throughout the season, a request sheet was in the locker room, and the players could write down any music they wanted to hear.

Long snapper Aaron Brewer, for example, often requests reggae band Rebelution. Welker's requests have included "Scar Tissue" by Red Hot Chili Peppers and "Crawl" by Kings of Leon. The picks have ranged from David Bruton's Mystikal, Jay-Z and Drake to Mitch Unrein's Metallica and Johnny Cash.

I'd probably go with this.

# Final AFC Title HealthONE Injury Report

By Gray Caldwell

DenverBroncos.com

January 17, 2014

Friday's final injury report for Denver and New England's AFC Championship Game matchup.



## Denver Broncos

Player	Pos.	Injury	Wed. Participation	Thur. Participation	Fri. Participation	Game Status
Thomas, Demaryius	WR	Calf	---	---	<b>LIMITED</b>	PROBABLE
Adams, Mike	S	Thigh	LIMITED	<b>FULL</b>	FULL	PROBABLE
Dreessen, Joel	TE	Knee	FULL	FULL	FULL	PROBABLE
Ihenacho, Duke	S	Knee	FULL	FULL	FULL	PROBABLE
Justice, Winston	T	Finger	FULL	FULL	FULL	PROBABLE
Kuper, Chris	G	Ankle	FULL	FULL	FULL	PROBABLE
Manning, Peyton	QB	Ankle	FULL	FULL	FULL	PROBABLE
Webster, Kayvon	CB	Thumb	FULL	FULL	FULL	PROBABLE

## New England Patriots

Player	Pos.	Injury	Wed. Participation	Thur. Participation	Fri. Participation	Game Status
Beauharnais, Steve	LB	Illness	---	---	<b>DNP</b>	OUT
Allen, Ryan	P	Shoulder	LIMITED	LIMITED	LIMITED	QUESTIONABLE
Amendola, Danny	WR	Groin	LIMITED	LIMITED	<b>FULL</b>	PROBABLE
Dennard, Alfonzo	CB	Knee/Shoulder	LIMITED	<b>FULL</b>	FULL	PROBABLE
Dobson, Aaron	WR	Foot	LIMITED	LIMITED	LIMITED	QUESTIONABLE
Fletcher, Dane	LB	Groin	LIMITED	<b>FULL</b>	FULL	PROBABLE
Hightower, Dont'a	LB	Ankle	LIMITED	LIMITED	<b>FULL</b>	PROBABLE
Mankins, Logan	G	Ankle	LIMITED	<b>FULL</b>	FULL	PROBABLE
Thompkins, Kenbrell	WR	Hip/Concussion	LIMITED	LIMITED	LIMITED	QUESTIONABLE
Vereen, Shane	RB	Groin	LIMITED	<b>FULL</b>	FULL	PROBABLE

### STATUS DEFINITIONS:

Out – player definitely will not play

Doubtful – at least 75% chance player will not play

Questionable – 50-50 chance player will not play

Probable – virtual certainty player will be available for normal duty

**BOLD** - Indicates change in status

# Fans Encouraged to Arrive Early Sunday

By Stuart Zaas

DenverBroncos.com

January 17, 2014

Broncos fans are encouraged to arrive early for gameday events surrounding Sunday's AFC Championship Game.

DENVER– The Denver Broncos are encouraging all fans to wear orange and arrive early to Sunday's AFC Championship Game against the New England Patriots at Sports Authority Field at Mile High (1:05 p.m.).

Prior to kickoff, there will be a 360-degree HD panoramic photo taken, presented by Verizon and Bud Light. The stadium will also be filled with orange pom poms in every seat.

Pregame festivities will include the Thunderstorm skydive jump team and a "Go Broncos" cheer led by a Broncos alum. The Broncos are also set to welcome home more than two dozen military members who will be accompanied by their families.

Honorary captain Rod Smith will join the rest of the Broncos captains at midfield for the pregame coin toss, and the pregame events will conclude with the National Anthem, which will be performed by Christian recording artist and concert headliner Leah Shafer of Parker, Colo.

Sunday's halftime performance will feature Denver's own The Fray, comprised of Isaac Slade (vocals, piano), Joe King (vocals, guitar), Dave Welsh (guitar) and Ben Wysocki (drums). The locally-based foursome formed in 2002 and achieved national success with their 2005 debut, featuring the hit singles "Over My Head (Cable Car)" and "How to Save a Life," which went double-platinum. The band also earned a 2010 Grammy. They will release their fourth album February 25th titled "Helios" and will be performing their new single "Love Don't Die."

## OTHER PREGAME FESTIVITIES:

The Mile High Mountain Village presented by Bud Light will open at 10 a.m. and is free and open to all fans with a game ticket. The main entrance is located at Gate 4 and represents the fans' first chance to come inside the stadium. The area features field viewing sections, pregame programming, the Tavern at Mile High, food and Bud Light specials and appearances by Broncos Cheerleaders, alumni and Miles the Mascot.

Outside of the game, fans can enjoy the Sports Legends Mall on the south end of the stadium. Free and open to the public, the outdoor area will appeal to fans coming via public transportation and will feature sponsor booths with football-themed activities, a beer garden, pregame programming and live music (Funkiphino) beginning at 10 a.m.

All on-site stadium parking lots will open at 8:00 AM. Gates to the stadium open at 11:00 AM. United Club and Suite ticket holders may enter Gate 2 or 7 starting at 10:00 AM. Kickoff is scheduled for 1:05 PM MST.

#### TOP GAMEDAY SUGGESTIONS

- Plan for extra time in transportation to the stadium. Carpool or utilize public transportation.
- Arrive at gates no later than 12 PM to minimize delays at security checkpoints.
- If possible, avoid bringing any bags. Any bags which are necessary must meet all bag policy requirements.

#### BAG POLICY

The Broncos and NFL strongly encourage all fans to not to bring any bags, however the following will be permitted:

- One clear bag no larger than 12" by x 6" x 12" OR a one-gallon clear freezer bag (Ziploc or similar).
- Fans may also carry a small clutch purse no larger than 6.5" x 4.5", with or without a strap, in addition to the larger clear bag.
- Each ticket holder, including children, may carry an approved clear bag and a clutch purse.

#### Additional Bag Policy Information

#### SECURITY SCREENING

Fans will pass through two security checks at stadium gates. At the first, bags will be visually screened to ensure they meet size & type requirements. At the second, the contents of all bags will be inspected and fans will be screened with a hand-held metal detector. To minimize delays:

- Confirm all bags meet NFL requirements.

- Remove blankets or other large, bulky items from bags and carry in hand. When bag contents are visible to security staff, inspection can take place without contents being removed. If items conceal contents of a bag, security will require their removal for screening to take place.
- Remove any keys, coins or other metal objects from your pockets and hold these in hand
- Simply present any bags to security at the first checkpoint so they can be quickly checked to for proper size / bag type. Contents of bags will not be inspected until the second check point at the gate itself.

## PARKING & TRANSPORTATION

### PARKING

Parking in stadium lots is reserved primarily for ticket holders with pre-sold permits. A limited number of single-game spaces are available for those without permits however quantities are limited and are sold on a first-come, first-served basis (\$30-\$20 cash only).

Single game spaces at the stadium will be sold out by 11:30 am

Game day parking will be available for \$15 per space, cash only, at the Pepsi Center and in lots on the Auraria Campus, both located east of I-25 and a 10 minute walk to the stadium,

**PARKING ON STREETS IN NEIGHBORHOODS AROUND THE STADIUM IS ILLEGAL. VIOLATORS WILL BE TICKETED AND TOWED.**

### LIGHT RAIL

The C, E, or W light rail lines stop at the Sports Authority Field at Mile High Station, an 8 minute walk to the stadium. Fans can take the D or H lines and transfer to the C or E lines at I-25 & Broadway, Alameda, or 10th & Osage stations.

The West Corridor Line stops at the Decatur Federal Station located just south of the stadium and part of the recently completed West Corridor Line, an extension of light rail service 12.1 miles to the West between downtown Union Station and the Federal Center in Golden.

### BRONCOS RIDE & FEDERAL / MARKET STREET SHUTTLE

Broncos Ride shuttle busses transport fans to the stadium from park and ride lots throughout the metropolitan area. Busses depart park and rides 2 ½ to 1 hour prior to kickoff and stage in Lot A for fans to board for the return trip. Round trip fares

range from \$ 4.50 to \$ 10.00 depending upon departure point. Round-trip tickets may be purchased at ticket machines or booths at select light rail stations.

The Federal Shuttle and Market Street Station Shuttle operate every three to five minutes starting two hours prior to kickoff until 10 minutes after kickoff. Following the game, service resumes with the last bus departing 45 minutes following the conclusion of the game. The Federal Shuttle stops at Lincoln High School (2285 South Federal Blvd) and at bus stops along Federal Boulevard to the stadium. The Market Street Shuttle departs from the Market Street Station located at the corner of the 16th Street Mall and Market Street in downtown Denver

#### ADDITIONAL PARKING & TRANSPORTATION INFORMATION

[WWW.RTD.COM](http://WWW.RTD.COM).

[WWW.SPORTSAUTHORITYFIELD.COM](http://WWW.SPORTSAUTHORITYFIELD.COM)

[WWW.COTRIP.ORG/HOME.HTM](http://WWW.COTRIP.ORG/HOME.HTM)

# Recalling the 2005 AFC Title Game

By Andrew Mason  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 17, 2014

Independent Analyst Andrew Mason takes a look back at the 2005 AFC Championship game.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – It couldn't have been more than 60 seconds after the No. 6-seeded Steelers wrapped up their upset of the top-seeded Colts in the 2005 AFC Divisional Playoffs that my phone buzzed with this message from a friend who was also on the Broncos beat back then:

"Be careful what you wish for. You might get it."

I replied in agreement. My feeling was exactly the same.

When Colts kicker Mike Vanderjagt sliced a game-tying 56-yard field-goal attempt wide with 28 seconds remaining, you could feel the sense of relief coming from many Broncos fans. Their team would avoid a trip to Indianapolis, where the Broncos' last two seasons had ended in playoff losses by a combined score of 90-34, and they would play the AFC Championship at home, where the Broncos had won 11 consecutive games.

Of course, the Steelers were 15-3 in their previous 18 road games and roared into Denver on a six-game winning streak, which became eight games after a 34-17 AFC Championship Game win over Denver and a 21-10 Super Bowl XL triumph over Seattle.

But the Steelers' sprint into the championship game, didn't stop a sense of overconfidence from seeping into Colorado. Nor did a pedestrian 8-8 mark for conference-championship hosts in the previous eight seasons dating back to the Packers and Broncos' road sweep of the 49ers and Steelers, respectively, on Jan. 18, 1998.

"Pittsburgh came to us, and everybody was excited about that," Smith recalled, "and I was like, 'No. You've got to go play. It's not about being excited about playing at home. It has nothing to do with that. You've got a football game. You can't worry about all the other stuff.'"

That mentality permeated corners of the locker room, as well.

"Honestly, I saw a lot of our younger guys kind of got lost in the fact that we had a home game, instead of getting lost in the fact of getting in that playbook, being focused, being disciplined on the things that we need to do as a team," Smith said.

Still, defeat seemed the last thing possible at kickoff earlier on a bright, sunny afternoon. At that moment, 76,775 onlookers twirled their towels -- although more than a few yellow "Terrible Towels" were interspersed with the orange ones given away to fans.

The stadium throbbed with enthusiasm. The sky was an azure blue that could have inspired another round of "God is a Broncos fan" bumper stickers. The sight was gorgeous: a photographer's dream. The sound was deafening: a visiting quarterback's nightmare. It is a picture that remains seared into my consciousness, as it always will.

Then the game began, and everything that worked so well in the previous 17 games fell apart. Potential interceptions were dropped. Blocks were missed. Among the onlookers, surprise became discomfort; later, discomfort transformed into shock.

And just when it seemed it couldn't get any worse -- after a Jerome Bettis touchdown to make the score 17-3 with 1:55 left in the first half -- it did. Ike Taylor intercepted Jake Plummer's pass for tight end Stephen Alexander. The Steelers scored four plays later, and a lead that was just 10-3 at the two-minute warning had ballooned to 24-3 at halftime.

Denver never drew closer than 10 points after that.

"We didn't play well, and we lost," Smith succinctly said.

Smith had two world championship rings, so he and others had past success on which they could linger in the future years. Most on that Broncos team did not, including Champ Bailey, who enjoyed an MVP-caliber season, but saw it end one game short of the Super Bowl.

Until now, Bailey had never been that close again. Shadows covered the stadium by the time Ben Roethlisberger crossed the goal line with the game-sealing 4-yard touchdown run in the fourth quarter.

What we didn't know then -- but seems obvious in retrospect -- is that the growing darkness was a metaphor for what was to come: five years of declining returns and performance. Stalwarts dating back to the world title years, like Smith, Matt Lepsis and Tom Nalen, got injured over the following years and eventually retired. Free-agent acquisitions didn't pan out as expected. Two head coaches were dismissed.

Bailey saw it all -- and stayed around long enough for the rebirth of the past three years, which began with John Elway's return as executive vice president and John Fox's arrival as head coach. He re-signed with the team in 2011, less than two months after a 4-12 season that was the club's worst in four decades.

Now, Bailey is the only link to that afternoon eight years ago, one that remains as regrettable as it was unforgettable.

"We had some up-and-down years, but that is the reason why, when my contract was up -- the time before this one -- there was no doubt I wanted to be back here," Bailey said. "Because this organization is about winning so it wasn't going to take long until we got back to it. I feel good about what I did and definitely glad I'm still here."

Bailey, Broncos fans and former players like Rod Smith waited out the lean years, longing for another opportunity like the one of eight years ago. It's here now, but is perceived differently: the Patriots are the sport's most accomplished team this century, and the Broncos are hardened by a year of obstacles and injuries, and the memory of last year's divisional-round loss to Baltimore.

"Last year was hard. It was hard for me," Smith said. "Honestly, as a player and being in that situation, I left the stadium, and my stomach hurt bad -- like somebody just took about 15 running starts and just punched me in the gut.

"Some of the guys weren't here, so the good thing is they don't feel that pain, but the ones who did, I can promise you they're out there right now, dialed in, laser-focused, so the new guys will come and say, 'Oh, I've got to be on my game, because I don't want to feel what they felt.'"

And they don't want to feel what the Broncos felt eight years ago, when an opportunity was lost, not to be regained again for nearly a decade.

The Broncos have taken the first step: their mindset is completely different than it was in January 2006. This time, nobody in Colorado has to say, "Be careful what you wish for," not with the quarterback and head coach responsible for five Super Bowl trips standing on the east sideline.

# Five to Watch: 4. Tom Brady

By Andrew Mason  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 17, 2014

Independent analyst Andrew Mason continues his look at five key players in Sunday's AFC Championship Game with Patriots quarterback Tom Brady.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This week, independent analyst Andrew Mason will take a closer look at five players to watch in this Sunday's AFC Championship Game. Fourth on the list: Patriots quarterback Tom Brady.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The mention of the name "Tom Brady" doesn't require any adjectives. The same thing can be said for Peyton Manning, which helps make Sunday's game arguably the most anticipated conference championship in recent NFL history.

And frankly, what can be noted about Brady that has not been written before?

But even though "Manning vs. Brady" is the marquee matchup, it's an inaccurate assessment of what looms Sunday. Unless one or the other stuns their teams, onlookers and the entire football-watching nation by lining up on defense, Manning will not face Brady, or vice versa.

Brady will face a Denver defense that had allowed just 27 points in 11 quarters until leaking 17 points in the fourth quarter last Sunday. In Weeks 1-15, the defense allowed 24.6 points per 60 minutes; from Weeks 16-17 and through the first three quarters last Sunday, that average dropped to 9.8 points per 60 minutes.

Much of that is due to the Broncos' success at disguising their pass rushes, to supplement an injury-transformed front four with blitzes. But Brady is one of the finest quarterbacks in league history at identifying pressure before it arrives, and is rarely rattled.

Brady has thrown for less than 200 yards in three consecutive games, but the Patriots won them all. They didn't need big numbers from Brady, not when their ground game was at its most effective in years.

So key could rest in takeaways. That sounds like a plan, but takeaways are difficult to procure from the unflappable quarterback. Nevertheless, the Patriots have lost all four times the last two seasons when Brady had a negative interception-to-touchdown margin, including in last year's AFC Championship defeat to Baltimore.

All four of those occasions, Brady had a margin barely in the negative: minus-1 each time. But the 0-4 mark in those games offers a stark contrast to the 26-5 record in all other games in that span.

Thus, the Broncos could take some chances in pressure and coverage. Those tactics might lead to some completions and long gains, but an interception or two is the best -- and perhaps only -- way to knock Brady a bit off-kilter, and force the mistakes that he's not going to make on his own.

"That's obviously our game plan. We want to hit him as much as possible and see if we can get to him," said Broncos defensive end Shaun Phillips. "A guy like that doesn't get rattled too much, but if we can keep the ball out of his hand and keep pressure on him, I think it's in our benefit."

# Five to Watch: 3. Edelman and Amendola

By Andrew Mason  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 17, 2014

Independent analyst Andrew Mason continues his look at key Patriots to watch in Sunday's AFC Championship Game.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This week, independent analyst Andrew Mason will take a closer look at five players to watch in this Sunday's AFC Championship Game. Third on the list: Patriots receivers Danny Amendola and Julian Edelman.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Because Danny Amendola signed with the Patriots within hours of Wes Welker's departure in free agency last year, the two were always going to be connected, even beyond their slot-receiver skills and shared alma mater, Texas Tech.

But injuries kept him from finding a groove last year, and in the end, it was Welker's understudy in New England, Julian Edelman, that ended up picking up most of the slack in the wake of Welker's departure.

Now that Amendola is healthy, you can't mention one without the other. With Rob Gronkowski out for the season after suffering a knee injury, the Patriots needed both, with one taking Gronkowski's role -- that often necessitated lining up in one slot.

So you will sometimes see them both in the slot. One of the key plays in their frantic comeback win over Cleveland saw each receiver line up in the slots to each side of Brady. This kind of formation can force safety confusion; each has the speed to get upfield if the need arises.

Although neither has Gronkowski's size, their speed and quick cuts provide another dimension. Covering either with a linebacker can be a futile task, and Tom Brady's ability to fire the football into narrow windows means that even tight coverage might not do much good.

The two are also lethal when they're flanked to one side. New England used this formation early last week in an attempt to force the Colts' cornerbacks to collide. It was unsuccessful, and the Colts' man coverage maintained its integrity, but Amendola still managed to cut in front of the cornerback and ran a post toward the goal line, catching a 16-yard pass just behind a safety. The play was properly defended, but still moved the chains on third-and-3 anyway.

But Amendola and Edelman are more than just move-the-sticks specialists. Combined, they averaged 10.62 yards per reception on 159 catches: 105 for Edelman and 54 for Amendola.

But with the emergence of LeGarrette Blount, they can take advantage of play-action and pick up yardage in larger chunks.

Amendola had a 53-yard reception last week, running a post route and taking advantage of the safety and cornerback biting on the fake. By the time Amendola caught the football, he had three yards of separation and was 39 yards downfield, adding another 14 after the catch.

"He's showed me really what he's all about," said Patriots quarterback Tom Brady. "He's fought through a lot of adversity earlier in the year and is really playing his best football. He's done a great job. He's been in and out of different roles in the whole offense and different positions, different formations. He's had to learn a lot of different spots. He's willing to do whatever it takes. He's doing great and I love being out there with him."

On the 53-yard connection, Edelman was available as a short option, running a crossing route just past the line of scrimmage. But the two are interchangeable, and it could be Edelman who gets the deep shot Sunday.

# Mile High Advantage

By Brandon Moree  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 17, 2014

The Broncos will play the AFC Championship game from the comfort of their home stadium.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – Many of the factors for Sunday's AFC Championship game between the Broncos and the Patriots are much different than they were for the Week 12 matchup – none more obvious than the location.

The Broncos' overtime loss to New England in the regular season came at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Mass. Sunday the Patriots have to come to Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

"We like playing at home because our fans have been outstanding all season," quarterback Peyton Manning said Thursday. "I think anybody prefers to play at home and with their home fans. But this has been an excellent team—at home and on the road—that we're playing. We need to do our job on the football field from an executing standpoint and count on that. At the same time we know our fans will be loud and excited. We're certainly glad to be playing here."

Last Sunday, Sports Authority Field at Mile High was raucously loud when the Chargers had the ball and nearly silent when the Broncos had the ball. It's conceivable that those varying volume levels were a factor in several miscues by the Chargers.

In the first quarter, with the fans screaming, quarterback Philip Rivers couldn't get a snap off in time and had to take a delay of game penalty. On the other side of the ball, it was so quiet that the Chargers could hear Manning's 'Omaha' call – and jumped into the neutral zone five times.

"That is the good thing—is they understand when to be noisy and when to be quiet," Head Coach John Fox said. "They've done a terrific job all season and really since I've been here."

But the noise isn't the only advantage have playing at home. Sports Authority Field sits at the highest elevation of any stadium in the NFL and the altitude can be difficult to adjust to.

"Honestly, the altitude does play a difference," defensive end Shaun Phillips said. "But, after you have played a couple quarters and blown your lungs out a little bit,

you're usually good after that. You have to get through that first initial surge. So, hopefully we can have a lead on a couple of teams before that surge comes."

Of course, the fans and the altitude can only do so much and the game will be decided by execution on the field – a fact that the Broncos are well aware of.

"It's definitely a plus," running back Knowshon Moreno said of playing at home.

"But we've still got to play the game no matter where it is. It's definitely a plus to be able to stay home and play here and have the altitude a little bit and see how they handle that, but at the same time it's still the game."

# That's What He Said: AFC Championship Friday

By Brandon Moree  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 17, 2014

Here are some of the highlights of what Coach Fox and players said to the media on Friday.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Head Coach John Fox and several players addressed the media today at Dove Valley in advance of Sunday's AFC Championship Game at Sports Authority Field at Mile High. Here are some of the highlights from what they said.

## **HEAD COACH JOHN FOX**

### **On the offensive line**

"I think we had a key injury (T Ryan Clady) early on. [T] Chris Clark has done a tremendous job. We lost two centers in camp, so I think [C] Manny Ramirez has filled in. As a unit, I think they've been pretty consistent both in the run game and the pass game. We'll have a huge challenge this week."

### **On former Broncos WR Rod Smith being an honorary captain**

"It's great to have those two Super Bowl trophies sitting in front of our locker [room] as our guys come out to practice every day. To have guys that were a part of that in the community like Rod still live here in Denver, I think it's huge."

### **On whether he gives a speech before a big game like Sunday**

"We treat it like any other game, actually. It's still played on the same size field. It happens to be a home game this week instead of a road game. It's just the normal nuances. Then it's about who executes, and usually that's about who prepared the hardest."

### **On the week of preparation**

"Outstanding."

## **SAFETY DAVID BRUTON**

### **On opportunities on special teams**

"I feel like there is always some type of vulnerability within a unit. Somewhere, we might do something better than what they're capable of blocking or covering or whatever. We're going to take advantage of whatever little nuances they may have

up, or what they've been flawed with all season. We're just going to go out there and have that attack mentality—go get it, go get it, play hard and balls to the wall.”

### **On whether he has respect for Patriots WR Matthew Slater for his special teams play**

“Oh yeah, definitely. Respect his game, respect—he’s been a Pro Bowl-caliber player the past few years. And at the same time, it’s competition. I go out there versus all the special teams players out there and try to prove that I’m better than them or whatnot. It’s that whole mindset of a competitor and that’s just what we’re going to take forth charging onto the field come Sunday.”

### **On treating this as just another home game**

“It’s not another home game. That’s what it comes down to. It’s the AFC Championship Game. It’s the last game before you go to that [Champion]’ship. It’s a dream game in two weeks. We’re taking it as there is added pressure to this game. Everyone wants to go out and perform well, perform to the best of their abilities. We know that it’s going to be a tough game, it’s a very high-caliber opponent with multiple weapons offensively, defensively and special teams. It’s just going to be our best versus their best and see whose best comes out on top.”

## **LINEBACKER DANNY TREVATHAN**

### **On Patriots RB LeGarrette Blount**

“That is a big, physical runner. He plays his game well. He knows his strengths and he knows his weaknesses, but he plays to his strengths a lot. We are going to try to keep him contained. They are going to come in here and try to run and do all that, but we are going to be prepared for whatever. It’s game time. Our defense knows what time it is and our offense knows what time it is. We just have to be prepared for that.”

### **On getting a lot of playing time this year**

“I really don’t think about stuff like that. I’m just enjoying this game. It is just my character, coming from the background I come from and having guys there in my life and people in my life that just want me to play ball. It is a dream come true to be right here and I want to make the most of this opportunity. Playing with these guys—this might be the last time this group of guys is together. You never know. So, you want to go out there and play for these guys and play for what you dreamed of for so long.”

### **On whether he’s learned from that Week 12 game**

“Every game is a learning experience. But that one really taught us something. It is a different day, a different attitude and a different mindset. We’re going to go out here and do what we have to do to get a win.”

## **GUARD LOUIS VASQUEZ**

### **On the challenges the New England defensive line poses**

"They take advantage of any loose balls. They do a good job of creating turnovers. Their offense does a good job of keeping it to themselves. We've got to be on-point with our ball security, maintaining our drives and staying out of third-and-long."

### **On putting up a 280-yard rushing performance earlier this season against New England**

"We feel that that is their big emphasis—to stop our run game. So we've been grinding all week to maintain our run efficiency and that just helps out the passing game. Any time we can be balanced, our offense is clicking on all cylinders at that point."

### **On if they embrace a battle in the trenches**

"That's what we get paid to do. That's our mentality. We take it upon ourselves to win it up front. Any time we're winning it up front that usually means good things are happening in the backfield or out on the edge."

## **DEFENSIVE TACKLE SYLVESTER WILLIAMS**

### **On the Patriots running for six touchdowns last week**

"It isn't always about passing, especially in the playoffs. Sometimes you have to get it done on the ground and that's pretty much what they did. They have a great quarterback though. I'm sure he can throw some touchdowns, we just plan on not letting him get it done this week."

### **On the difference between what the Patriots did in Week 12 and what they do now**

"I think the biggest thing is that their running backs are just motivated. They had some fumbles early in the year and they cleaned that stuff up. I think they're just motivated and they're on a roll—getting the ball downhill and the offensive line is blocking well."

### **On how you can see that someone is motivated**

"You can look at the yardage that they are putting up. It's just as much them coming together as a unit and getting the job done."

# Woodyard 'Living Through' Trevathan

By Brandon Moree  
DenverBroncos.com  
January 17, 2014

Linebacker Wesley Woodyard has been a leader for Danny Trevathan to follow this season.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. – Though linebackers Wesley Woodyard and Danny Trevathan both played their college ball at Kentucky, they weren't in Lexington at the same time.

Woodyard left Kentucky after the 2007 season and Trevathan arrived in 2008, but now they share the same field as a part of the Broncos linebacking corps. This season, Trevathan led the team with 125 total tackles and Woodyard was second on the club with 83.

Trevathan is in just his second year in Denver while Woodyard, a defensive captain, is in his sixth.

"Being a leader, I would definitely say having that captain on my chest, that's my chip (on my shoulder)," Woodyard said. "Regardless of anything that goes on, my job is to continue to lead my defense and to continue to lead my teammates – give guys good advice out there. A guy who I'm living through and I love to see play every game is Danny Trevathan.

"He came in like a little brother to us, and now he's just growing up and taking over things. It's exciting to see that. To me, that's what I look forward to, seeing guys step up."

Trevathan has taken advantage of that opportunity to learn from Woodyard and some of the other veterans on the team, noting that he watched "how they come in, how they lead, how they handle themselves off the field with the media" and the like.

As the 2013 regular season progressed, so did Trevathan. After a strong training camp, he came out and started all 16 games – picking up a pair of sacks, three forced fumbles and three interceptions along the way.

Woodyard, who battled injury throughout the season and spent some time in sub packages, said that "Danny deserves everything he's gotten."

But to the two former Wildcats, it doesn't seem to matter who is on the field.

"Whoever is on the field, we're rooting for each other," Trevathan said. "That is just the way it goes. Me and Wesley have been through it for a long time. This is our second year together, but it feels like 15 years. Having that guy out there – he has really been a great role model in my life, talking to me, helping me get it together. Even though he's not on the field, he's with me in my head all the time. That's how I'm going to carry him."

# Quotables: Jeff Saturday Conference Call

By Mike Morris

DenverBroncos.com

January 17, 2014

Former Colts center and ESPN NFL analyst Jeff Saturday discussed the AFC Championship Game between the Broncos and Patriots.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- On Thursday Morning, former Colts center and ESPN NFL Analyst Jeff Saturday broke down the AFC Championship Game matchup between the Broncos and Colts on an ESPN media call. Saturday, who played alongside quarterback Peyton Manning from 1999-2010 – Manning missed the 2011 season due to injury – discussed the importance of the game, which marks the 15<sup>th</sup> all-time meeting between Manning and Patriots quarterback Tom Brady. Here are some of the highlights.

## **On the matchup between the Broncos and Patriots, as well as between Manning and Brady**

“I would say that, as excited as I am about all four teams, because I honestly believe these are the four best teams in the NFL – it doesn’t hurt that I picked these as my picks early in the season, makes me feel even better – I think that the excitement between Brady and Manning, the excitement in the media and around, is fun to watch. But ultimately, this game will not be decided by those guys. They will show up and play well like we have come to expect, but ultimately the defensive front sevens of both of these squads – and the rushing attacks on both teams – are going to decide the fate of this football game. It’s going to be who’s able to stop the run and who’s able to make each team go one-dimensional, whichever area they’re trying to push them into.”

## **On Manning ‘wanting’ this game**

“As far as how bad he wants it, listen, he shows up every year preparing and working as hard as you possibly can to get up. That’s why you play the game of football. We talk about all the time, teams set up goals every year about winning your division, getting a home playoff game. You set up small goals that way. But the ultimate goal is to win the Super Bowl. And the greatest part about the game of football is there’s only one winner. There are no consolation prizes, nobody makes you feel better because you won the AFC, or you didn’t. It’s about winning that Super Bowl.”

## **On Manning’s success in late-game situations where the score is tight**

"You know, I heard a quote that Peyton said – I don't remember what week it was, if it was last week or a couple of weeks ago – and he talked about pressure, and the only time you feel pressure is if you don't know what in the hell you're doing. That's true, because ultimately the greatest part about Peyton is you know he knows what he should do with the ball. And you know he's fully capable of getting it there. And you feel comfortable that he has prepared and put in the time – and knows what should happen, what should develop in a play, to give you the best chance to be successful."

### **On Manning's legacy**

"I think from his perspective, he obviously wants it. He always has and that's the competitive nature he has. As far as a legacy, I don't buy into all of that. It really frustrates me when people talk about his legacy and that he won't be considered, or a certain-style quarterback. Look, he's going to go down as the best quarterback in the NFL in history – or one of them. It all depends upon your opinion of quarterback play. But ultimately, playoff football – and I have said this continuously these last few weeks – playoff football is team football. And you're looking at all three phases of the team and the game have to be effective. If your defense doesn't play well and it puts you in a position where you have to press, or your special teams doesn't do their job and now you're starting inside your own 20, no one ever talks about those things."

### **On the process of playing a team again after losing to that team earlier in the season**

"Well, you begin by stripping down what you feel like you failed at. So at some point during the game, you will look at what you did poorly and why. Was it because of what they did? Was it because of what you did? Because like you're asking, you don't make changes if it was self-inflicted. If receivers weren't running crisp routes or the quarterback wasn't throwing the ball on time, or the line wasn't necessarily in the spots they were supposed to be – if that's the problem, you begin to work on yourself. You really focus on improving in the areas that you know you messed up and you shot yourself in the foot."

### **On the playoffs**

"The cool part of the playoffs is you really do go back throughout the regular season and you look at teams that run a similar offense to you. Okay, so what did they do here? And you begin to rebuild your game plan so that the same mistakes can't occur. And what makes teams effective in the second time they're playing them is you self-scout it, so now you know what you didn't do well and you've talked about it all week. And you know that's not going to be the area that costs you."

## **On Patriots Head Coach Bill Belichick**

"The thing about Bill Belichick is he will take your strengths away. And you've got to respect that. And he'll still give your team an opportunity to win, but you've got to win through your weaknesses – which is what he's willing to bet the game on. As we've seen through his entire career, he's made good choices because he's won a whole lot more than he's lost."

## **On the way Belichick makes adjustments during games**

"(Belichick) is willing to change strategies mid-game. We would have a number of football games where we would play and they may come in, they may have been a 3-4 the whole season – and you show up and they're playing a 4-3. Now, they've changed their entire structure of their defense. Then we've had games where they would start out dropping eight and only rushing three, not worried about pressuring the quarterback but trying to create lane matchups for the quarterback to fit the ball in. And then he would have other games where he would bring pressure and not worry about covering as much over the top."

## **On Manning calling audibles**

"Honestly, it would always go to the week and what matchups we felt like we had, or were most advantageous for us. Before we went to that no-huddle, he would change the play. You would actually hear the play called in the huddle and as you were walking to the line of scrimmage – but he sees the game so well that he could change it walking it up. I would call defensive linemen, whether it was three down or four down look, or whatever it would be. He would know going up with safety rotation and where linebackers were lined up, 'OK, here's a change we're going to make.' Now teams would always try to play with you. You'd have the Ravens, who thought they had it figured out and would wait until the last five seconds to make a call, or a make an adjustment. But honestly, if we got in situations like that we would quick snap guys and get the ball out of our hands before they had a chance to get to that last adjustment. Peyton is as good as anybody with the gamesmanship in that regard."

# What They're Saying: Patriots

By Mike Morris

DenverBroncos.com

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Patriots Head Coach Bill Belichick, quarterback Tom Brady and linebacker Rob Ninkovich discussed their AFC Championship Game rematch with the Broncos.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The NFL's all-time winningest postseason quarterback, Tom Brady is well aware of how much is on the line in Sunday's AFC Championship Game at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

He's also well aware of just how thin the margin of error is for the Patriots and Broncos when the two teams square off on Sunday.

"When you play against one of the best teams in the league, you realize there's very little margin of error," Brady said. "You can't go out there and turn it over and not be good on third down, not be good in the red area and think you're going to go in and beat one of the best football teams on the road. There's a reason that they're at this point; there's a reason why we're at this point. We have to be ready to go out and play our very best to hopefully advance."

In a showdown between the AFC's two best teams – and in a game where New England will face a Denver offense that set an NFL record with 606 points in the regular season – Brady was quick to note he expects his Patriots team will need to fire on all cylinders and in all facets in order to earn a berth in Super Bowl XLVIII, especially with such a potent offense on the opposite sideline.

"They out-score you and they can score quickly, they can run the ball like they did against us last time. They have a bunch of guys who have caught a bunch of touchdowns," Brady said. "What that means for our offense is we have to be able to match it. We have to be able to eliminate the ability for them to possess the football, whether that's controlling the ball through third downs, whether that's not turning the ball over, whether that's getting the ball in the red area. There's not one phase of our game that we can't be at our very best. They have a great football team."

Brady's play was instrumental in the Patriots 34-31 overtime win over the Broncos in a Week 12 thriller. The New England quarterback threw for 344 yards and three touchdowns in that game, leading the Patriots back from a 24-0 halftime deficit by completing 81 percent of his passes in the second half.

When the two teams meet again on Sunday, however, everything that transpired on that bitter New England night in November will be inconsequential to the outcome in the rematch – as Patriots Head Coach Bill Belichick pointed out.

“I think we’re going to see a different team. I don’t know about different teams, but I think we’re going to see a different game,” Belichick said. “The matchups – we have some players that are playing in this game that didn’t play in that game and so do they. We’ll just have to see how it all plays out. But the guys that we have and what we have, we’re going to do our best to be ready to go and matchup with them.

“It’s just like any time you play a team twice,” he added. “I think you look at what happened but you have to erase the board and start all over again.”

If anything, the first meeting serves as an indisputable reminder for both teams that earning a trip to the Super Bowl will require a complete performance for 60 minutes – and perhaps more.

“We’re a game-plan team. We go in, we think they’re going to play a certain way. If they don’t, we have to make adjustments and try to move forward,” Brady said. “You can’t really play 30 minutes in the first 30 minutes and then go, at the end of the first (half) and go, ‘Well, the game’s over, we’ve got it wrapped up.’ You’re going to have to play all the way through this game, however long it takes – 60 minutes or beyond – to see if we can ultimately score more points than they do.”

For linebacker Rob Ninkovich, one of the takeaways from the first meeting between the teams was the Broncos’ prolific rushing attack, as Denver rolled up 280 rushing yards, including a career-high 224 from running back Knowshon Moreno.

“You can’t have games like that where you’re giving up that many yards on the ground,” Ninkovich said. “We’ve got a tough challenge for us. They are a good football team and they do a lot of great things in the run game. Again, it just comes down to watching the tape, seeing the things that they did against us and knowing that they will probably try and repeat some of those runs and then also some things that they haven’t shown to us.”

Meanwhile, one of the variables to the “different team” that Belichick expects to face is the presence of Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey, who did not play in the Week 12 meeting.

“Champ’s pretty close to the face of that franchise, has been for the last decade,” Belichick said. “Great player, great ball skills, tremendous consistency. I think Champ is one of the players that, (what) makes him so special is he can just match up against anybody. (You) can put him on big receivers, can put him on tight ends, can put him on little, fast guys. You can put him on anybody you want. He’s always

been able to cover the top players; excellent run force player, good tackler, tough, very instinctive. He's been a great football player. He's had a great career."

Regardless of the how the teams have changed since they first met, Brady noted that he expects the Patriots to still play to the strengths that got them to the AFC Championship Game in the first place.

"I think you have to figure out what you do well and then go out there and try to do it the best you can," Brady said. "This is the game where it matters most. This isn't a big trial-and-error game. This is, let's see what we do well, let's see how consistent we can be at it and let's challenge them. Let's see what they do well. It's not like they're going to install a whole new defense this week. They've got what they've done."

For Ninkovich, it's truly a culmination of an entire year's work of exhaustive work – all for the opportunity to represent the AFC in the Super Bowl.

"I put in just as much work every single season. I say, 'Hey, this is my chance to go out here and play football and win a championship,'" Ninkovich said. "That is on everyone's mind when you're a little kid, like, 'Hey, this would be unbelievable to play in an AFC Championship Game.' It is an amazing feeling."

And after walking a long and often tumultuous road through the offseason, the preseason, the regular season and into the playoffs – a year that has seen the Patriots overcome injuries and pull through in close games, winning seven contests by a touchdown or less – Brady said that the adversity New England has overcome in reaching this stage has only hardened the Patriots for the task at hand on Sunday.

"We've talked about that for a long time, how we've become a team that's more resilient and mentally tough and I think we've proven over the course of the season that we are that," Brady said. "We've won a bunch of different ways. We've won coming from behind, we've won with leads, we've won in pretty (poor) weather conditions. You just fight through whatever it takes. It's all about winning a football game. That's why we're here playing."

# Broncos Fired Up for Sunday

By Mike Morris

DenverBroncos.com

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Broncos players couldn't contain their excitement with Sunday's AFC Championship Game on the horizon.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- David Bruton didn't hesitate for a moment in his response.

Instead, the Broncos safety and special teams captain clearly pronounced what has become growingly apparent throughout the course of the week: Sunday's showdown with the Patriots will be played on no ordinary stage.

"It's not another home game. That's what it comes down to," Bruton said. "It's the AFC Championship Game. It's the last game before to you go to that 'ship. It's a dream game in two weeks. There is added pressure to this game. Everyone wants to go out and perform well, perform to the best of their abilities."

Coupled with the stakes that have been raised to Rocky Mountain heights, however, is the undeniable excitement about playing for a berth in the Super Bowl – the sport's grandest stage and a place where the Broncos haven't been since Jan. 31, 1999.

"I'm ecstatic. It's a one-in-a-lifetime deal," Bruton said. "Some guys get a chance to actually get to this game. We've been to the playoffs the past three years and I've never gotten to this game. So I'm extremely excited, happy and blessed for this opportunity."

He's certainly not the only one.

"I'm really excited, it's an opportunity for us to go out there and get one game closer to the Super Bowl," linebacker Danny Trevathan said. "We have this game in front of us. We aren't going to do anything different. We're just preparing and staying within our realm. Just getting excited and getting motivated to go out here and try to put together a good 60 minutes."

Of course, the players aren't the only ones amped for the game. Broncomania has swept over fans in Denver and all over the country – creating a deafening atmosphere at Sports Authority Field at Mile High that left defensive tackle Terrance Knighton impressed after the Broncos' 24-17 win over the Chargers in the Divisional Round.

Impressed, but prepared to be even more charged on Sunday.

"It was crazy last week, more than I expected," Knighton said. "And this week, it will probably be even louder. That only gets us going, so we definitely need that."

"It's great, all the fans are behind you," defensive tackle Sylvester Williams said. "That's a part of this game, when you the fans are behind you."

"It's a blessing," he added.

Bruton was just as quick to send a message to Broncos fans as he was to pronounce his own enthusiasm for Sunday's game.

"Let's get loud," safety David Bruton said. "Let's make it uncomfortable for (Patriots quarterback) Tom (Brady) back there. Let's get it rocking because it was rocking last week and I expect it to be decibels higher this week since we're a lot closer. Our fans have been great so let's just keep that riding."

After a week of preparation and anticipation, the weekend has finally arrived in Denver – with the franchise's biggest game since January 2006 trailing closely behind.

Game on.

"We know that it's going to be a tough game," Bruton said. "It's a very high-caliber opponent with multiple weapons offensively, defensively and special teams. It's just going to be our best versus their best and see whose best comes out on top."