

Broncos to don orange jerseys for Super Bowl against Seattle Seahawks

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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Based on the orange tint to the Sports Authority Field at Mile High stands, Broncos fans will be pleased by this.

It's the AFC's turn to be the home team at the Super Bowl, so the Broncos will wear their home orange jerseys for the Feb. 2 game against the Seattle Seahawks at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J.

When the Broncos won NFL championships in the 1997 and 1998 seasons, they wore their home blues while beating the Green Bay Packers in Super Bowl XXXII and their road whites while beating the Atlanta Falcons in Super Bowl XXXIII.

The Broncos switched their primary home color from blue back to orange in 2011. They have won three consecutive AFC West titles since.

Injury report. Breathing might be difficult for a few days, but Knowshon Moreno's rib X-rays came back negative. Moreno was injured halfway through the fourth quarter of the AFC championship game Sunday. Montee Ball finished the game at tailback.

Moreno might rest during practice this week, but the expectation is that he will be a starter in the Super Bowl.

Cornerback Tony Carter left the AFC title game because of a pinched nerve in his shoulder and neck area.

"He's fine," coach John Fox said.

Super planning. During a team meeting Monday, the players were advised about travel arrangements and media obligations, given the scrutiny they will be under during Super Bowl week.

The players are off Tuesday and Wednesday, but spouses will meet Tuesday.

"It's an important meeting," Fox said, laughing.

Elway off to Senior Bowl. Now that the Broncos have made it to the Super Bowl, John Elway's work as football operations boss is pretty much done for the season.

This week, Elway starts scouting for next season. Elway, his top assistant Matt Russell and several Broncos scouts left Monday night for Senior Bowl practices in Mobile, Ala. And on it goes.

Odds update. According to Colorado State graduate Jay Kornegay, of the Las Vegas Hotel & Casino, his sports book opened with the Broncos as two-point underdogs and they are now two-point favorites to beat Seattle. Nearly 80 percent of the early public money was bet on the Broncos, thus the line shift.

Adam Gase will not interview for Cleveland Browns coaching gig

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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The Super Bowl helped save the Broncos from losing offensive coordinator Adam Gase.

The leading candidate to become the Cleveland Browns' head coach, Gase called the team Tuesday morning to say he was withdrawing from consideration so he could fully concentrate on the Broncos' quest to win the Super Bowl, according to an NFL source.

Gase, who turns 36 on March 29, now becomes the No. 1 candidate for any head coaching opening for the 2015 season.

The Browns are the only NFL team without a head coach. They have had the vacancy since hours after their final regular-season game Dec. 29, when they fired Rob Chudzinski after he went 4-12 in his first and only season.

The Denver Post's NFL reporters post analysis, notes and more on this blog focusing on the Broncos.

It was clear the Browns wanted to make Gase their next head coach. He was especially to have been the top choice of owner Jimmy Haslam, who is a close personal friend of Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning since going back to their days at the University of Tennessee.

In Manning's first 15 years as an NFL quarterback, he never put up a season like he did in his first season with Gase as his offensive coordinator in 2013. Manning set NFL records with 55 touchdown passes and 5,477 yards while the Broncos set another league mark with 606 points.

The Browns wanted to tap into that passing genius. Earlier this season, they made a stunning trade that sent running back Trent Richardson — the team's No. 3 overall draft pick in 2012 — to the Indianapolis Colts in exchange for a first-round pick Cleveland hopes to convert into a top-pick quarterback in this year's draft.

But after waiting more than three weeks for Gase to become available, the Broncos' berth in the Super Bowl worked against the Browns.

Although Gase had given the Browns little thought while the Broncos were in the midst of their playoff run that featured wins against San Diego and New England, it

became evident the longer he waited, the tougher it would be for him to put a quality coaching staff together if he did accept the Browns' head coaching job.

Whatever coaching assistants Gase might have wanted to come along have made commitments elsewhere in the three weeks since the season ended.

By withdrawing from consideration for the Browns' job, Gase automatically becomes the early frontrunner for any head coaching position that will become available following the 2014 season.

Broncos released their Super Bowl itinerary

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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The Broncos released their Super Bowl itinerary, and it's difficult to find where New York fits in. The Broncos will arrive at the Newark airport at about 3:30 p.m. Sunday. They will stay at the Hyatt hotel in Jersey City, practice at the New York Jets' facility in Florham Park, N.J., and play the Super Bowl at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J.

Footnotes. The projected forecast for Super Bowl Sunday in East Rutherford is for a high of 42 degrees with chance of rain or snow. ... Lucky 7? This is the Broncos' seventh Super Bowl appearance from '77 to the present, and No. 7 (John Elway) is again in charge

Broncos Mailbag: Denver's defense suddenly in a "magic moment"

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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What the heck happened to Denver's defense over the past few weeks? It looks completely different (in other words much, much better) than it did earlier in the year. It's championship-caliber now, despite a rash of significant injuries (Von Miller, Derek Wolfe, Rahim Moore, etc.). How on earth did our defense improve without these players?

--Chris, Denver

I'm equally as stunned. I addressed this same subject following the Denver D's impressive performance against the New England Patriots in the AFC championship.

Shaun Phillips gave me credit: "The magic moment was a guy like you doubting us and calling us average. You said we were an average-at-best defense. I spread it amongst the locker room and guys started playing better and started stepping up."

Aw shucks, Shaun. It was nothing. Seriously, Phillips must have caught me in a rare generous moment. Through 14 games this season, the Broncos ranked 25th in the NFL in total defense (374.6 yards) and 26th in points allowed (26.6). There are only 32 teams in the league. I know I uttered far harsher descriptions than "average-at-best."

But in their last three games, the Broncos allowed zero points through three quarters against Oakland; zero points through three quarters in a playoff win from San Diego and 3 points through three quarters last week against the Pats.

I think the return of Champ Bailey has made a difference. I think the return of Tony Carter helped last week. I think the improved development of young players like Nate Irving, Sylvester Williams and Malik Jackson have made a difference. And I think Phillips was correct: veterans like Terrance Knighton, Robert Ayers, Mike Adams and, yes, Phillips, have stepped up.

Did Wes Welker intentionally hit Aqib Talib? Yep. It's the NFL, not "touch football." Was the hit malicious? Was it intended to "take out" Talib? No. But if so, I would suggest that John Fox send someone more the size of Julius Thomas and not someone who has suffered two concussions within the past month.

--Docthor, Morgan Hill, Calif.

Your second point is noted. But I'm not sure Welker intentionally hit Talib. I know it looked that way on video but I think Welker saw a collision coming, tried to avoid it

and guessed wrong as to the path Talib would take. I could be naive, but given Welker's recent concussion history, as you pointed out, I don't think he was looking for contact.

So psyched the Broncos are going to NYC! I'm happier to be playing the Seahawks than then 49ers in the Super Bowl. I like Peyton vs. their all-world secondary a lot more than I like Peyton vs. the '49ers all-world front seven (even without NaVorro Bowman). And the Seahawks offense has fewer weapons. Am I right?

--Eric, Brooklyn

I've heard this a lot since Sunday night: The Broncos have a better chance of beating the Seahawks than the 49ers. Probably because, had the 49ers won, it would have meant them winning three consecutive road playoff games -- at Green Bay, at Carolina and at Seattle. A neutral-site game, then, would have seemed like a breather in comparison.

But here's why the Seahawks are the tougher opponent: The weather. If it's 30 degrees with light flurries at kickoff in New Jersey, the conditions will be ideal for a physical, defensive-oriented team like Seattle.

This has nothing to do with the Peyton Manning cold-weather baloney. All quarterbacks have a tougher time throwing the ball in cold weather. Receivers have a tough time catching the ball in the cold.

The Broncos are built to win 30-24. The Seahawks are built to win 20-14. The fear is, this Super Bowl won't be Seattle against the Broncos. It will be the Seahawks and inclement conditions against the Broncos.

I am living in Brady-land New England and enjoyed hosting our Patriots friends during the AFC Championship while clad in an Elway jersey and sitting in our old Mile High stadium seats. The theme around here is that the Pats were too injury-depleted and it caught up to them. I'm wondering why more credit isn't given to the Denver "D," which has played well throughout the playoffs despite injuries to five would-starters since the beginning of the season?

--Ryan Tibbetts, Portsmouth, R.I.

U.S. Navy Engineer, displaced from the Motherland

You, too, missed the "Jack Del Rio is one step from backing Von Miller's promise" story. I will say, I was among those surprised the Patriots made it to the AFC championship. It may have been one of Belichick's best coaching jobs.

Peyton Manning was wrong, though, in calling Belichick the greatest NFL coach of all-time. Vince Lombardi has the best postseason record (9-1, .900 winning percentage) and second-best regular-season record (96-34-6, .738) behind John Madden (minimum seven seasons).

Belichick has the 13th-best regular-season record and seventh-best postseason mark among those with at least 10 playoff games (19-9, .679).

I agree Belichick is the greatest coach of the past 13 years. But what Manning should have said is "it's safe to say that he will go down as the seventh-best NFL coach of all-time."

You've held New England to 3 points through all but 10 minutes of the game. Then, (as they've done before, by the way) you go into a three-man front with a fall-back eight-man secondary -- and give up two touchdowns. Happened against San Diego too. Why this is good football? It could bite the Broncos in the Super Bowl.

--Terry, Aurora

Earlier in this bag, you saw the 0, 0 and 3-point stats through three quarters of the previous three games. That's really good. Now the bad: The Broncos gave up 14 points in the fourth quarter to Oakland, 17 points in the fourth quarter to San Diego and 13 points in the fourth quarter to New England.

It did take those three opponents some time score those points. The Broncos used a "prevent" type defense that essentially exchanged points for game clock, knowing they had points to give.

But Denver's D has gone a little too soft with its fourth quarter defense. San Diego was a third-and-17 conversion pass away from having a chance to tie it. New England was a missed two-point conversion from possibly having a final minute chance to tie it. (The Pats probably don't try the onside kick that Eric Decker recovered with 3:07 left if they're 2-point try was successful).

To date, those fourth quarter letdowns were incidental. The Broncos won. The Broncos are in the Super Bowl. But as they use these next 10 days to prepare for the Seahawks, something tells me their fourth quarter "slumps" will be addressed.

Is it just me or do the Seahawks look really familiar? Run-first offense that wants to control the game. Strong-armed QB who improvises better than he throws from the pocket. A trio of small and speedy WRs who can also improvise. A defense that forces turnovers, hits hard in the secondary and consistently rushes the passer. And, oh yeah, they've got the best home-field advantage in the NFL. That's Elway's Broncos teams!

--Dave Moll, Denver

Actually, when I watch the Seahawks, I see more of the read-option offense that Tim Tebow and Willis McGahee ran to surprising success in 2011. The difference is, Russell Wilson has a far better passing touch than Tebow and is a swifter and more elusive runner. And Marshawn Lynch is a better back than McGahee.

Wilson's arm has nowhere near the velocity Elway had on the ball. But both brought heavy doses of athleticism and leadership to the quarterback position.

And you were dead on with the home-field advantage. Elway and the Broncos had their way at old Mile High.

I know after a big win like Sunday's, people don't want to think about next year. But I was wondering if this could be the last game in a Broncos uniform for a lot of players, including Eric Decker, Knowshon Moreno, Zane Beadles, Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, Shaun Phillips, etc. Please give us some insight for the possibility of these players returning.

--Richie Luetke, New Castle

Yep, it could be. I would say two of those five players you mentioned won't be back. Maybe more. Don't know who stays or who goes, yet. But last year's Super Bowl turned out to be the last game for Anquan Boldin, Dannell Ellerby, Paul Kruger, Ed Reed, Cary Williams and Bernard Pollard with the Ravens. It was also the last game for Ray Lewis, but he had already announced his retirement beforehand.

Will injured players Ryan Clady, Von Miller, Chris Harris, Kevin Vickerson, etc. attend the Super Bowl? As a fan, I feel like they're such a big part of our team and a big part of our success (even though not for the entire season) and I think they should be part of the special moment for the team. Do players feel the same? Or would they prefer to be watching from home if they can't be on the field?

--Sarah, Lakewood

They'll be there but not until a couple days after the team arrives. I do feel for those guys. They're all putting on a brave face and staying positive for the team. But inside this has to be killing them.

Now that Denver is headed to its seventh Super Bowl, might people begin to finally recognize how under-represented the Broncos are in the Hall of Fame? Seriously, FOUR inductees! What gives? When I see individuals such as Kevin Greene make it as a finalist over Randy Gradishar, Terrell Davis and Steve Atwater, it makes me ill. Greene wasn't even the best linebacker on his team!

--Brandon, Chandler, Ariz.

You're right, the Broncos are severely under-represented in Canton. Dan Reeves should be in too.

But I want you to feel better about Greene. Think about how important sacks are in today's football. Think about how much money pass rushers get. Think about how high in the draft pass rushers go.

Now think about this: Greene ranks No. 3 on the all-time sack list with 160.0. And we're now 14 years after he retired. No. 3 to Bruce Smith (200.0 sacks) and Reggie White (198.0), both of whom were elected into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in their first year of eligibility.

I've been following the Broncos for 30 years. I watch every game live (even with the time-zone difference). And I'm planning to take a 13-hour flight to watch my Broncos live in N.Y. Do they have the gas for one more W?

--Marwan Alsudais, Saudi Arabia

Not only do the Broncos have enough gas, they have Peyton Manning. They can beat the Seahawks

Patriots' Belichick whines, but classy Tom Brady gives Broncos credit

By Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
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While Patriots coach Bill Belichick was turning sour grapes into whine on Monday morning, quarterback Tom Brady was passing out compliments to the Broncos.

Belichick, as we all know by now, ripped Broncos receiver Wes Welker for his collision with New England cornerback Aqib Talib in Sunday's AFC championship game, calling it "one of the worst plays I've seen."

"It was a deliberate play by the receiver to take out Aqib. No attempt to get open," Belichick told reporters in New England. "I'll let the league handle the discipline on that play, whatever they decide. It's one of the worst plays I've seen. That's all I'll say about that."

Brady, meanwhile, speaking on his weekly radio appearance on Boston sports radio station WEEI, said the Broncos' performance in their 26-16 win over the Patriots was "pretty flawless."

"Denver played a really good game," Brady said. "They were pretty flawless. ... We couldn't force them into making any bad plays on either side of the ball."

Brady lamented his overthrown pass to a wide-open wide receiver Julian Edelman during the first half that likely cost the Patriots a touchdown, but he acknowledged that Denver was the better team Sunday.

"It's unfortunate for our season to come to an end like this, but I would say Denver earned it," he said. "They played a lot better than we did yesterday."

Brady said he won't be watching when the Broncos take on the Seahawks in Super Bowl XLVIII on Feb. 2.

"Truthfully, I could care less about watching the game, and that's pretty much how I feel," he said.

Denver Broncos trivia quiz while waiting for Super XLVIII

By Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
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Let's see ... there are still 12 days until the Denver Broncos take on the Seattle Seahawks in Super Bowl XLVIII. What to do until then?

Hmm ... I know, how about a Broncos quiz to pass the time?

Here are 10 questions — plus a Super Bowl bonus question — to ponder. Some questions are tough, some very easy. My brother, Steve, helped put this together. See how you do ... without going to Google!
(Answers can be found below)

1. The Broncos have retired three numbers. Name the players and their numbers. Also, what is unusual about one of the numbers?
2. What team did the Broncos beat in their very first playoff game?
3. Who scored the Broncos' first touchdown in a Super Bowl?
4. The Broncos are heading for their seventh Super Bowl. Name the locations of the previous six Super Bowls in which the Broncos competed.
5. Who has scored the most points for the Broncos in all of their Super Bowls combined? (touchdowns, field goals and extra points)
6. Most fans know that Terrell Davis scored three touchdowns in the Broncos' first Super Bowl victory. What Broncos player scored two touchdowns in a game?
7. Who did the Broncos beat to win their first AFC championship to advance to their first Super Bowl?
8. Who has the most receiving yards for the Broncos in a single Super Bowl?
9. Who did the Broncos beat to go to their most recent Super Bowl? (Before they beat the Patriots this year)
10. The Broncos have played in nine AFC championship games and have lost just twice. Name the two teams that defeated them.

Super Bowl bonus question:

When the Broncos won their first AFC championship, who ran to the top of the

legendary South Stands at the old Mile High Stadium, and then stole the Colorado flag and American flag as souvenirs?

Answers:

1. The Broncos have retired three numbers: Quarterback Frank Tripucka, No. 18; Hall of Fame running back Floyd Little, No. 44; Hall of Fame quarterback John Elway, No. 7. Unusual? The Broncos took No. 18 off retirement for Peyton Manning to wear, with Tripucka's blessing.
2. The Broncos beat the Pittsburgh Steelers 34-21 on Christmas Eve, 1977. Leading, of course, to the classic song "Orange Crushmas." As in ... "I'm dreaming of an Orange Crushmas."
3. Rob Lytle, on a 1-yard run in the third quarter of Super Bowl XII in which the Cowboys beat the Broncos 27-10.
4. New Orleans (Superdome), Super Bowl XII; Pasadena (Rose Bowl), Super Bowl XXI; San Diego (Jack Murphy Stadium), Super Bowl XXII; New Orleans (Superdome), Super Bowl XXIV; San Diego (Qualcomm Stadium), Super Bowl XXXII; Miami, (Pro Player Stadium), Super Bowl XXXIII.
5. John Elway, with 24 points. He ran for touchdowns in Super Bowls XXI, XXIV, XXXII and XXXIII.
6. Fullback Howard Griffith scored two touchdowns in the Broncos' victory over the Falcons in Super Bowl XXXIII.
7. The hated Oakland Raiders, 20-17 at Mile High Stadium on Jan. 1, 1978.
8. Rod Smith, 152 yards in Super Bowl XXXIII.
9. The New York Jets, 23-10 in the 1998 AFC championship game at Mile High Stadium.
10. The Buffalo Bills in the 1991 championship game, and the Pittsburgh Steelers in the 2005 championship game.

Super Bowl bonus question: My brother, Steve, grabbed the Colorado flag and my cousin, Mark, grabbed the American flag. The flags are now treasured family heirlooms.

How you rate:

11 points: You must have cheated!

7-10 points: You are a true Broncomaniac

5-6 points: Good, solid fan.

3-4 points: Strictly a weekend couch potato

0-2 points: You are a Seahawks fan!

Broncos have nothing but praise for Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman

By Irv Moss
The Denver Post
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Broncos tight end Julius Thomas would expect nothing less in the Super Bowl than to face the best. The matchup between the Seattle Seahawks and Broncos pits the top seeds in the AFC and NFC — and Thomas and the Broncos' No. 1 offense against the Seahawks' No. 1 defense.

"This is for all the marbles, so I'm pretty sure it will be a tough game all around," Thomas said. "It's the Super Bowl, so it's going to be tough. ... I'm pretty sure you're going to see two teams playing as physical as possible."

Seattle's "Legion of Boom" defense has a reputation for being physical. Expect Denver's receivers to get heavy man-to-man coverage and bumping at the line of scrimmage by the likes of all-pro cornerback Richard Sherman.

"He's done a great job ever since he's been in the league," Thomas said. "He likes to have a little fun out there. I don't necessarily think there is anything wrong with that."

Sherman tipped a pass at the end of Seattle's 23-17 NFC championship game victory Sunday, leading to an interception by a teammate that clinched the game. Sherman then went ballistic in a postgame TV interview, praising himself and criticizing San Francisco 49ers receiver Michael Crabtree.

"I know he's a terrific player, a great cover guy," Broncos coach John Fox said.

As for Sherman's postgame rant, Fox wasn't about to be drawn into a controversy.

"I really can't comment," he said. "I know the Seahawks are statistically very good on defense and in particular pass defense. I'm sure their secondary has a lot to do with that."

Seattle ranked first in fewest yards allowed per game (273.6), fewest passing yards allowed (172.0) and fewest points allowed per game (14.4).

Thomas has had a breakout season as a third-year pro. In the playoffs, he has been clutch, with six catches for 76 yards against San Diego in the divisional round and eight catches for 85 yards Sunday in the AFC championship game against the New England Patriots.

"Nothing is easy," Thomas said. "I put a lot of time into practice. I'm going to pride myself on being tough to cover. You're going to go up against tough defenders. If I can make it easier on our team by making sure I get open as quickly as possible, it's definitely something I continue to keep trying to highlight."

Thomas is taking it all in as he prepares for his first Super Bowl.

"I'm just excited," he said. "A lot of hard work goes into getting to this position. Some people think it starts in September, but for us, it starts way back in April. To know that you're one of the last two teams left in this tournament is a great feeling."

Denver billboards ramp up trash talk before Broncos and Seahawks in the Super Bowl

By Ryan Parker
The Denver Post
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The trash talking is already in full swing around Denver before the Super Bowl, with multiple billboard displays and marquees taking shots at the Seattle Seahawks — namely their cornerback Richard Sherman.

Sherman has been almost as big of a conversation piece as the Super Bowl itself after he went off on 49ers receiver Michael Crabtree's "sorry, mediocre" play during multiple post-game interviews after Seattle beat San Francisco 23-17 in NFC championship on Sunday.

Now, he's become a point of rancor in Denver.

A marquee at the Hornet bar on South Broadway in Denver compared Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey to Seattle's "chump" (presumably Sherman).

And a billboard outside Contract Appliance at 1045 Zuni St. shows a picture of Broncos corner Champ Bailey with the word "Class," next to a picture of Sherman with the words "No class."

With 12 days until kickoff, it is safe to say this is just the start of the back-and-forth between towns.

Super Bowl anthem to be sung by Renée Fleming

By Ray Mark Rinaldi
The Denver Post
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Renée Fleming, perhaps the biggest star in American opera, will sing the National Anthem at Super Bowl XLVIII.

Fleming, a soprano, has a long list of international credits and is a regular with the Metropolitan Opera, the country's most respected vocal company.

She is known for her wholesome looks and a voice that is versatile enough to handle the most difficult works by Mozart, Strauss and Handel. She has enhanced her career and popularity by singing off the classical repertoire with the contemporary music of pop composers such as Leonard Cohen.

Fleming, 54, has won numerous accolades, including a 2013 Best Classical Vocal Solo Grammy Award for her album of 20th century French music titled "Poèmes." Last year, President Obama awarded her the National Medal of Arts.

Fleming's last appearance in Denver was March 10, 2012, when she sang with the Colorado Symphony Orchestra at Boettcher Concert Hall.

The Superbowl anthem is among the most visible gigs in music, and the job usually goes to current hitmakers. Past performers include Cher, Alicia Keys, Billy Joel, Diana Ross, Beyoncé Knowles and Christina Aguilera. Last year, 164 million people tuned in for the game.

The event is set for Feb. 2 at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J. The Denver Broncos will play the Seattle Seahawks.

Denver Broncos, Level 3 among 12 businesses FTC accuses of consumer privacy agreement violation

By Andy Vuong
The Denver Post
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The Denver Broncos and Broomfield's Level 3 Communications are among 12 businesses accused of falsely claiming that they complied with international consumer privacy guidelines.

Specifically, the businesses allegedly misrepresented that they abide by an international privacy framework known as the U.S.-EU Safe Harbor, which allows U.S. companies to transfer consumer data from the European Union to the U.S. The Federal Trade Commission announced Tuesday proposed settlements with the 12 businesses, which include two other pro football teams, the Tennessee Titans and the Atlanta Falcons.

"Under the proposed settlement agreements, which are subject to public comment, the companies are prohibited from misrepresenting the extent to which they participate in any privacy or data security program sponsored by the government or any other self-regulatory or standard-setting organization," the FTC said in a statement.

Level 3, which operates one of the world's largest Internet networks, said the settlement covers a "technical issue" and "at no point in time was the privacy of personal information compromised as a result of this issue."

A Broncos spokesman issued the following statement: "This issue was caused by a clerical error related to the renewal of our privacy certification. It has since been resolved, and our website is in full compliance with all privacy regulations."

In the complaint against PDB Sports, which does business as the Broncos, the FTC said the club stated on its website that it "complies with the EU Safe Harbor framework as set forth by the Department of Commerce regarding the collection, use, and retention of data from the European Union."

"In truth and in fact, from November 2011 until November 2013, respondent was not a 'current' participant in the U.S.-EU Safe Harbor Framework," the FTC complaint states. "Therefore, the representation ... is false and misleading."

In the proposed settlement, the Broncos don't admit or deny guilt but agree to not misrepresent participation in "any privacy or security program sponsored by the government or any other self-regulatory or standard-setting organization."

In Level 3's case, the FTC said the company stated on its website that transfers of "personally identifiable information made by Level 3 are made in compliance with the Safe Harbor principles."

The FTC said Level 3's participation in the program had expired June 2012, making the statement false.

It's worth noting that Level 3, which carries traffic for major Internet companies, reportedly may have provided the National Security Agency with a peephole into the information and communications data of Google and Yahoo users.

"We take the protection of the privacy of our customer, employee and vendor data very seriously," the company said in a statement Tuesday. "The agreement with the FTC concerned a technical issue of an outdated Safe Harbor reference in our Privacy Policy. We've since revised the policy to address the FTC's concerns and at no point in time was the privacy of personal information compromised as a result of this issue."

The FTC said enforcement of the Safe Harbor agreement is a priority.

"These 12 cases help ensure the integrity of the Safe Harbor Framework and send the signal to companies that they cannot falsely claim participation in the program," said FTC chairwoman Edith Ramirez.

The list of the 12 businesses from the FTC release:

- Apperian, Inc.: Company specializing in mobile applications for business enterprises and security;
- Atlanta Falcons Football Club, LLC: National Football League team;
- Baker Tilly Virchow Krause, LLP: Accounting firm;
- BitTorrent, Inc.: Provider of peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing protocol;
- Charles River Laboratories International, Inc.: Global developer of early-stage drug discovery processes;
- DataMotion, Inc.: Provider of platform for encrypted email and secure file transport;
- DDC Laboratories, Inc.: DNA testing lab and the world's largest paternity testing company;
- Level 3 Communications, LLC: One of the six largest ISPs in the world;
- PDB Sports, Ltd., d/b/a Denver Broncos Football Club: National Football League team;
- Reynolds Consumer Products Inc.: Maker of foil and other consumer products;
- Receivable Management Services Corporation: Global provider of accounts receivable, third-party recovery, bankruptcy and other services;
- Tennessee Football, Inc.: National Football League team.

Sir Mix-A-Lot of "Baby Got Back" fame can't bear to watch beloved Seahawks

By Benjamin Hochman
The Denver Post
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The biggest Seattle Seahawks fan is also the biggest fan of big butts (and he cannot lie).

In 1992, rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot released the song "Baby Got Back," in which he proclaimed: "I like big butts, and I cannot lie!" The creative, catchy and controversial song, which declares his desire for derrieres, was an instant hit. It reached No. 1 on the Billboard charts, won a Grammy, and remains popular to this day. Well, the knighted lyricist, whose real name is Anthony Ray, is Seattle born and bred and brimming with Super Bowl excitement.

"You got to remember, I came up during the era in which you'd root for the Seahawks to get home safe on the plane, they were that bad," said Sir Mix-A-Lot, who is now 50, if you can believe it. "The Kingdome days were horrible. But I'm still a big Seattle fan."

He's been a "12th man" since before he was 12, a Seahawks lifer who made a point to bring up the old rivalries with the Broncos and the then-AFC Seahawks. Just how much does he care about the team?

"Well this is going to crack you up man, but I'm pretty superstitious when it comes to the Seahawks," he explained by phone on Tuesday. "I realized recently that watching the game brought them bad luck from me. The playoff game against Atlanta, the loss against Indianapolis. I know it sounds goofy, but even at halftime of the Tampa Bay game, they were down 21-7. My brother said, 'Let's see if your superstition stays true, why don't you leave?' I left the house, went shopping for furniture — and they won the game in overtime.

"So now I record the game, but I'll watch another game intentionally and then I'll watch the recorded version. When I do that, they win."

Last Sunday, after the Broncos won the AFC championship game, Sir Mix-A-Lot was in a bind. There weren't any other games on during the NFC championship game, "so I watched the NFL Network and went outside to do some work. When I came in, I was getting texts from people who were there saying, 'Man you should be here! This is insane!' I could've been at the game, I was invited to a luxury suite but I didn't go, because I knew if I'd go, they'd lose."

On the phone with him (his number, of course, is 1-900-MIX-A-LOT), he gushed about the Seahawks' "Legion of Boom" defense, explaining that the controversial

cornerback Richard Sherman "embodies the Seahawks, that's what they are." But Sir Mix-A-Lot, in a stately, regal fashion, was quick to compliment the Broncos, explaining that Peyton Manning is his favorite non-Seahawks quarterback of all time, and that Manning "is probably at home right now, with a poster of Richard Sherman on the wall, studying everything he does, what he eats for breakfast, what kind of car he drives, where does he get his gas. Peyton Manning is thorough."

So I had to ask him about the song. Was there anyway he knew "Baby Got Back" would be such a smash?

"Honestly, I had no idea," he said. "When I did the song, I really did it to just (tick) off the establishment. But from Day One, (producer) Rick Rubin knew that song would be a hit. He said, 'That song is going to be the biggest of your career,' and I said, 'No way, (1987 song) "Posse On Broadway" will be.' But he was right.

"Many times what kills songs for artists is when they come out and say something like, 'I'm bigger than just 'Baby Got Back.' I have other songs, too.' When you do that, you basically just pull credibility right up from under your own feet, because you're telling them that that hit isn't what you should be listening to. I don't do that. When I show up, I don't do a two-minute version of 'Baby Got Back,' I do a 10-minute version of 'Baby Got Back' — I make sure people get what they paid for."

As for Super Bowl Sunday, he won't be watching. He'll record the game as he is wont to do, which might not be good news for Denverites. Sir Mix-A-Lot predicts a final score of Seattle 27, Denver 24, but even if the Broncos lose, he still thinks Manning is the greatest of all time.

"I got to watch Joe Montana, Dan Marino, those guys are awesome," he said. "But to say he's not better than Montana or Tom Brady because he didn't win as many rings, that's garbage, man. So what does that make Eli Manning, one of the greatest ever? Are you kidding. I think Peyton is the greatest of all time, I just hope he loses in two weeks."

From travails to triumph, Trevathan leads Broncos

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
January 21, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — As promised, Danny Trevathan has snuffed the showboat in him after his humiliating gaffe in the NFL opener.

He morphed into a standout linebacker in his second season and led the Broncos in tackles after his inauspicious debut in Denver's rout of the Ravens in September.

Trevathan blamed excitement over his first career start for his premature celebration of a sure pick-6 of Joe Flacco when he flipped the football aside just before crossing the goal line.

That decision left teammate Wesley Woodyard with an ankle injury and made Brandon Stokley the new Don Beebe. On the other hand, if Trevathan doesn't pull a Leon Lett, maybe Peyton Manning takes the rest of the night off and doesn't get a chance to make history with his seventh touchdown throw later on in Denver's 49-27 win.

Trevathan's miscalculation was reminiscent of Lett's gaffe in the Super Bowl in 1993 when Dallas' defensive lineman was returning a fumble for a score in the Cowboys' 52-17 win over Buffalo. Beebe chased down a hotdogging Lett and knocked the ball loose just before he crossed the goal line.

This time, as Woodyard casually bent down in the end zone to pick up the souvenir for Trevathan, who was celebrating a few feet away, an alert Stokley dived for the football and knocked it out of the back of the end zone.

Instead of a touchdown, it was a touchback.

Instead of hugs and high-fives, Trevathan got harangues from teammates and defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio, a former linebacker.

"I promised myself I would never put my team in a place like that again," Trevathan said this week. "I'll make up for it. I'll do whatever I've got to do. I promised those who were laughing at me, I'm going to make them suffer. I'm going to be here and grind it out, I'm going to pick it off next time, do whatever I've got to do to go ahead and get that off my back."

Redemption came one month later in Dallas when Trevathan deked Tony Romo into throwing an interception at the Dallas 24 in the waning moments of a shootout, and

it came just four days after he was carted off the practice field with a knee injury that at first had him fearing his playing days were over.

Trevathan briefly thought about jumping up and trying to score. Remembering the Ravens game, he decided to just stay down, allowing Manning to come on and run out the clock until Matt Prater's field goal won it 51-48 as time expired.

That was one of many big plays for Trevathan, a sixth-round pick from Kentucky in 2012 who led Denver this season with 124 tackles and has a dozen more in the playoffs, where he's helped hold the Chargers to 65 yards rushing the Patriots to 64.

He'll be a big part of Denver's designs to throttle Seahawks running back Marshawn Lynch in the Super Bowl.

And it all goes back to his big blunder in the opener.

"Sometimes setbacks are setups for bigger things to come," coach John Fox said. "I think in his case, it was a learning experience."

Trevathan worked his way into the starting lineup this summer when the Broncos moved Wesley Woodyard to middle linebacker and inserted Nate Irving on the strongside with star Von Miller having to sit out the first six games on a drug suspension.

"Danny's got things that you can't coach. He's got speed. He's got instincts," linebackers coach Richard Smith said. "So, this gave us the opportunity to get more speed on the field."

A shoulder stinger would eventually render Woodyard, a fellow Kentucky alum, a backup.

"Even though he's not on the field, he's with me in my head all the time," Trevathan said. "That's how I'm going to carry him."

There's that maturity again, that growth that the Broncos believe will come in handy in the Super Bowl, where Trevathan can get the ultimate redemption.

"Life is a game. It's ups and downs, highs and lows. But, you know, I like my lows and I like my highs because without my lows, I never know what my highs are," Trevathan said. "It was a rough, roller-coaster year but we pulled it together. I've got a strong faith in God and I've got a strong faith within my team. We're here now and we've just got to get this one more win."

AP Source: Broncos' Gase tells Browns he's out

By Tom Withers
Associated Press
January 21, 2014

CLEVELAND (AP) — Adam Gase has told the Browns not to wait for him.

Denver's offensive coordinator removed his name from consideration for Cleveland's head coaching job on Tuesday, a person familiar with the Browns' search told the Associated Press. Gase called Browns owner Jimmy Haslam and informed he was withdrawing his name and would not interview after the Super Bowl, said the person who spoke on condition of anonymity because the team is not commenting during its search.

The 35-year-old Gase, who will lead the Broncos' high-powered offense against Seattle, was the first candidate contacted by the Browns. Gase declined an initial interview request because he wanted to concentrate on the playoffs, and the Browns would have had to wait until after Feb. 2 to speak with him.

Gase was believed to be the Browns' top target in their quest to replace Rob Chudzinski, fired after one season in Cleveland.

Last week, Haslam said the team is "prepared to wait as long as necessary" to hire a coach, and now the Browns will move ahead without Gase, who enjoys his role with the Broncos and may not be ready for a head coaching gig.

The Browns have interviewed at least eight known candidates to become their seventh full-time coach since 1999, and the team has set up second interviews with Seattle defensive coordinator Dan Quinn and Buffalo defensive coordinator Mike Pettine, the source said.

Quinn, who has presided over the NFL's top-rated defense this season, met with the Browns on Jan. 1 and reportedly impressed Haslam and CEO Joe Banner. Pettine had his first interview with the club on Jan. 16.

Per NFL rules, the Browns can conduct a second interview with Quinn by Jan. 26, but are not permitted to offer him a job until after the Super Bowl. Pettine can meet again with the team at any time.

Gase drew the Browns' attention and soared up their wish list of candidates helping quarterback Peyton Manning shatter several league records this season. Also, Haslam received a glowing recommendation on Gase from Manning, who has a long-standing relationship with the Haslam family because of their Tennessee ties.

Gase, too, fit the outline — young, offensive-minded — of the type of coach Banner wanted to bring to the Browns, who went 4-12 under Chudzinski and have lost at least 11 games in each of the past six seasons.

Gase is the second high-profile coach to remove his name from consideration. New England offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels also told the Browns he was not interested in pursuing their opening.

The Browns have also interviewed former Tennessee coach Mike Munchak and Dallas special teams coordinator Rich Bisaccia, who could both be brought back for second meetings.

Column: Bookies and the NFL both wary of weather

By Tim Dahlberg
The Associated Press
January 21, 2014

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Roger Goodell once had his beer freeze while watching a game in Chicago, so sitting outside at the Super Bowl shouldn't be too much of a burden for the NFL commissioner.

But what if — and this is a very real possibility — the stadium is blanketed in the kind of blizzard-like conditions that wreaked havoc across the Northeast on Tuesday? What if the NFL doesn't get lucky and score a chilly yet tolerable Super Bowl evening at the Meadowlands?

Even worse, what if snow, sleet, ice or any combination in the first outdoor cold weather Super Bowl determines who wins the big game?

Could happen, and Goodell and other NFL officials won't be the only ones poring over weather forecasts leading up to Feb. 2. Oddsmakers in Las Vegas will be keeping a close eye on it, too, as a possible factor in whether the Denver Broncos can cover what is now a 2½-point spread against the Seattle Seahawks.

"Probably the most important guy being interviewed next week will be (television weatherman) Al Roker," said Jimmy Vaccaro, who runs the sports book at the South Point hotel.

That's not necessarily a bad thing, especially if the forecast doesn't include wind and snow or sleet. Goodell has embraced the idea of cold, though he had little choice in the matter after NFL owners decided to reward the owners of the Jets and Giants for getting a new stadium by giving them a Super Bowl.

He'll sit outside for the misery that could accompany the usual mastery of a Super Bowl. If all goes according to plan, he will hand out the Lombardi trophy to the best team in the land, and everyone will go home happy.

But some who are in the business of making the point spread for the game believe that if something like Tuesday's storm hits the day of the game it could tilt the game in favor a team that relies more on power football and defense rather than finesse. And in this Super Bowl, that would be the Seahawks.

"With the game being in New York and the early forecast for below normal temperatures in the teens that certainly favors a defensive team and a running

team," said Jay Kornegay, sports book director at the LVH. "That would certainly be an advantage to the Seahawks."

Partly because of that, Kornegay and his oddsmakers made the Seahawks a 2-point favorite when betting opened Sunday for the game. But bettors enamored with the idea of Peyton Manning winning a second Super Bowl quickly caused the odds to shift to Denver's favor with a flood of money on the Broncos.

The knock on Manning, though, is that for all his greatness he's not a good cold-weather quarterback. He played much of his career inside in Indianapolis and is 4-7 in games that are below freezing at kickoffs, though some of those were games where he played sparingly because the Colts had already locked up playoff seeding.

Others were against New England, when the Patriots clearly had the better team. And Manning did complete 39 passes for 397 yards and four touchdowns against Tennessee last month when the temperature at kickoff in Denver was 18 degrees.

"I won't try to answer it because I didn't give it any validation in the first place," he said afterward about his supposed cold-weather struggles.

Both football fans and oddsmakers found out how unpredictable a big storm can make the game last month when winter weather made conditions miserable in several cities. It took players in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Baltimore the first half to get used to the conditions, then they responded with an unlikely series of wild plays and drama in lighting up the scoreboard in the second half.

That has oddsmakers scratching their heads about what to do about this year's game. They often figure things out in advance with lines that come remarkably close to the final result, but a Super Bowl in the snow would be something new to everyone.

"If it's big snow you can take all the handicapping and anything we thought we knew and throw it out the window," said Johnny Avello, the book director at the Wynn hotel.

The so-called sharps — those who wager the biggest money in this gambling city — usually wait until closer to the game to make their bets, and they may wait even longer for this game. The 10-day forecast coming out this week will shed some light on the possibility of a storm, but most will probably wait until the weather picture becomes clearer to put their money down.

"There will probably be more money on Seattle if the forecast is for colder than normal with rain or sleet," Vaccaro said. "But the biggest thing that will make the wise guys get off their wallets now is if Denver goes to 3 (point favorite). If it's 85 degrees out they will still take plus 3 with Seattle."

It won't be 85, might not even be 35. But the bookies and the NFL have at least one thing in common for a Super Bowl that could be remembered for all the wrong reasons.

Neither of them can do anything about the weather.

Broncos Rewind: Defense, special teams

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 21, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- All season long the Denver Broncos have talked about the idea there is only one happy team when the season is over, that they want to be playing their best football into the playoffs and that they want to be in the season's last game.

Well, with one of their best all-around efforts the Broncos earned all of that with a trip to Super Bowl XLVIII after a 26-16 victory over the New England Patriots in the AFC Championship Game.

And after a long look at the game video from Sunday's win, here are some thoughts on the Broncos' defense and special teams:

- The Super Bowl will present a far bigger challenge, at least in terms of the personnel the Broncos defense faces at wide receiver, but Sunday's game did offer a glimmer of something the Broncos had hoped would be their hallmark all season. Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, who is the Broncos' match-up guy on the outside right now, showed when he's on, he's in the upper tier of coverage players. Rodgers-Cromartie had two quality plays Sunday on Tom Brady's first two throws of the game, one against Austin Collie for an incompleteness and one where he held Julian Edelman to a 5-yard gain. The Broncos also got to see Champ Bailey, who spent most of the season recovering from a foot injury he suffered against the Seahawks in the preseason, open it up and stride it out. With just under five minutes remaining in the third quarter, Brady went with play-action and tried to hit Aaron Dobson deep down the field. But Bailey, knowing he had help to the inside of the field from safety Mike Adams, held his outside technique, stayed in front of Dobson and was in better position for the ball than the Patriots receiver was some 50 yards downfield. If Rodgers-Cromartie can simply play with that edge from the first snap to the last -- he seemed out of sorts at least some after a collision with Patriots wide receiver Julian Edelman when Edelman launched himself into the cornerback -- and if Bailey feels that good, it gives the Broncos more options in coverage and would allow the Broncos to commit more safety help against the Seahawks' power run game. But the Seahawks will be better stocked on the outside. The Patriots were using Matthew Slater at wide receiver for three snaps Sunday and Slater had not been targeted once during the regular season. Brady only targeted him once Sunday. The Patriots also used Collie, who had been released and re-signed several times by the team this season, for 37 snaps in the game.
- Former Broncos head coach and current Patriots offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels -- he was fired by the Broncos with four games remaining in 2010

-- gets plenty of criticism on a variety of topics here. But even those who didn't like his methods in Denver say there were many things in his offensive game plan that were of high quality. One of those items was throwing the ball down the field with run action up front -- it looks the same run or pass and it keeps the defensive front guessing at times. On many plays McDaniels has the offensive line block run only to have Brady throw, from the pocket, back across the field, against the grain of defenders flowing to the ball. Brady will throw not only the requisite short passes, but push the ball out of the look into the intermediate and deep areas of the field. He caught the Broncos several times, including when he missed Edelman early in the game for what may have been a touchdown.

- The Broncos had just two sacks in the game, but both came at key moments. And both represent just the kind of plays they're going to need against Seattle's physical offensive line in the Super Bowl. On the first, a third-and-8 situation at the Broncos' 18-yard line with just under four minutes remaining in the second quarter, defensive end Robert Ayers beat Patriots right tackle Nate Solder with an inside move. And many personnel executives around the league have always believed Ayers could be a consistently productive rusher if he would simply work to the inside, with better hand placement, more often. Ayers' play, for an 11-yard loss, forced the Patriots to kick a field goal. The second sack came on a fourth-and-3 with 2:30 left in the third quarter and the Patriots having driven the ball to the Broncos' 29-yard line, attempting to cut into the Denver's 20-3 lead. Defensive tackle Terrance Knighton beat perennial Pro Bowl selection Logan Mankins at the snap, quickly knocking Mankins' hands away, and also worked to the inside to get Brady for a 10-yard loss. The Broncos took over and held the ball for the next 5:23, scoring on a Matt Prater field goal. It's just what they'll need against the mobile Russell Wilson in the Super Bowl when the Broncos will have to create pressure without leaving their rush lanes.
- The Broncos will have a little something different for Wilson than they did for Brady. But a decision to fill the passing lanes and rush just two players in the fourth quarter gave Brady a chance for his first rushing touchdown of the season. With the Broncos holding a 26-10 lead in the fourth quarter -- a two-score game -- the Patriots drove to the Broncos' 5-yard line with 3:13 to play in the game. The Broncos had flooded the formation with defensive backs as the Patriots spread things out. They rushed just two -- Jeremy Mincey and Ayers -- and both players were shoved past Brady in the pocket. And with the middle of the field then clear, with the remainder of the Broncos defenders in pass drops that took them near the goal line or into the end zone, Brady ran through the middle for a score.
- The Broncos had just one defensive penalty in Sunday's win, a neutral zone infraction from defensive end Shaun Phillips. It was just the sixth time in their 18 games the Broncos had one defensive penalty or no defensive penalties in a game.

- The Broncos did not allow a punt or kickoff return in the game. Britton Colquitt's only punt of the day almost checked up deep in Patriots' territory before bouncing into the end zone for a touchback and Prater had touchbacks on all seven of his kickoffs.

Broncos Rewind -- Offense

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 21, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- All season long the Denver Broncos have talked about the ideas that there are only one happy team when the season is over, that they want to be playing their best football into the playoffs and that they want to be in the season's last game.

With one of their best all-around efforts, the Broncos earned all of that with a trip to Super Bowl XLVIII after a 26-16 victory over the New England Patriots in the AFC Championship Game.

And after a long look at the game video from Sunday's win, here are some thoughts on the Broncos' offense:

- Talk to defensive coaches around the league and one of the things, beyond quarterback Peyton Manning, that makes the Broncos' offense so tough to match up against is the variety of ways they often align their pass catchers. The Broncos often take their top three wide receivers -- Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker and Wes Welker -- and line them up on the same side of the formation. Often, the Broncos bunch the three so the defensive backs have to back off a bit to sort it out after the snap, and it gives the three the room they need to get a free release. It also forces the defense to put at least four defensive backs, including usually the top three coverage players in the formation, on that side as well. The Broncos then take tight end Julius Thomas and line him wide on the other side of the formation and almost always create a 1-on-1 matchup that Julius Thomas can win -- especially if a linebacker is out there with him. A textbook example, against one of the better defensive minds in Bill Belichick, can be seen in the fourth quarter. The Broncos lined up the three receivers to offensive right and put Thomas out wide left. The Patriots chose to match-up rookie linebacker Jamie Collins on Julius Thomas. Collins, a former prep quarterback and college safety, had handled the job against the Colts' Coby Fleener well the week before. But Julius Thomas, in this offense, at this point in his development, is a different deal. Thomas went by Collins and Manning hit him immediately for a 37-yard gain, on a second-and-10 play, that led to Matt Prater's 54-yard field goal.
- Through the years, Belichick has routinely answered Manning with more players in coverage and by going a little light in the middle of the field. In the Nov. 24 loss to the Patriots, the Broncos rushed for 280 yards against the look. But when a punt bounced off Broncos cornerback Tony Carter's leg in overtime, putting the Patriots in position for the game-winning field goal, the popular, yet illogical, theory from some in the Boston area was that Belichick had "lured" the Broncos into pounding out almost three bills worth of rushing yardage. But on a picture-perfect day in Denver Sunday, Belichick went with

many of the same looks. Manning was spectacularly accurate and the Patriots still couldn't hold up in coverage. They also left plenty of six-man fronts behind -- what Broncos running backs coach Eric Studesville calls "friendly boxes." The Broncos got just that on a third-and-10 from the Patriots' 39-yard line in the second quarter. With the Patriots having five defenders on the line of scrimmage and six in between the tackles, Manning checked to a run, the Broncos' Manny Ramirez and Zane Beadles created the alley when they double-teamed Chandler Jones and Knowshon Moreno rolled to a 28-yard gain on the play.

- Sometimes you can see coordinator Adam Gase's offensive roots at work. Gase apprenticed under Mike Martz when Martz was the offensive coordinator for San Francisco and Detroit. But when Martz' "Greatest Show on Turf" offense in St. Louis was piling up the points, the shallow cross route, a receiver coming across the formation at about the depth of the middle linebacker, was a staple. And it's been a quality staple for the Broncos as well, who routinely will sneak a receiver right past that middle linebacker with little or no contact. Manning found Decker for a 21-yard gain on one such play Sunday, and it's a play that will be intriguing to watch in the Super Bowl given the Seahawks' size in the secondary and strong safety Kam Chancellor's knack for altering receivers' routes in the middle of the field.
- Though the Broncos ran sets with multiple tight ends for just 10 snaps, they continue to have a high efficiency rate when they do it. It is the variety of the players they put in the formation, with Julius Thomas' athleticism to go with Jacob Tamme's ability to play like a slot receiver to go with a power player like Virgil Green. On Tamme's 1-yard touchdown reception -- a designed rollout for Manning out of a run-first look with three tight ends to go with defensive tackle Mitch Unrein in the backfield -- both Tamme and Green were open on the play. Tamme was at the front side of the end zone while Green was back near the end line.
- In the two playoff wins, the Broncos have stuck to what they like the most on offense. They were in a three-wide look for 65 snaps against the Patriots, including penalty plays -- all but 11 plays, counting the kneel-down at the game's end. Against the Chargers in the divisional round they were in a three-wide set for all 75 snaps on offense, including penalty plays and excluding the kneel down to end the game.
- Against the Patriots, Manning worked to a variety of depths with 14 completions for 10 or fewer yards, 10 completions between 11 and 20 yards and six completions between 21 and 30 yards.

Gase knows what he has with Broncos

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 21, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- It doesn't really matter much whether the Cleveland Browns decided to move on in their coaching search before or after Denver Broncos offensive coordinator Adam Gase told the Browns on Tuesday that he no longer wanted to interview for the job.

That's just the way coaching searches go. People pull their names out, teams move on from candidates, and everybody wants to look as though he made the call, not the other guy. It's usually all semantics.

The real deal, the bottom line is that Gase is smart enough to call plays for the highest-scoring offense in the league's history, he's young, and he has Peyton Manning at quarterback. Oh, and the Broncos are in the Super Bowl.

The Browns are hiring a head coach because they fired the last one after just one season. They have uncertainty at quarterback, and the draft class has more question marks at the position than answers.

For many inside the Broncos' Dove Valley complex, it's a no-brainer. It's also an indication that virtually everyone inside the team's walls believes that Manning will be back for 2014.

Manning will have a medical exam in the weeks after the Super Bowl, the same kind of exam he had after the 2013 season. If doctors give Manning the thumbs-up, the Broncos believe that Manning, win or lose on Feb. 2, will be back for the 2014 season and the Broncos will remain in the Super Bowl conversation with left tackle Ryan Clady back in the lineup and the likes of Demaryius Thomas and Julius Thomas still catching passes.

"I still think he's young and he's playing well," Broncos executive vice president of football operations John Elway said of Manning last week. "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."

After the season Manning just had, there isn't anyone with the Broncos, or anywhere else in the league, who believes Manning is on his last leg. When asked whether he believed Manning was still enjoying the game, Elway said, "I'm sure he is still enjoying it, and he's on a good football team, which also, late in your career,

is crucial."

Manning just threw for a single-season-record 5,477 yards and a single-season-record 55 touchdown passes. He likes working with Gase as well as Gase's aggressiveness, work ethic and vision with the playbook. He's told some in and around the league he believes Gase is a "superstar," and Elway said he wished he could have played with Gase calling plays for him.

Gase, having worked his way up the ladder in the NFL with rolled-up sleeves, knows what he's got, knows the situation he's in. And in a business where it's hard to find at times, Gase has loyalty to Manning and his job. Elway called Gase's decision to tell the Browns and Vikings he did not want to interview until the Broncos' season was done "studly."

The Broncos don't have the salary-cap issues that so many of the league's elite find themselves with when things go well. Elway is focused on the long-term plan enough to go to the Senior Bowl practices this week.

So, no matter how badly the 35-year-old Gase wants to be a head coach in the league, and a person in his position certainly would want to try, it isn't urgent for him to leave. There is no legitimate deadline other than those who tell all the 30-somethings in the league to strike while the iron is hot. Often young coaches find it wasn't that good of an iron, or they weren't really ready to hold it.

Not with a Super Bowl on the docket and a pile of birthdays to enjoy before he can he even see middle age.

So, maybe the Browns moved on, maybe Gase moved on -- it will always depend on whom you ask. In a year when Gase has made plenty of good calls, this is another one. For everybody.

The Football Gods' Super Bowl

By Gregg Easterbrook
ESPN.com
January 21, 2014

It's the Super Bowl the football gods wanted to see -- the No. 1 offense versus the No. 1 defense. Perhaps the football gods will show mercy and send mild weather!

It's fitting that this season of scoreboard-spinning -- the Broncos with the highest-scoring team of all time -- should conclude this way. If Seattle's fantastic defense overcomes Denver's fantastic offense, the decade-long trend of favoring offensive players and tactics over their defensive equivalents might reverse. If Denver prevails, the movement toward a powerful offense may get even stronger.

What does history predict? This year's New Jersey Super Bowl will be the fifth time since the 1970 AFL-NFL merger that the top-rated offense has met the top-rated defense. So far, defense is 3-1 -- Giants over Bills (1991), 49ers over Dolphins (1985), and Steelers over Cowboys (1979), with the top offense prevailing only in 1990 (49ers over Broncos). Football lore long has held that defense trumps offense, especially in the postseason. Two weeks from now in the swamps of Jersey, we'll find out if that remains true in the shotgun-spread era.

The Super Bowl also matches the conference No. 1 seeds, and thus is as if the NFL playoffs were a seeded tournament, pleasing cranky critics. And the pairing makes me look smarter than I am, because seven weeks ago, Tuesday Morning Quarterback led with a forecast of a Denver-Seattle Super Bowl.

You'll hear many times in the next two weeks that if Denver wins, Peyton Manning will become the first quarterback to start in Super Bowl victories for different teams. If Seattle wins, Pete Carroll will sort of become the first head coach to win both a BCS title and a Super Bowl trophy. Sort of, because the BCS win was vacated due to the Reggie Bush scandal. (Jimmy Johnson and Barry Switzer won both a Super Bowl and the old "mythical national championship.") And though a Seattle victory likely would be mainly about the Bluish Men Group defense, it also would be a crowning moment for the zone read.

In other football news, the time approaches to name the winner of the coveted longest award in sports: the TMQ Non-QB Non-RB NFL MVP. Because the official MVP always goes to a quarterback or running back, TMQ annually names an MVP who is neither. This year, readers will choose! Next week's column will present four nominees. A poll will determine the trophy recipient. See next week's column for details.

At the intersection of football and politics, an online petition started by Lynda Woolard of New Orleans, seeking to revoke the nonprofit status of NFL headquarters, already has more than 300,000 signatures. It's worth considering.

Her view is seconded by Sen. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, among the most conservative members of Congress, who has proposed a bill to strip other professional sports of this and other tax favors.

NFL headquarters is hardly the only offender: "Outside the Lines" recently reported that the PGA hides behind a charitable exemption curtain, though only 16 percent of donations to its tour charity events actually go to charity. Coburn's bill would put an end to such abuses, and also to NFL access to tax-free bond issues, a financing tool that was created to finance libraries and cultural institutions, but now is used to subsidize stadium luxury boxes.

Nobody likes taxes. But if the wealthy don't pay their fair share, then average people must pay more, or the national debt rises. It is a measure of the bleak condition of national politics that although it's transparently absurd for the \$10 billion-a-year NFL to have a tax-exempt headquarters -- where commissioner Roger Goodell pays himself \$30 million a year while on paper being the leader of a philanthropy -- only one other senator has agreed to co-sponsor Coburn's legislation. Coburn can push hard because he has announced he will retire at the conclusion of the current Congress. Not seeking re-election, he no longer cares about campaign donations. Yet in the U.S. Senate, the notion that the very wealthy National Football League should not have a tax-exempt headquarters is too controversial for 98 of 100 senators to touch. That is a measure of the bleak condition of national politics.

Stats of the Championships No. 1: Before Spygate, Bill Belichick's Patriots were 12-2 in the playoffs and 3-0 in the Super Bowl. Since the taping scheme was discovered, they are 6-6 in the postseason and 0-2 in the Super Bowl.

Stats of the Championships No. 2: The Broncos have punted once in the playoffs.

Stats of the Championships No. 3: In four starts versus Seattle and Russell Wilson, Colin Kaepernick is 1-3 with 3 touchdown passes, 7 interceptions and a 54 quarterback rating.

Stats of the Championships No. 4: Averaging 144 yards rushing in his previous three games, LeGarrette Blount was held to 6 yards.

Stats of the Championships No. 5: In 33 offensive possessions against Seattle this season, San Francisco recorded three touchdowns.

Stats of the Championships No. 6: Russell Wilson is 17-1 at home, with 32 touchdowns versus seven interceptions.

Stats of the Championships No. 7: In two meetings with New England this season, Denver jumped out to leads of 24-0 and 23-3.

Stats of the Championships No. 8: Ten of the past 11 Seattle-San Francisco contests have been won by the home team.

Stats of the Championships No. 9: In the 2010 regular season, the Patriots averaged 32.4 points; they scored 21 points in their playoff loss. In the 2011 regular season, the Patriots averaged 32.1 points; they scored 17 points in their playoff loss. In the 2012 regular season, the Patriots averaged 34.8 points; they scored 13 points in their playoff loss. In the 2013 regular season, the Patriots averaged 27.8 points; they scored 16 points in their playoff loss.

Stats of the Championships No. 10: Eli Manning won the Super Bowl in Indianapolis, when that was Peyton Manning's home stadium. Now Peyton has a shot at winning the Super Bowl in Eli's home stadium.

Sweet Play of the Championships: It felt as if Denver was blowing New England off the field, but when a Patriots touchdown made it 26-16 with 3:07 remaining, a deuce would have put the visitors within one score. New England showed a passing set, then ran a draw to Shane Vereen. Outside linebacker Shaun Phillips knifed in and dragged down Vereen by his ankles. Tom Brady hung his head, knowing the game ended on that play.

Sour Play of the Championships: With Denver leading 20-3 late in the third quarter, the Flying Elvii faced fourth-and-3 on the Broncos' 29. Needing points against the league's highest-scoring offense -- New England was unlikely to shut Denver out down the stretch -- Belichick rightly went for it. At the snap, Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton simply ran straight by his blocker, sacking Brady before he even had a chance to scan the field. Who was the blocker? Pro Bowl guard Logan Mankins, called by some the best offensive lineman in football. Mankins barely so much as slowed Knighton. Very sour.

Sweet 'n' Sour Play: Seattle trailing 10-3 in the early third quarter, Marshawn Lynch headed into the line left behind backup rookie tackle Alvin Bailey, who was playing in a six-lineman heavy package, then cut back right and went 40 yards for the touchdown that tied the contest. Sweet for the home team. The play occurred on third-and-1. San Francisco had eight defenders in the box and two deep safeties, an alignment that might give up a first down but should be impossible to get a long run against. Not only did Bailey take out two defensive backs with the same block, the highly hyped first-round draft pick, safety Eric Reid, whiffed on his tackle attempt. Sour for the visitors.

Disclaimer of the Championships : Reader David Lisitza of Silver Spring, Md., reports bottles of Palmolive dish soap proclaim "No unnecessary chemicals." He notes: "A plutonium trigger factory can probably make the same claim."

In the Nissan Rogue commercial in which the car leaps atop an imaginary elevated Amtrak train in San Francisco, a small-type disclaimer warns: "Fantasy. Cars cannot jump onto trains." The real fantasy of this ad is that when the urban hipsters reach

their destination, they find ample vacant parking spots on the street in downtown San Francisco.

Concussion Lawsuit Subtext: The judge supervising the brain-injury settlement between the NFL and some 4,000 retired players put the deal on hold because of questions about whether enough money was being set aside by the league and whether the deal is fair to the "actual class members." The latter concern is that the deal as it stands would be fantastic for plaintiffs' lawyers (big payday up front) and fantastic for the NFL (liability shed with no admission of wrongdoing) but not so great for the "actual class members" (many former players would receive little or nothing). The proposed settlement is \$765 million for players and \$112 million in attorneys' fees. Did the league offer plaintiffs' lawyers a bag of gold doubloons in hopes that the lawyers would sell their clients the deal and make the former players go away? As the judge's ruling notes, lawyers expect this spectacular fee despite having bungled rudimentary aspects of the settlement proposal.

The rational move for the NFL would be to address the judge's move immediately by increasing the offer to the former players but not increasing the offer to their attorneys. Perhaps the NFL should offer twice as much, \$1.5 billion, with all additional funds being given to former players.

From the league's standpoint, it is essential that the chance to settle this mess not be lost. The NFL can buy its way out of any problem, but this works only if the other party agrees. With the settlement now perceived as the lawyers having shafted their own clients, the willingness of the former players to make a deal may not last. Increasing the money is the league's best chance of getting the former players to stay on board.

Here's the rub. With any class-action lawsuit, "actual class members" must decide whether to opt in (take the current offer while waiving future claims) or opt out (get nothing while reserving the right to file their own lawsuits). For those former players who are already aging, or already showing signs of neurological complications, it makes sense to opt in and take the best offer right now. Former players in these situations need help fast, and may not live long enough to receive a larger settlement that other lawsuits might produce in the future.

But for any former player who doesn't show neurological symptoms or who is less than, say, 65 years of age, opting out may be the way to go. The proposed settlement's offer to players without current neurological conditions is relatively modest -- waiver of future claims in exchange for about \$25,000 to \$50,000 each. The incentive to opt in for the relatively modest amount is that because with current technology it's nearly impossible to prove that harm to the brain was caused by NFL contact, you might as well take a relatively small payment and move on.

That's with current medical technology! Chronic traumatic encephalopathy is little-understood and has been studied only a short time. Think about a former NFL player who is, say, 45 years old and in decent health. He might have decades of life

ahead. Despite the media misconception that former NFL players die young, they as a group live longer than men of the same age. In the next decade or two, neurological diagnoses may advance significantly. It may become possible to link the onset of CTE to specific life events. If that happens, then a former player would have a much stronger legal claim against in the NFL.

The league needs former players to waive liability now, before some development in medical knowledge strengthens the former players' hand. The way for the league to achieve this is to put a lot more money in the pot.

The Road to the Swamps: This year's Super Bowl will be played in New Jersey, but all of the media talk will be of New York. So TMQ is keeping the focus on Jersey.

Did you know that the Garden State is named after the largest Channel Island? Today the island of Jersey is sort-of a miniature country, a self-governing dependency of the British crown. Because Jersey remained loyal during the English Civil War, James II gave the land that is now New Jersey to two aristocratic supporters. The Lenape were not consulted. If the Washington R*dsk*ns ever move to New Jersey, they would become the Washington Lenape.

In 1783, Princeton was briefly capital of the United States. There is a large waterfall on the Passaic River. Alexander Hamilton tried to use the waterfall to generate power so the United States would have industry and not be dependent on Europe for manufactured goods.

The hit movie "American Hustle" is very loosely based on the actions of several New Jersey politicians and con artists during the FBI's ABSCAM stings in the late 1970s. The movie is a must-see -- witty, gritty, with fabulous acting by Christian Bale and Amy Adams, though the audience never understands why the bungling loser who is the film's central character is intensely desired by two spectacular women: Adams and Jennifer Lawrence. Maybe it's because they know he is really Christian Bale.

The senator taken down by ABSCAM, Harrison Williams of New Jersey, resigned moments before the Senate was to expel him, then to his death (following prison) maintained he resigned on principle, not to avoid expulsion. "American Hustle" misses the funniest moment of the actual ABSCAM. After video was released showing Rep. Richard Kelly reaching for a briefcase of cash offered by a fake sheik, Kelly declared he was using the money to conduct his own investigation. (No one bought this.) Not addressed in coverage of the movie -- because ABSCAM ended three decades ago -- has the FBI given Congress a pass on corruption?

New Jersey offers what your columnist considers the best delicatessen on Earth, the Millburn Deli. My last meal would be a Millburn Deli smoked turkey sloppy Joe with a Balvenie neat. And if I had to choose between the two, I'd take the Joe.

How Did Seattle Do It? TMQ took a lot of heat halfway through the season with a column saying San Francisco couldn't pass the ball. Then the Niners finished 30th in passing and in the NFC title game were held to 147 passing yards. The game

concluded with San Francisco trying to throw into the right corner of the end zone - - exactly what San Francisco tried at the end of last year's Super Bowl -- and like in that Super Bowl, were unsuccessful. In both instances, the intended receiver was double-covered -- maybe defensive coordinators know something?

Jim Harbaugh has taken the 49ers to three straight conference title games, so he's obviously doing well. But his decisions can be puzzling. He sent Alex Smith to the bench, then traded him, to give Kaepernick the reins. Though the Nevada quarterback is a lot of fun to watch, he has yet to show he can pick apart an NFL defense. In the second half, Kaepernick turned the ball over on two of three snaps. As the stats item notes, Kaepernick is 1-3 versus the Seahawks, with a terrible passer rating. Versus Seattle and Russell Wilson, Smith was 1-0 with a 74 quarterback rating.

In-game, Harbaugh/West can be puzzling. With Seattle leading 23-17 at the 2-minute warning, San Francisco had first-and-10 at midfield, holding three timeouts. The game would be decided by Kaepernick's interception thrown from the Seattle 18 with 22 seconds remaining. The coach only used one of the timeouts, leaving two on the table. (They were called during Seattle's kneeldowns.) Harbaugh/West let an inexperienced quarterback sweat as the clock ticked toward all-naughts, rather than call time and coach up Kaepernick. Earlier, San Francisco, facing third-and-1 in the fourth quarter, took a delay-of-game penalty rather than burn one of the timeouts they ended up not using. Puzzling.

Harbaugh/West also had the Niners facing fourth-and-1 on the Seattle 41. They tried to draw the home team offside, then took a penalty and punted. Why not just run a play for the first down?

San Francisco played terrific defense against Seattle in the first half, stuffing several short-yardage runs; on the game, the Niners sacked Russell Wilson four times: the visitors surprised the hosts with zone blitzes. But it was as if everyone on the San Francisco defense thought they'd heard the whistle on Wilson's 51-yard completion to Doug Baldwin. Wilson had 7 seconds in the pocket, a long time in NFL terms, as numerous Niners defenders just stood around looking at each other.

On the Seattle side of the ball, San Francisco was held to 17 points with a total of just three blitzes. Last week, TMQ wrote that the Seahawks play old-fashioned vanilla defense and rarely blitz, despite a reputation for Carroll being blitz-happy. Three blitzes in a title game; conventional four-man rush; Super Bowl invitation.

Down 10-3 with seconds remaining before halftime, Seattle faced fourth-and-6 on the San Francisco 38. Carroll went for it, disdaining a 55-yard field goal attempt on a day that was cold and humid, both bad for long-distance kick flight. The attempt failed, but the result of the play was San Francisco ball on its 38. (The spot moved back following a dead-ball penalty walkoff.) Had Seattle missed a field goal on the same down, it would have been San Francisco ball on the 45. Because the half was nearly over, going for the first down was less risky than attempting the long field goal.

At the start of the fourth quarter, Seattle faced fourth-and-7 on the San Francisco 35, a nearly identical situation. Still an improbable field goal through cold, humid air. The Bluish Men Group lined up trips right. At the snap, all three trips guys ran go routes; Lynch ran a flare left; six blocked. Wilson looked toward Lynch, drawing the safeties' eyes that way, then threw into the end zone for a touchdown to little-used Jermaine Kearse. San Francisco seemed to expect a short possession throw. Instead on a big play, the ball goes to a guy who rarely sees the ball, which is a time-tested football success tactic.

Later leading 20-17 in the fourth quarter, Seattle failed on fourth-and-goal from the 1 with a simplistic no-misdirection play that looked an awful lot like the fourth-and-2 play for the national championship that failed for USC when Carroll was coaching against Texas. Denver has the NFL's prettiest goal-line plays. Seattle needs to work on goal-line designs for the Super Bowl, because settling for field goals won't git 'er done against the highest-scoring team ever.

Huge Players Not Big Enough: Reader Matt Loughman of Suwanee, Ga., notes this Kansas City Star story saying Eric Fisher, the first choice of the 2013 draft, needs to "get bigger and stronger." Loughman asks, "Fisher is 6-8, 305 pounds, that's not big enough?" At the combine, Fisher did 27 reps of 225 pounds. That's not strong enough?

In a supersized society, the notion that huge, muscular football players aren't huge and muscular enough is not an outlier. During the preseason, a Packers analyst scoffed at Green Bay linemen as "soft and small." The Pack's expected line starters in preseason averaged 6-foot-4, 317 pounds.

My new book "The King of Sports" -- say, have I mentioned "The King of Sports"? -- has a chapter titled, "How 307 Pounds Became Undersized." Among facts from that chapter: When the Green Bay Packers played in the first Super Bowl, their defensive line averaged 254 pounds. When the Packers played in the 45th Super Bowl, their defensive line averaged 320 pounds. No one on the 1972 Dolphins' perfect team weighed more than 300 pounds. In the most recent Super Bowl, Ravens versus 49ers, 13 starting players weighed at least 300 pounds. The chapter offers, via Mel Kiper Jr.'s storeroom of draft records, considerable detail on the steady rise in size and strength of linemen.

At the NFL level there is always pressure on linemen to gain strength. Professional athletes supervised by trainers and nutritionists can gain healthy weight and then lose it back once their playing days end. But in a nation with a childhood obesity epidemic, it just cannot be good that the No. 1 sport celebrates weight gain.

For every one NFL player gaining weight as lean muscle mass, there are a hundred of teens wolfing down bacon cheeseburgers to get big so they can start for varsity. "The King of Sports" gives lots of stats for weight increase in high school football, and the numbers are bleak -- high schools where the average offensive lineman weight is higher than the 1972 Dolphins, prep programs with multiple 300-plus lineman. High school players who gain significant pounds usually are not under the

tight supervision of trainers and nutritionists, and they're on their own trying to lose that weight when no recruiting offer comes.

Beyond that, very heavy football players extolled by television as celebrities give young people the idea that weighing that much is not a risk. True, television also bombards young people with images of perfect-10 bodies. But a perfect-10 body is impossible for most young people to attain, while anyone can gain pounds by reaching for the French fries. Football needs to rethink the way in which it extols "getting big."

The Belichick-Welker Psychodrama: Back home at Foxboro, Bill Belichick called the Wes Welker hit on Aqib Talib "one of the worst plays I've seen" . . . a deliberate play by the receiver to take out Aqib." Psychoanalyzing the Patriots could itself be a sport. Here goes:

- Welker felt unappreciated at New England. Despite being the franchise's all-time leader for receptions, he was shown the door the moment a less-expensive Welker-like figure, Danny Amendola, came along. Driven by subconscious Oedipal conflict, Welker wanted to slay his father figure, but decided that defeating his father-figure's team would be more acceptable. In the first Denver-New England game, Welker played poorly and the father figure prevailed. That made it essential for Denver to defeat New England on the second try. Welker entered the contest filled with rage, which in football is a useful emotion.
- Welker was jealous of Talib, who was being welcomed into the Patriots' locker room just as Welker was being shown out. Welker was the good boy, Talib the prodigal son. Yet Talib received honors -- whether the Patriots sacrificed a fatted calf is unknown -- while Welker was banished.
- Welker was further enraged that the master he served, Tom Brady, did not protect him. Instead, Brady's wife, Giselle Bündchen, blamed Welker in 2012 at Indianapolis when the Patriots failed against the Giants. Brady received the fair damsel's embrace while Welker was sent into the wilds, which to Bündchen would be any place you fly over going from Boston to Los Angeles. Thus Welker wished Brady to suffer, ideally to see Bündchen leave him for, say, Andy Samberg.
- Brady knew if there was one way the loss of Welker would blow up in the Patriots' faces, it would be if Welker joined up with Peyton Manning, to whom Brady secretly feels inferior, despite having two more Super Bowl rings and seven more playoffs wins. The football world thinks of Manning as a "real" quarterback, even though he wears wigs while lip-syncing rap music, and thinks of Brady as a pretty-boy. Suddenly Brady's best option defects to the "real" quarterback.
- Belichick viewed Welker as a disloyal son. Belichick has made many football players better than expected, but the two over which he waved the magic wand were Brady, an unheralded sixth-round selection who is now a first-ballot Hall of Famer, and Welker, who wasn't drafted at all, and became a star wearing New England colors. Brady is loyal and grateful; he brings in Dunkin' Donuts for the

coaches using his Lamborghini. Brady never complains in public when the Patriots offer him \$57 million! But Welker was not grateful when offered \$10 million. Now Belichick so despises the disloyal son that his name cannot be spoken. He's not Welker, he is "the receiver."

- Belichick feels his genius is evident if anybody he plugs into the slot receiver role in his offense catches 100 passes a year. Ideally, a volunteer chosen at random from the audience just before kickoff would be Belichick's slot receiver. That would prove the coach, not the player, produces New England's passing stats. Amendola only caught 54 passes, and who cares about that collapsed lung or whatever his flimsy injury excuse was. This embarrassed Belichick, causing him to feel human emotion, which in turn made him very uncomfortable.
- Those who have themselves been accused of questionable ethics like to redirect attention to others, so Belichick denounces someone else for poor sportsmanship. Soon, Chris Christie will complain that the NFL Super Bowl setup in Manhattan is blocking traffic for New Jersey residents trying to use the bridges into New York.
- What does TMZ think? That Welker should have been flagged for offensive pass interference. He wasn't blocking -- he hit Talib while the pass was in the air.

Et Tu, Bob? In his roles in public life, Robert Gates seemed a fine, conscientious man. Then his new book "Duty" stabs in the back the president and vice president who supported Gates against liberal opposition and kept him in charge at the Pentagon. OK, it's Washington: The stab in the back is practically mandatory. How slick of Gates to make it seem it was his "duty" to slam the president and vice president; this way he sounds loyal and daring simultaneously. But even acknowledging that former government higher-ups of both parties are motivated by self-praise, your writer was blown away by the following passage about Gates' book from Bret Stephens, a conservative columnist at the Wall Street Journal:

Take this vignette from 2010: That January, Mr. Gates called for a highly restricted meeting of [White House] principals to discuss the possibility of conflict with Iran with little or no advance notice. Mr. Gates describes the meeting in detail and then concludes with this nugget:

"I was put off by the way the president closed the meeting. To his very closest advisers, he said, 'For the record, and for those of you writing your memoirs, I am not making any decisions about Israel or Iran. Joe [Biden], you be my witness.' I was offended by his suspicion that any of us would ever write about such sensitive matters." This is related without irony on page 393.

Gates was offended by the president's suspicion that Gates might do precisely what Gates later did. Wow. Even by Washington standards, this is amazing double-talk.

Of course Gates did not make policy regarding Israel or Iran. What about issues Gates personally controlled? This brings to mind the Pentagon's KC-X program.

Since 2002, the Air Force has been trying to build a new airborne tanker. Most Air Force tankers are derivatives of the obsolete 707 jetliner, which first flew in 1958 and which Western airlines retired a generation ago. The initial phase of the KC-X tanker project, occurring before Gates, involved a corruption scandal that sent a high Pentagon official, Darleen Druyun, to prison. In 2006, Gates became secretary of defense, tasked by President George W. Bush to clean up the KC-X mess, with wide authority regarding the project.

There were years of lobbying wars regarding whether Boeing or an Airbus-led venture would get the contract. The lobbying involved high-priced hired guns hurling campaign donations hither and yon to members of Congress who were more concerned with influence peddling than Air Force operational requirements; John McCain also got involved, and McCain gave George W. Bush the willies. To be secretary of defense while this was going on would not have been easy. But fixing the tanker mess was his job, and Gates failed, despite having five years in charge of the Defense Department.

In 2008, Gates called a new tanker the military's top acquisition priority, declaring production would be "expedited." Yet today, nothing is flying. Six years after Gates got on the case, Air Force fighters still are refueled by Eisenhower-era hardware.

The latest estimate is that the initial prototype of the new tanker, now dubbed KC-46, may take wing in 2015 -- seven years after Gates said the project was being expedited. First deployment is hoped for in 2017, a decade after the moment of "expedition," with construction of the new fleet not complete until 2028.

This terrible record of acquisition performance does not link to lack of money: \$52 billion has been authorized for the program. Nor is some great technological leap involved. The KC-46 is a "variant" of the Boeing 767, an airliner that has been in the skies for 30 years and already gone through half a dozen variations. At the current pace, 15 years will have passed between when the Air Force decided to build a tanker based on well-established existing aircraft, and when the new planes actually are fueling Air Force aircraft. (The entire B-24 bomber project -- the most-produced U.S. military aircraft ever -- took six years from first test flight to final model off the assembly line.) Nine years will have passed between when Gates said he was giving his full attention to the problem, and the first tanker reaching service.

What does Gates have to say in his book about the Air Force project? He complains that at the Pentagon, when "anyone elected" from Alabama was on the phone -- the Airbus competitor would have been built in the Yellowhammer State -- the call was whining about tanker politics. That does sound excruciating. But it was his job to fix the tanker program, and Gates failed completely. Now he wants to sell you a book about how everyone else is to blame.

How Did Denver Do It? Was Bill Belichick too clever by half? Riding a streak of strong performances by the revitalized New England rushing attack, he went into Denver and had the Patriots call just 14 running plays and 42 passes. (That figure

adjusts for sacks and scrambles.) Did the unexpectedly ideal conditions cause Belichick to yield to his normal pass-wacky self, after three consecutive bad-weather rush-oriented games in Massachusetts? Was he attempting reverse psychology -- passing because he expected Denver to expect runs? The Patriots executed a lot of play fakes, suggesting they wanted to establish the run, then started play-faking but forgot the first part of that equation.

CBS color man Phil Simms repeatedly stated the Patriots were throwing because the Broncos have a highly ranked run defense and a low-ranked pass defense. But those stats are artifacts of Denver jumping to big leads, resulting in second halves in which opponents abandon the run while the Broncos drop into a Cover 3. Teams that win by big margins often have great rush defense stats and weak pass defense stats. Denver finished the regular season seventh in rushing yards allowed -- but defended just 420 running plays, one of the league's lowest figures. Denver finished 27th in passing yards allowed -- but defended 613 passing plays, one of the league's highest figures.

Maybe Belichick thought the Denver secondary would collapse with Chris Harris out injured, replaced by the graying Champ Bailey. Maybe the pop-psychology explanation of the New England sideline was that Flying Elvii offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels, former head coach at Denver, wanted to show he and Tom Brady could out-pass Manning -- because in the current football reality, throwing is viewed as more manly than running. Whatever happened, the New England offensive game plan was too clever by half.

The Patriots' defensive game plan involved frequent use of a front Manning hasn't seen much -- an 8-1-2 with all receivers against press coverage. This unusual front was worth a try, but alternated with a funky two-defensive lineman look, allowed 507 yards of offense and an 8-of-14 conversion rate on third and fourth downs.

Belichick made a puzzling decision by ordering a punt from the Denver 39. Sure, it was fourth-and-16, but you don't defeat the league's highest-scoring team by punting in its territory. Belichick made a really puzzling decision when with New England scoring to pull within 23-10 with 9:23 remaining, he had the Flying Elvii kick away. Belichick has never cared for the alternative -- only one recovered onside kick in his many years at New England. But what choice did he have? The ball went back to the league's best offense, and soon the lead was 26-10.

As for the Broncos, as usual they had a creative play for the goal line. Reaching second-and-1 on the New England 2, the Broncos lined up heavy left and ran outside left. Stuffed, they faced third-and-1 on the New England 2, and again lined up left and ran outside left, reaching first-and-goal. Again they lined up heavy left - then faked an outside run left, Manning rolling right to toss an easy touchdown pass to the backup tight end. Denver's other touchdown came on a really pretty goal line zed-in to Demaryius Thomas -- the zed-in is the Canadian version of a z-in.

Denver has faced many third-and-short situations in the playoffs, and every time gone for a super-short possession play rather than thrown deep. Back in the day, Bart Starr thought third-and-short was the best down to throw deep. Seattle plays so tight on receivers, will Denver be able to complete super-short possession passes on third-and-short?

One of TMQ's themes this season has been the warning that scoreboard-spinning teams tend to peter out at the last. Until this season, the highest-scoring NFL team ever was the 2007 Patriots. They averaged 37 points per game in the regular season, then dropped to an average of 26 points in their two home playoff games, then scored 14 points in their Super Bowl loss. This season, the Broncos became the highest-scoring team ever. They put up 38 points per game during the regular season, then dropped to 25 points during their two home playoff games. Will the third part of the pattern repeat?

Tinkering with Kickoff, Try and Onside Rules: Last week TMQ proposed doing away with the kickoff -- the scored-upon team would start at the 25, which is generous to the receiving team because the average returned kickoff reaches the 23 -- and also eliminating the singleton PAT kick, making all tries two-point attempts. My reasoning was that eliminating kickoffs would reduce concussions, while requiring two-point attempts would add back roughly the amount of excitement lost with no kickoffs. The PAT kick is the dullest moment in professional football -- more than 99 percent succeed -- while the kickoff is the most dangerous moment. So fix both in one fell swoop, whatever "fell swoop" means.

My alternative suggestion was to eliminate kickoffs, then after touchdowns, give the scoring team the option of going for two from the opponent's 2-yard line (the current deuce try) or kicking for one with the ball spotted on the 35. That would add all kinds of strategy to the second half, and sports fans love statistical analysis.

Reader Tim Kokesh of San Jose, Calif., countered: "Instead of doing away with the kicked PAT altogether, how about requiring the player who scored the touchdown to kick the PAT? Kind of like a foul shot on a made basket. The scoring team could either allow their touchdown man to kick for one, or go for two using the current deuce format."

Dave Moore of Pittsburgh wrote: "I don't like the injuries on kickoffs either, but I love the strategic choice of the onside. So why not leave the PAT rule as is, and change kickoffs to encourage the onside? Spot the ball at the 50 for kickoffs. Most of the time, the scoring team would just sail the kickoff out of the end zone for a touchback -- no wedge-busting, no kickoff concussions. But with the kickoff spot at the 50, onside kicks would become more likely. A failed onside would cost only about 20 yards in field position: the opponent would start around his 40 instead of at his 20. Risking 20 yards of field position in return for the chance of a turnover could be attractive, especially in the fourth quarter."

In the 2013 regular season, there were 2,748 kickoffs and only 62 onside kicks, about 2 percent of kickoffs. Under Moore's scheme, onside kickoffs would become

more common. In 2013, 11 onsides were recovered, or 18 percent. Would recovery likelihood go down (receiving teams more wary) or up (kickers practice the onside more) under Moore's idea? Only experience would tell, as only experience would tell whether more onside kicks would become a concussion factor. Even if the recovery percentage stayed the same, there could be many instances where an 18 percent chance of getting the ball back was worth the risk of 20 yards of field position.

Maybe Self-Aware Nanobots Write the Scripts: The weirdest show on television, "Revolution," is halfway through what is likely to be its swan-song season. In a world without electricity, three good guys armed only with knives are walking down a dark country road where eight bad guys with carbines wait to ambush them. The guys who formed the ambush and have the element of surprise fire hundreds of rounds at close range: all miss. The good guys sneak up behind the bad guys, and need mere seconds to kill them with knives. How can you sneak up behind an ambush? After the first couple of bad guys die when struck from behind, why don't the rest turn around?

"Revolution" carries a stark warning to humanity -- after the electricity stops, so will logic. The current season depicts the 16th year after the global power blackout. A child born at least two years after the blackout is shown as now a man in his mid-20s. No explanation. A character is shot in the stomach at close range with a bullet from an assault rifle; in a few minutes she is completely fine without medical treatment, and able to walk several miles. A good-guy character is shot in the chest with a crossbow arrow, recovers in a day or so when treated with "balm," then needs mere seconds to kill a huge muscular man by kicking him once.

After electricity, good guys cannot be killed but bad guys drop dead instantaneously if a good guy looks at them crosswise. And there's an infinite supply of bad guys. Viewers are told that about a year after the blackout, order broke down and a horrific Hobbesian war of all against all killed 90 percent of the American population. Since then militias have fought each other for control of towns and of remaining manufactured products. So military-age males ought to be in short supply. Instead, the societies of "Revolution" seem to consist entirely of military-age males and good-looking young women.

There are huge muscular men everywhere, all obedient to various crackpot warlords who are obviously insane. No matter how many military-aged males are killed, twice as many more march in. But there are no old people, no children -- and no farmers. No one grows crops or raises stock: Eating seems to have been forgotten altogether, though there's plenty of moonshine, which characters drink all day long, and unlimited bullets. Plus, Aaron the computer geek has been wearing the same clothes for 16 years, and they're not frayed.

During the initial episodes, it was darkly hinted the blackout was caused by a test of a military ray-gun weapon; during the test, something went Horribly, Horribly Wrong. The McGuffin everyone was seeking in the first season was a flash drive with software that nullified the ray-gun effect and caused electricity to come back on. A dozen or so episodes concerned maneuvering for the mysterious flash drives.

Then "Revolution" was renewed for another season, and the flash drives, like food, were forgotten -- they haven't even been mentioned in the current season. In the future, memories will be short.

Now viewers are told that self-aware nanobots shut down the electricity in order to, in order to . . . presumably, that's the Big Reveal for the series finale. Often as action series are strung out and new twists added, previous episodes become nonsense in retrospect. This year's plot twists have rendered nonsensical nearly everything in the series pilot. Consider the super-scientist character, Rachel. Now we're told that 16 years previously, Rachel designed the self-aware nanobots and always knew they would destroy the world. Yet in the pilot, she's a mother with two little children, she's made no preparations to care for them after what we're now told she always knew would be a permanent global blackout. And in the pilot she was obsessed with getting one of the flash drives, though we're now told they were always no good versus the self-aware nanobots she herself built.

"None of this makes any sense" -- an actual line from a character in the latest "Revolution" episode. So brace yourself for what's coming as the next weirdest show on prime time, "Resurrection," premiering in March. The premise: in a remote town where all of the phone lines have failed, long-dead people come back to life. "None of this makes any sense," the protagonist says in the "Resurrection" trailer now running in theaters.

Careers Openings in Luxury Law: Imagine practicing luxury law. An upcoming conference has a session on trademark trolls and the threat to high-end luxury goods from 3D printers.

Race to the Bottom at Big Universities: The University of Louisville made itself look terrible by bringing back weasel coach Bobby Petrino, and no one seems to care except Northeastern athletic director Peter Roby. He notes Petrino "didn't pay any price for all the embarrassments he caused to the institutions where he was at, to his family, to the NCAA and to the member schools." This is a core point about institutional corruption in NCAA sports. If a player eats a free cheeseburger, all hell breaks loose. If a coach behaves dishonorably, he gets a \$3.5 million-a-year deal. Human beings respond to incentives; in big-college football, cheating is rewarded and dishonor never punished.

Syracuse University is maneuvering to make itself look terrible. As noted by reader Mike Zaino of Rocky Hill, Conn., though a private school that costs undergraduates \$57,450 a year, Syracuse is lobbying for at least \$300 million in taxpayers' money to build a fancy new football stadium. Last year, Syracuse cleared an \$11 million profit on football; a new stadium with luxury boxes would increase that. If a private school wants a nicer football stadium in order to gain revenue, why should average taxpayers -- many of whom cannot afford college for their own children -- be compelled to pay? New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, born into privilege, endlessly says he's for the average person. If he backs a public giveaway to a private university, voters may find out where his true loyalties lie.

Louisville and Syracuse are amateurs compared to how the University of North Carolina is striving to make itself look terrible. First there was the 2011 scandal regarding fake courses for athletes. The NCAA lowered the boom on a player but only slapped the wrists of the university.

After all, the NCAA's policy is that players should be used up and thrown away, while colleges, coaches and athletic staff should roll in money. So fake courses were not in any way offensive to the NCAA. But a player revealing the existence of fake courses -- off with his head!

Last month the professor who ran the fake courses was indicted for fraud. What about higher-ups at the university, the deans and the chancellor? In big organizations, the people on top say they should receive ginormous paychecks because the buck stops with them. Then, when something goes wrong, they say they're not responsible. Holden Thorp, who was chancellor when fake courses were being offered at UNC, paid no fines, faced no indictment. He's now provost at Washington University in St. Louis, a cushy job at a top school. Thorp and Petrino ought to get together and have a few laughs.

The University of North Carolina's latest move toward the bottom is to lash out at a whistleblower who says many Tar Heels athletes don't read well enough to be qualified for high school, let alone college. Only after trying to blame the messenger did the school agree to investigate: first step in the "investigation" is ordering researcher Mary Willingham to stop discussing her allegations. Maybe the investigation will show the claims of illiterate athletes aren't true. If they are true, will Tar Heels chancellor Carol Folt resign?

Wacky Dog Food of the Week: Kibbles 'n Bits dog food now offers "grilled USA beef steak flavor." Though there are several USDA grades of beef, "grilled USA beef steak" is not one of them. But then the dog food doesn't actually contain "grilled USA beef steak," only its flavor.

Wacky Human Food of the Week: TMQ likes coffee with nonfat half-and-half. The other day, my grocer was fresh out, so I bought regular half-and-half and mixed it with skim milk. This means I made half half-and-half.

Wacky Primate Food of the Week: Many readers, including Marcia Hefler of Santa Monica, Calif., noted the news that bananas are bad for monkeys.

Adventures in Officiating: Everyone agrees NaVorro Bowman recovered Seattle's fumble at the San Francisco 1. Even the football gods agreed, causing Seattle to lose another fumble on the next snap. The frustrating part was that replay review can't overturn a fumble ruling on the field. That needs to be corrected in the offseason. The reasoning is that dog piles following a fumble often are impossible to see into, so replay won't show anything definitive. In this case, replay did have a definitive view.

TMQ maintains that officials consistently call this situation incorrectly. When the ball comes out and a player on the ground grabs it, the whistle should sound immediately. The play should be over the instant a fumble is possessed by a man on the ground who's in contact with an opponent. Instead, officials tend to let the boys fight it out in the dog pile, where matters quickly become Darwinian.

Hidden Play of the Championships: Hidden plays are ones that never make highlight reels, but sustain or stop drives. With Denver leading 3-0 in the first quarter, the Flying Elvii had first-and-10 at midfield. Tom Brady play-faked and rolled right; Julian Edelman cut deep left and was as open as an NFL receiver ever gets; Brady badly missed him. Had New England recorded a touchdown on this play, taking an early lead -- Brian Burke of Advanced NFL Stats maintains home-field advantage works most in the first quarter, then fades -- the game outcome might have been different. Instead, New England ended up punting, and Denver drove the other way for a 10-0 lead.

Next Week: Readers vote on the coveted longest award in sports: Entertainment and Sports Programming Network's Tuesday Morning Quarterback Non-Quarterback Non-Running-Back National Football League Most Valuable Player.

12 Days: If the Super Bowl were today ...

By Jane McManus
ESPN.com
January 21, 2014

Each day from now until Feb. 2, ESPNNewYork.com will take you inside the challenge of staging the most unpredictable NFL title game ever. There are 12 days until the Super Bowl.

NEW YORK -- If the weather currently hitting the New York and New Jersey region were happening on Super Bowl Sunday, the NFL would have to decide whether to postpone the game. The heaviest snowfall is expected right around the 6:30 p.m. kickoff. Although the snow might not make holding the game impossible, it could make moving 80,000 people by train and bus much more difficult.

- Can you hear me now? "Selfie" is the word of the year for a reason, and your cell phone company knows that on Feb. 2, many of the fans on hand will be updating their status and changing their Facebook cover pictures to something related to the game. In preparation for Super Bowl XLVIII at MetLife Stadium, Verizon has backed up its power source and quadrupled the data capacity.

The upshot for users -- if the lights go out on Feb. 2, you will still be able to tweet about it.

Verizon completed the work in October, part of \$400 million in upgrades throughout the New York and New Jersey area according to Michele White, the executive director of network in the New York and New Jersey area.

"As of [Jan. 19] you won't be able to bring any equipment into the stadium, so we've stocked our spaces with our spares, and spares for the spares," said White, standing in the company's data hub room at the stadium.

Verizon is just one of the cell providers who has been preparing for the Super Bowl. Many of the cell antennae are hidden in the architecture of the stadium itself, and most fans won't notice many of the 544 antennae built into the stadium.

- Reserve your bus: Anecdotal word that some of the earlier Fan Express buses to the stadium may be reaching capacity. If you are planning to get there and want a specific stop and time, book now.

Gase withdraws from Browns' search

ESPN.com
January 21, 2014

The Cleveland Browns are moving on with their coaching search after Denver Broncos offensive coordinator Adam Gase reportedly withdrew his name from consideration for the job.

The Browns have scheduled a second interview with Buffalo Bills defensive coordinator Mike Pettine for Tuesday evening, according to league sources. The team also is considering other candidates, including Seattle Seahawks defensive coordinator Dan Quinn, a league source told ESPN NFL Insider Adam Schefter.

Atlanta Falcons offensive coordinator Dirk Koetter also will interview for the Browns job, sources confirmed to ESPN. Koetter will become the eighth candidate to interview for the vacancy.

Gase called the Browns on Tuesday morning to inform them that he wanted to concentrate on Denver's upcoming matchup with Seattle in the Super Bowl and would not interview with Cleveland after the Feb. 2 game, according to multiple media reports.

The Browns, who have not made the postseason since 2002, are searching for a replacement for Rob Chudzinski, who was fired after going 4-12 in his first season as coach.

More From ESPN.com

Adam Gase is smart enough to call plays for the highest-scoring offense in league history, he's young, and he has Peyton Manning at quarterback. Oh, and the Broncos are in the Super Bowl. He doesn't need the Browns job, writes Jeff Legwold. Analysis

- McManamon: Browns still methodical

Gase, 35, was the first candidate the Browns asked permission to interview after firing Chudzinski in the hours following a Dec. 29 loss at Pittsburgh. He declined Cleveland's initial offer for an interview so he could focus on the Broncos' playoff run.

Cleveland also has been spurned by New England Patriots offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels, who withdrew from consideration earlier this month, a source told ESPN.

Pettine met with Browns owner Jimmy Haslam and CEO Joe Banner on Thursday. The 47-year-old is coming off his first season with the Bills after four seasons as defensive coordinator for the New York Jets.

League rules prohibit teams from finalizing deals with assistant coaches whose teams are still in the postseason. So even if the Browns want Quinn, the club can't discuss a contract until after the Super Bowl.

Ex-agent: Ryan Leaf sabotaged draft

ESPN.com
January 21, 2014

It's a plot twist the writers of "Jerry Maguire" missed.

But it undoubtedly won't be overlooked in the major motion picture that tells the story of Ryan Leaf.

Leigh Steinberg, the former superagent who inspired the Tom Cruise movie character but subsequently fell on hard times after battling alcoholism and bankruptcy, says in a book that Leaf skipped a meeting with former Indianapolis Colts coach Jim Mora to sabotage his chances of being chosen No. 1 in the 1998 NFL draft.

It worked.

Leaf, who Steinberg wrote didn't want to play in Indianapolis, fell to the San Diego Chargers with the No. 2 pick.

The Colts, of course, chose Peyton Manning.

"I told Ryan it would do no good to approach Colts GM Jim Irsay," Steinberg wrote, according to USA Today Sports, which obtained an advance copy of "The Agent: My 40-Year Career Making Deals and Changing the Game," which was released Tuesday. "Irsay saw the sport the same way he viewed his other passion, rock 'n' roll. Just as musicians tended to be a bit eccentric, so did football players, and that did not stop him from drafting Jeff George or trading for Eric Dickerson.

"'Leigh,' he used to say, 'it's about the freaking talent.' If someone is that gifted, in Irsay's opinion, you simply find a way to deal with his personality."

So Steinberg proposed an idea to Leaf that would change the course of NFL history: Leaf could alter the Colts coach's perception in such a way that the team would have no choice but to pass on him despite Irsay's potential persistence.

"'If you go to the combine,' I told Ryan, 'but fail to show up for a meeting with Mora, that should do it. Jim is a real prideful person who has a tendency to explode. I am not recommending you do this, but if you are desperate to go to San Diego, this is the way,'" Steinberg wrote.

Leaf sought the quarterback job in San Diego "because of the exceptional weather and the more laid-back lifestyle," Steinberg wrote.

"Ryan approved, but I first cleared the idea with Chargers general manager Bobby Beathard, lest San Diego also question my client's reliability," Steinberg wrote.

"Beathard went along with the ruse. If he'd had a problem, Ryan would've shown up for his meeting with Mora."

While Steinberg has bounced back from his own fall from grace in recent years -- at least enough to author a book -- Leaf hasn't been as fortunate. The former Heisman Trophy finalist at Washington State who retired after four dismal seasons in the NFL is serving a five-year prison sentence in Montana stemming from burglary and drug possession charges and probation violations from 2010 charges in Texas.

"Once Ryan was a no-show, Mora, as anticipated, went ballistic," Steinberg wrote. "I defended my player, naturally, dismissing the coach's response as another Mora meltdown. As I'd anticipated, Ryan was criticized, but the plan achieved its purpose. The Colts took Manning."

"Something tells me the folks in Indianapolis have never regretted that decision."

For his part, Beathard disputes there were any questions surrounding who the Chargers preferred at No. 2.

"We absolutely wanted to draft Peyton," Beathard said Tuesday in an interview on ESPN Radio's "Mike and Mike" show. "I knew Archie and Olivia [Manning], I knew the family. And that's who we wanted. I had seen both quarterbacks personally. I had some reservations about Ryan and there were a lot of rumors up in Pullman, Wash., about Ryan."

"The head coach did not level with me," Beathard said about Mike Price, then the coach at Washington State. "I knew the assistant coaches and the trainer, and they leveled with me that there were some problems with Ryan."

Former Colts president Bill Polian, now an NFL analyst for ESPN, also suggested Steinberg may have mischaracterized the scenarios that led to the top two picks in the 1998 draft.

"We had decided that we were going to start with a clean slate," Polian told ESPN Radio. "Nobody had any previous record. We were going to do it from scratch. Look at every film, go through every detail and make a decision without any previous bias."

Polian said he distinctly recalls Leaf had missed a predraft meeting that year but that his absence didn't necessarily factor into the Colts' decision to draft Manning.

"And I remember Leigh telling the press that we had blown it because we hadn't called him and given him the right time to come to the meeting. I knew that was false because I had made the call," Polian said, laughing. "So I'm glad after 16 years he's finally told the truth."

Is NFL picked clean?

By Howard Bryant
ESPN The Magazine
January 21, 2014

This story appears in ESPN The Magazine's Feb. 3 Music issue. Subscribe today!

MAYBE ROGER GOODELL knows football is doomed and has decided to plunder as much as possible from the village. As the commissioner oversees a sport in which camera close-ups of concussed players are routine and the mediocrity of flawed teams scoring on each other at will passes as excitement, it is more honorable to see his recent proposal to add two wild-card teams this way: He is emptying the tank of a financially soaring -- but morally suspect -- enterprise.

Otherwise, the truth of the situation is far starker: that Goodell and his owners might seek extra playoff games in an era of CTE and eight-win playoff teams because they actually believe it is good for the sport.

Goodell was exposed as compromised on the issue of player safety when he advocated an 18-game season in 2010, just as the severity of concussions was coming into clearer, deadlier focus. Goodell reasoned that players did not face increased injury risk from two extra games, because the number of preseason contests would be reduced by two. But that argument asked the public to believe that pros play the preseason with the same intensity as they do when the Super Bowl is at stake.

So Goodell is once again looking to add games -- high-stakes games -- and although he sells the appearance of responsibility and has taken some credible actions to address the head-injury crisis (like bolstering concussion protocols), the overriding consideration then, as now, is money. Of course it is. The job of the commissioner is to increase the value of franchises for the owners, and in this, there is no doubting his efficacy. Ex-players might be in wheelchairs, and addled legends like Tony Dorsett might have harbored suicidal thoughts, but NFL revenue is up an estimated 3 percent from 2009, and viewership for the first two rounds of this season's playoffs spiked by 7 percent from last season. The public cannot get enough, so Goodell wants to give it more. Meanwhile, the players' association has no position on an expanded playoffs because, according to spokesman George Atallah, the NFL has not presented a formal proposal. But should that come, it too will give plenty of weight to the financial benefits, even as some of the players call out the league for its mixed messages, passing rules to curb the most violent hits on one hand but considering adding more games on the other. "Every time they are doing these things that make more money for football but don't protect players," Steelers safety Ryan Clark said recently on Mike & Mike, "it makes you question the way that we're changing the game on the field."

Yet extra playoff games don't come just at the expense of player safety. They will also diminish the quality of the product. Salary caps and restricted free agency haven't produced parity as much as exciting mediocrity. The raucous, up-and-down NFL is trending toward arena football, and because of the game's breakneck speed, it remains ultraviolent despite the rule changes. The cap, meanwhile, prevents teams from paying for real backups. The result is a lower skill level, with turnovers and injury reports often determining the most important games.

The NFL basked in the illusion of wild-card weekend in all the close games. It did this while curiously ignoring that for the sixth time in the past eight years, multiple teams reached the postseason without winning even 10 games. Goodell has responded to this reality by offering seconds. Under his proposal, with one additional wild-card team per conference, 10-6 Arizona would have made the NFC playoffs. In the AFC, however, the 8-8 Steelers would've beaten out the 8-8 Jets, Ravens and Dolphins.

But maybe the NFL wants it this way. Maybe the extra playoff games, in the name of fan interest, are simply attractive cover for the real motive: to recoup the \$765 million the NFL agreed to pay players in the concussion lawsuit settlement, a number the judge on the case preliminarily rejected for being too low. Or maybe, because injuries so dominate the league, more playoff teams are necessary, since a lower playoff bar indirectly softens the impact of broken bodies on a team's fortune.

If these are the NFL's reasons, so be it, but these reasons do not promise a quality winning product. It is one thing to watch, quite another to be fooled.

Super Bowl 'picks' not only about odds but play calls

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
January 21, 2014

DENVER -- John Lynch watched the AFC Championship Game live at Sports Authority Field at Mile High on Sunday and didn't notice anything remarkable about Denver Broncos

receiver Wes Welker colliding with the New England Patriots' Aqib Talib beyond the cornerback's injury.

So when he heard New England coach Bill Belichick rail against Welker, a former Patriot, Lynch went back to tape of the game. Lynch, who played briefly in the 2008 preseason for Belichick at the end of his 15-year career as a safety, thought if Belichick was so adamant the play was dirty, maybe there was something there.

"Did I miss something? Did I not see something?" Lynch told USA TODAY Sports. "I think it was nonsense. I don't think Wes is that type of player. I think that's a play you see 15 or 20 times in a game, particularly when they're playing this type of tight, man-to-man coverage that they were seeing."

Offensive players call it a rub play, as Welker was doing Sunday. Defensive players call it a pick.

But it's all the same idea. An offensive player, usually a wide receiver or a tight end, will try to disrupt a defensive player from covering another offensive player and breaking up man coverage. If the offensive player makes contact before his teammate catches the ball, the official can call offensive pass interference.

"I always tried to make it look like I was going to run into him, and then you move out of the way at the last second. You're just trying to slow that guy down if you can, you're trying to make him go over the top," recently retired slot receiver Brandon Stokley told USA TODAY Sports.

"You always try to get away with as much as you could, but there's a fine line there. It's just like defensive guys. They're going to hold and grab you as much as the refs let you get away with. It's the same for receivers. You're going to pick and rub and make as much contact as you think the refs will let you get away with."

With the Seattle Seahawks defense built upon strong man-coverage from the backs, and the Broncos' offense so reliant on the short passing game, expect to see plenty of these crossing routes and picks in the Super Bowl.

"So much of football is set up to the offenses. Where you can, and no one does it better than Seattle, do your damage as a defensive player within those five yards. You want to make it as disruptive as possible," Lynch said.

There are plenty of legal pick plays. If an offensive player isn't moving and the defensive player crashes into him -- as in a pick in basketball -- that's clean. If the contact is an incidental collision, that's allowed as well. Once the ball is caught, contact is legal and considered a block.

When Jim Daopoulos, a former NFL referee and now an officiating analyst for NBC Sports, slowed down the Welker-Talib play, he said it appears Welker arrived "a few frames early." In real time, it was a judgment call by the officials, who did not throw a flag.

"Let me tell you, the contact by Welker was not of an unnecessary type -- it would never be called unnecessary roughness, or a personal foul," Daopoulos said. "It was legal contact. The question is, was it before the ball was touched, or was it after the ball was touched? It is very difficult for an official watching that at regular speed to determine that. That just has to be a gut call on his part."

Stokley, who played in Patriots coordinator Josh McDaniels' offense and was a teammate of Peyton Manning in Denver and with the Indianapolis Colts, said Welker probably should have been flagged. But he said Welker's intent was clear, to try to force Talib to break off his route as he trailed Demaryius Thomas.

What Stokley saw was a classic pick play, one of the staples of the Broncos' and Patriots' offenses.

Belichick believed Welker wasn't trying to get open and that Welker was trying to take out Talib.

Stokley called Belichick's comments "shocking" and was adamant that Welker was not trying to hurt Talib.

"When you see man-to-man coverage you try to run picks and rubs. That's just part of what you do to get open," Stokley said. "I've played in Josh's offense, I've played with Peyton -- and no one ever taught me to run full speed into a defensive guy. Even if someone did try to teach me that, I would look at him like he was crazy. It doesn't make sense. I'm not going to go full speed into a guy and try to hit him as hard as I can because I'm going to hurt myself."

Bell: In 15th season, Broncos' Champ Bailey finally gets Super Bowl shot

Jarrett Bell
USA TODAY Sports
January 21, 2014

DENVER — Champ Bailey's eyes were watery; his voice cracked.

He showed all of the signs of a man choked up by emotion.

"I lost my voice, really," the veteran Denver Broncos cornerback insisted to USA TODAY Sports. "You know I keep my emotions in check. But all of this hasn't sunk in yet."

This was late Sunday, in a euphoric locker room after the Broncos secured a trip to Super Bowl XLVIII, after Bailey and teammates celebrated on the field before a sea of raucous fans dressed in orange.

Bailey, 35, has been in the NFL for 15 seasons. He's going to the Super Bowl for the first time.

It was rather cool to catch him in that moment. This has been a trying season for Bailey, once one of the NFL's most gifted athletes. Including the playoffs, he has played in just seven games this season while battling through a foot injury.

Time flies. I vividly remember when he broke into the NFL with Washington in 1999 as the hotshot seventh overall draft pick who eagerly became an understudy to eventual Hall of Famer Darrell Green. It was special how he picked Green's brains — in film sessions, on the practice field and about the playbook.

Now it's Bailey passing on knowledge to young cornerbacks.

I told him about the text-message that came in after the game from a giddy mutual friend of ours in D.C., urging me to give him a hug for her.

Rather than hug, we laughed.

Last week, she texted and told me not to call Bailey "Gramps."

He laughed at that, too.

"Everybody likes to tease me like that," he said last week, coming off the practice field.

Age is nothing but a number and something to use to make a point to the young teammates.

"When I tell guys I've been in the NFL for 15 years and never been to the Super Bowl, they understand," Bailey said as he dressed Sunday, widening his eyes for emphasis. "You've got to take advantage when you have the opportunity."

Bailey kept believing he would get to a Super Bowl, but he also came to grips with the possibility that he could wind up like Tony Gonzalez — the tight end who just wrapped up a brilliant, 17-year career — as a distinguished player who never reached the ultimate game.

"Tony, that's Example No. 1 in that category," Bailey said.

There is no shortage of aging Broncos relishing their first chance to win a ring.

The Broncos have 13 active players on their 53-man roster who are in their 30s.

Toward the end of Sunday's game, defensive end Shaun Phillips, 32, shared a moment on the sideline with cornerback Quentin Jammer, 34, to reflect. Phillips and Jammer, who played for years together with the San Diego Chargers, are also headed to their first Super Bowl.

"We just said, 'It's been a long time,'" Phillips said. "Especially for a guy like that. He's one of my best friends. He's been playing for 12 years. I've been playing for 10."

Phillips and Jammer played on several contending Chargers teams repeatedly upset in early playoff exits.

"When playing this game, you play to win Super Bowls," said Phillips, who joined the Broncos this season as a free agent.

"You want to make as much money as you can, go to as many Pro Bowls as you can. ... But you also want to win as many Super Bowls as you can."

Drawing even less attention is the path of 12th-year linebacker Paris Lenon, a 36-year-old on his eighth NFL team. And Lenon's tally is not padded by his two stints with the Green Bay Packers, nor by his time in NFL Europe with the Amsterdam Admirals or the stint in the XFL with the Memphis Maniax.

Then there's Wes Welker. He's been to two Super Bowls, but the New England Patriots came up short both times.

"I even told them last week," said Welker, 32. "I went to the Super Bowl in '07. I thought I'd be back the next year and the next year after that. It's hard. You've got to seize the opportunity."

No need to remind Bailey.

His résumé includes 12 Pro Bowls and selection to the All-Decade Team of the 2000s. And during an AFC divisional playoff game in 2006, he picked off a Tom Brady pass in the end zone and ran it back 100 yards — the longest non-scoring interception return in NFL postseason history.

The next week, Denver was upset at home in the AFC title game by the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Until now, Bailey never came close again to go to a Super Bowl.

"Now that it's here," he sighed, "I've got to go win this thing."

Could Peyton Manning retire if Broncos win Super Bowl?

By Jim Corbett
USA TODAY Sports
January 21, 2014

Peyton Manning put together the greatest season by a quarterback in NFL history but has one more bit of history to achieve — becoming the second-oldest QB to win a Super Bowl.

Super Bowls are won more than ever by top-tier quarterbacks, as six of the last seven Super Bowl MVPs have been signal callers. Yet only five of 47 Super Bowls have been won by a quarterback 35 or older.

Hall of Fame and former Denver Broncos quarterback John Elway, the executive who persuaded Manning to join the Broncos in March 2012, was 38 years, seven months and three days old when Denver defeated the Atlanta Falcons in Super Bowl XXXIII.

Elway retired that spring.

Could the same go for Manning? He will be 37 years, 10 months and nine days old Feb. 2, when the Broncos take on the Seattle Seahawks in Super Bowl XLVIII in East Rutherford, N.J.

"I don't think he'll walk away after this year, because Peyton has such a great perspective on the history of the game and he's in that argument for best quarterback of all time," Super Bowl XXXIV MVP and NFL Network analyst Kurt Warner told USA TODAY Sports on Tuesday. Warner was 37 years, seven months and 10 days old when he and the Arizona Cardinals lost Super Bowl XLIII to the Pittsburgh Steelers.

"All great players want to do something that really separates them. That is why I don't see him walking away."

Indeed there is more history to be made for Manning if he beats the Seahawks for his second Super Bowl title. Four passers (Terry Bradshaw, Joe Montana, Troy Aikman and Tom Brady) have at least three Super Bowl victories.

And even Elway found it hard to walk away after winning a Super Bowl.

"I think Peyton would like to finish like John Elway, winning back-to-back Super Bowls," Warner said. "Go back to back, and he can go, 'They'll remember me for this.'"

Warner is unique in that he did retire after playing in a Super Bowl at an advanced age. Rich Gannon, the league MVP in 2002 for the Oakland Raiders, lost Super Bowl XXXVII to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers at 37 and played two more injury-plagued seasons.

"I imagine winning a Super Bowl would be a good way to end a career as a veteran quarterback," Gannon told USA TODAY Sports. "But I don't think many people go into the Super Bowl thinking that."

"I really can't fathom Peyton thinking about that after throwing for 55 touchdowns and almost 5,500 (5,477) yards. He enjoys the game too much, the competition and the preparation. And the Broncos are an elite team."

There is something about elite achievement in the twilight that is more rewarding.

"Peyton knows he's in the fourth quarter," Manning's father, Archie, told USA TODAY Sports. "You do cherish it more when you know it's almost over."

Gannon gets it. He reached the NFC Championship Game as a rookie on the Minnesota Vikings but didn't make the Super Bowl until 15 years later.

"I remember playing my first year in Minnesota and just thinking, 'Oh, this is how it is going to be every year,'" said Gannon, who is an analyst for CBS and SiriusXM radio. "Then, in 2000 with the Raiders, I got hurt in the AFC Championship Game. The next year, we lost the tuck rule game. Then you finally get there and realize how hard it is."

Gannon says he thinks Manning's experience will separate him from second-year counterpart Russell Wilson.

"This is Peyton's third Super Bowl, and he's all about preparation," Gannon said. "He's probably already talked to (brother) Eli (Manning) about MetLife Stadium, about the field, the wind. He'll look at common opponents the teams have played, the AFC South and the Giants."

"Because no one prepares like Peyton. He's amazing."

Ex-Broncos wide receiver says marijuana helped him deal with pain

By Mike Foss
USA TODAY Sports
January 21, 2014

Former Denver Broncos wide receiver Nate Jackson spoke with HBO's Real Sports about the benefits of using marijuana in favor of opiate-based painkillers when dealing with injuries during the season.

"You're always battling your body," Jackson said in the interview which airs Tuesday. "The job description is slamming yourself into another human being as hard as you can."

Jackson played six seasons in the NFL with the Broncos and argues that marijuana actually better equipped him to deal with the rigors of the day-to-day grind in the NFL.

Former NFL punter Chris Kluwe shares Jackson's view, and submits that most players are using pot to cope with pain, not to get high.

"It's everywhere," Kluwe said, "In the locker room when guys used to talk about it it wasn't about 'I'm going to go get blazed and tear up the town' it was like, 'Yeah I smoked a bit and passed out on the couch because I felt like crap after practice.'"

Despite the legalization of recreational marijuana in Washington and Colorado, the NFL has still outlawed its use among players. Another former Broncos wide receiver, Hall of Famer Shannon Sharpe, doesn't think the policy will change any time soon.

"That will never happen. Not in our lifetime, because of the way kids follow what NFL players do," Sharpe said in 2012. "If you look at Little League football, kids who play want to wear the pink towels and shoes for breast cancer awareness ... they follow everything the big guys do."

2013 Broncos: At Seattle

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 21, 2014

Next up: Seattle. In Week 2 of the preseason, another event had the eye of Seattle residents: HempFest. (Ironic, no?) Hundreds of residents gathered in a nearby park to celebrate their favorite herb. On the field, Seattle defensive back Brandon Browner was a wrecking ball. Browner won't play in the Super Bowl, however, having been suspended by the NFL for violating the substance-abuse policy.

Turns out, this was a Super Bowl preview.

The game: Seahawks 40, Broncos 10 (preseason).

The date: Aug. 17.

The site: CenturyLink Stadium, Seattle.

The photos: CenturyLink Stadium, a tribute to the "12s" in the field-level tunnel, John Elway photograph in the press box, quarterback Russell Wilson.

The notable: Champ Bailey left the locker room on crutches. Derek Wolfe was taken off the field in an ambulance. Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie was still recovering from an ankle injury. Yes, it was that kind of a season.

2013 Broncos: At San Francisco

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 21, 2014

With the Broncos heading to the Super Bowl, let's try something different in this space.

Over the next 6-7 days, or until I fly to New York on Monday, I'll have blog posts reviewing each game of the Broncos season. Looking back on previous columns through this NFL season, I found it interesting to see the state of the Broncos, week-to-week. The team we'll see at the Super Bowl followed a wild road to get there.

Plus, my cell phone might be on its final leg, but it's packed with photos that otherwise would go to waste (like the America's Cup zooming through San Francisco Bay, bottom right). So let's use 'em!

We'll start in San Francisco, site of the first preseason game.

The game: Broncos 10, 49ers 6.

The date: Aug. 8 (preseason).

The stadium: Candlestick Park.

The notable: San Francisco linebacker Aldon Smith narrowly missed a big hit on Peyton Manning, causing Broncos Country to shudder.

Broncos will wear orange jerseys in Super Bowl XLVIII

By Will Brinson
CBSsports.com
January 21, 2014

We already know the Super Bowl match-up. It's the Broncos and Seahawks in one of the most-anticipated pairings we've head in quite some time. But the important question is what jerseys will they be wearing?

We know the answer for Denver: they're rocking orange jerseys.

That's been the home color for Denver most of this season and they're 9-1 now while wearing that color, having lost only to the Chargers at home on Thursday night. The AFC is the "home" team this year, so the Broncos get first choice.

Denver switched to orange as their home jerseys before the 2012 season, the same time they signed Peyton Manning. Since then, the Broncos are 14-2 at home. Needless to say they like the orange.

However, the Broncos haven't fared well in the Super Bowl while wearing orange jerseys. They're 0-3 in Super Bowls while wearing orange, having lost to the Cowboys in Super Bowl XII, the Redskins in Super Bowl XXII and the 49ers in Super Bowl XXIV.

Denver's previous two Super Bowl wins came while wearing blue (against the Packers in Super Bowl XXXII) and white (against the Falcons in Super Bowl XXXIII).

We'll see if they can buck the trend.

Report: Adam Gase pulls out of Browns job, focuses on Super Bowl

By Will Brinson
CBSsports.com
January 21, 2014

The Cleveland Browns coaching search continues to be a factory of awkwardness. The Browns are the only team without a coach in place for the 2014 season, having fired Rob Chudzinski after a single season and failing to replace him with anyone yet. Their search took another blow Tuesday as Broncos offensive coordinator Adam Gase withdrew his name from consideration.

CBS Sports NFL Insider Jason La Canfora reported last week that Gase was by far and away the Browns top candidate.

But Gase, who is just 35 years old, won't be their next head coach.

His intentions in pulling out of consideration, per Mike Klis of the Denver Post, is to focus on the Super Bowl.

Denver's slated to play the Seahawks, who feature another one of the Browns top candidates in defensive coordinator Dan Quinn.

It's not hard to blame Gase for staying put either. Cleveland fired their coach after one year. Winning there is difficult and there's no quarterback in place. The Broncos are about to play for the Super Bowl. Gase works with Peyton Manning and he's as hot a name as there is in football. If he's smart he'll keep parlaying his position into a cranked up rumor mill and his choice of jobs.

Billboard in Denver takes shot at Richard Sherman

By Andy Nesbitt
FOX Sports
January 21, 2014

Billboard trash talk is back!

That's a sarcastic exclamation point.

You just knew we'd see something "mean" from folks in either Seattle or Denver in the two weeks leading up to Super Bowl XLVIII.

Our own Mike Garafolo was driving around the Denver area Tuesday when he saw this:

See what they did there? Broncos CB Champ Baily is classy and Seahawks CB Richard Sherman (perhaps you've heard a thing or two about Sherman since Sunday's NFC title game) is classless.

Our own Clay Travis had a great take on the "classless" debate Monday.

Quick question: Isn't it kind of classless to call someone classless on a billboard?

I don't know about you but I'm over the whole billboard trash-talking fad. We've seen so much of it the past few months. It just seems hacky at this point. Right?

Super Bowl luxury suite prices reaching astronomical figures

FOX Sports
January 21, 2014

Get ready for pay through the nose.

If you've got a couple of spare dollar bills laying around, you might be in luck -- you only need a million more to see the Super Bowl from the comfort of a luxury suite at MetLife Stadium.

The cold-weather Super Bowl locale has fueled interest in the indoor seating option, and one optimistic seller has listed a full-service, climate-controlled suite for the Feb. 2 Seattle-Denver matchup at \$1,019,000 on the secondary ticket market, according to the New York Post. Other sellers' prices passed the \$500,000 mark.

Prices for luxury suites at Super Bowl XLVIII are more than double those of suites at previous Super Bowls, and given the weather forecast, the comfort is coming at a premium. Temperatures are predicted to be close to freezing for the 6:30 p.m. kickoff.

"The weather is a big factor," Seatgeek.com spokesman Connor Gregoire said. "It's going to be cold, and being inside comes at a higher price."

Adding to the price inflation is suite availability. MetLife Stadium has 220 suites, which go for about \$350,000 for the season, but a number of the rooms were reserved for NFL and Super Bowl decision-makers, who sell them to sponsors or other high rollers for upwards of \$400,000.

The cheapest suite price among online sellers Monday was \$318,000 for a room in the upper "nosebleed" area.

Regular ticket prices for the game have spiked, too, with the cheapest seat in the stadium going for \$2,096 on the secondary market. Face value for those seats is between \$800 and \$850.

Cleveland Browns have yet another NFL assistant coach turn down their head-coaching job

By Frank Schwab
Shutdown Corner / Yahoo! Sports
January 21, 2014

There are 32 NFL head-coaching jobs. Even the worst of the lot is very valuable. They're almost impossible to get. And almost all of them pay more than what any NFL assistant coach makes.

And the Cleveland Browns can't get anyone to be their head coach.

Denver Broncos offensive coordinator Adam Gase, a 35-year-old who had never risen above position coach until this season, has told the Browns he isn't interested according to the Denver Post's Mike Klis.

The line about "concentrating on the Super Bowl" seems like a "I have to stay in and wash my hair" type excuse. The Browns are the last team that has a coaching vacancy. They would surely have waited two more weeks if Gase was their guy. But Gase would rather pass altogether. The Super Bowl excuse just softens the blow.

And now, Browns fans have every reason to feel pretty miserable.

At least three assistants have said no thanks to the Browns. Arizona defensive coordinator Todd Bowles, a respected coach who has been in the NFL for almost 20 years without getting a shot at a permanent head-coaching job, said no. Patriots offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels, who is from Ohio and should feel fortunate to be getting considered for a second chance after an absolute debacle in Denver, pulled out of consideration. And now Gase, with all of one year as a NFL coordinator, doesn't want it either.

Again, there are only 32 of these jobs in the world. No coach can be sure he'll ever get a shot at one. And multiple assistants have turned Cleveland down. The Browns can't exactly go into a press conference after they finally hire a coach and pretend he was their first choice, can they?

The fallout from firing Rob Chudzinski after just one year might be much stronger than first realized. The Browns fired Chudzinski after one season despite injury issues at quarterback and trading running back Trent Richardson early in the season. They canned him without any great reason, at least none that have been revealed publicly.

This is a franchise with a good defense, some good pieces on offense (tackle Joe Thomas, receiver Josh Gordon and tight end Jordan Cameron among them), the fourth overall pick of the draft and another first-rounder thanks to the Richardson trade. Cleveland has a tremendous fan base that is desperate for a winner. It should be a fairly attractive job. And nobody seems to want it.

Last week Browns owner Jimmy Haslam told fans through an open letter to not worry. Well, worrying seems to be the proper reaction now.

Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning's Omaha love leads to airline offering deal to visit the city

By Anwar S. Richardson
Shutdown Corner / Yahoo! Sports
January 21, 2014

Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning has increased Omaha's popularity recently.

Frontier Airlines is optimistic that means people are ready to visit the largest city in Nebraska.

The Denver-based airline decided to piggyback Manning's constant reference to the city during football games as he calls out "Omaha" at the line of scrimmage before most plays, and is offering a one-way special to Omaha until Jan. 23. Customers will have until May 21 to take their trip.

How much are the tickets? Only \$48, in honor of Super Bowl XLVIII, which will take place on February 2.

College students, spring break is right around the corner, and you wouldn't want to miss on this opportunity.

If Manning's infatuation with Omaha is not enough motivation to visit the city, the airline is also offering one-way fares between Denver, Kansas City, Oklahoma City or Salt Lake City for XLVIII dollars.

However, none of those cities have Dolce, OpenTable.com's Diner's Choice Winner in 2013, like Omaha does. So why bother?

Manning definitely has a thing for Omaha. Frontier Airlines hopes after watching all those Broncos games this season, a vacation to Omaha is subliminally calling to you.

Matchup of Peyton Manning, Russell Wilson intriguing on many levels

By Don Banks
SI.com
January 21, 2014

Delving into the intriguing matchup of quarterbacks in Super Bowl XLVIII ...

- Denver's Peyton Manning, 37, will be the second-oldest quarterback to start a Super Bowl and Seattle's Russell Wilson, 25, will be the sixth youngest. But the 12-year age gap between them (and in reality it's almost 13 at 12 years and eight-plus months) is the largest for any of the previous 47 Super Bowl quarterback matchups.

Before Manning-Wilson, the record was held by Super Bowl XLIII's pairing of Arizona's Kurt Warner and Pittsburgh's Ben Roethlisberger. Warner was 11 years older than Roethlisberger in that game five years ago, with Warner being 37 on gameday and Big Ben just 26.

MORE COVERAGE: Sherman explains outburst | Super Bowl poised to be battle of league's finest

Not surprisingly, the 13-year (or 14-year) gap in NFL experience between Manning and Wilson is also the Super Bowl's largest ever when it comes to starting quarterbacks. Technically Manning is a 16-year NFL vet, having entered the league in 1998. But he didn't play whatsoever in 2011 due to his neck injury, so he has 15 seasons worth of experience on his resume. Wilson, of course, has just two, having been drafted in 2012.

To put their age gap another way, when Manning played his first regular-season NFL game in September 1998, Wilson was still almost three months shy of his 10th birthday. By comparison, not even five years separate Peyton Manning from his well-accomplished little brother, Eli, of the Giants.

- Coincidentally enough, Peyton Manning now has very large connections to both the Super Bowl's oldest starting quarterback and its third oldest, or in other words the two names that surround him on that chart.

Denver's John Elway, who is Manning's boss these days as the Broncos football czar, was the oldest starter. He was 38 and seven-plus months when the Broncos beat Atlanta in Super Bowl XXXIII in South Florida in January 1999 -- the final game of his Hall-of-Fame, 16-year career.

Could there be any symmetry at work here, with Elway winning his second ring and then retiring a Denver icon, 16 years after he entered the league as the first overall draft pick? And, of course, Elway was property of two organizations in the NFL, the Colts and Broncos.

Manning, who is shooting for his second Super Bowl ring, entered the league as the first overall draft pick 16 years ago and has been property of two organizations in the NFL. Yep, the Colts and Broncos. Does anyone else have chills?

The third-oldest starting quarterback in Super Bowl history was Johnny Unitas, who was 37 and eight-plus months when he opened the game for the Colts against Dallas in Super Bowl V in January 1971. Manning is about two months older than Unitas was then, and of course they're linked by being the two greatest quarterbacks in Colts franchise history, as well being the only two starting QBs to win a Super Bowl as a Colt.

Strangely, just like Manning two years ago with his neck issues, Unitas had a lost season late in his career and then came back two years later to start a Super Bowl. In the 1968 preseason, Unitas injured his throwing elbow and barely played that season, appearing in only five games and throwing 32 passes, plus a fourth-quarter relief stint of Earl Morrall in the Colts' epic Super Bowl III loss to the New York Jets.

Elway, Manning, Unitas. Not a bad little club to be in.

- Both Manning and Wilson joined their new teams in the spring of 2012, so that provides a good line of delineation to compare them. Here's the first thing that jumps out at you: They're the two winningest quarterbacks in the league since then, even if won-loss records for QBs don't really convey that football is the ultimate team game.

Manning is 26-6 in the regular season over 2012-13, with a 2-1 playoff record that makes him 28-7 overall (.800). Wilson is 24-8 in the regular season, with a 3-1 playoff record, making him 27-9 as a starter (.750).

Manning has thrown a ridiculous 92 touchdowns and 21 interceptions in his 32 regular-season games as a starter in Denver, with seven more touchdowns and three picks in the postseason. Wilson has 52 touchdowns and just 19 interceptions in his 32 regular-season games, with four more scoring passes and one more interception in the playoffs. Those are spectacular stats for a second-year veteran.

In his record-breaking 2013 season, Manning is now up to 59 touchdown passes and 11 interceptions, including the postseason. Wilson has less than half as many touchdown passes, 27, but fewer interceptions, nine.

- Manning is trying to become the first quarterback to start and win a Super Bowl for two different teams, something only Kurt Warner (St. Louis, Arizona) has had a shot to do. Craig Morton started Super Bowl V for Dallas and Super Bowl XII for Denver, but lost both games.

Wilson is trying to become the first Seattle Seahawks' quarterback to win a Super Bowl, with Matt Hasselbeck losing to Pittsburgh in the franchise's only other Super Bowl trip, eight years ago in Detroit.

Wilson will be the sixth quarterback to start a Super Bowl in either his first or second NFL season, but only three of those previous five won the game: Warner in 1999 with the Rams, Tom Brady in 2001 with the Patriots, and Ben Roethlisberger in 2005 with the Steelers.

But no second-year quarterback has ever entered the Super Bowl with more career wins than Wilson's 27, which includes his three playoff victories.

- There have been 19 other matchups of Super Bowl quarterbacks where one has previous Super Bowl experience and one does not, as is the case this year with Manning and Wilson. The results are almost evenly split, with the quarterbacks possessing Super Bowl experience holding a 10-9 edge in that situation.

It took until Super Bowl IX between Pittsburgh and Minnesota for a Super Bowl novice quarterback to beat a Super Bowl veteran, with the Steelers and Terry Bradshaw besting Fran Tarkenton and the Vikings.

But lately -- and Seattle fans should love this -- all the momentum has been on the side of the first-time Super Bowl quarterbacks. The past three matchups to break down that way went to the newbies, with the Giants' Eli Manning beating Tom Brady and the Patriots in 2007, the Saints' Drew Brees defeating Peyton Manning and the Colts in 2009, and the Packers' Aaron Rodgers besting Roethlisberger and the Steelers in 2010.

Just stand back and watch all that gambling money flood to the Seattle side of the ledger.

- The Seahawks and Broncos have met only three times in the regular season since the onetime AFC West rivals went their separate ways in 2002's realignment, with their most recent showdown being in 2010, before Manning and Wilson were on the scene. But these two did tangle in Week 2 of the preseason this year, in one of those glorified scrimmages we all love so much.

For what it's worth, both quarterbacks played a substantial amount for the preseason, with Seattle rolling to a 40-10 rout of the visiting Broncos. Wilson went the entire first half against Denver, completing 8-of-12 passes for 127 yards and a pair of touchdowns without an interception.

Manning played well into the second quarter and was having some legitimate success against Seattle's first-team defense when he left the game: 11-of-16 for 163 yards, with an 11-yard touchdown pass to Wes Welker, no sacks or interceptions. Denver had 209 yards of offense in the first half, but it was 27-7 Seattle when Manning called it a night and 33-7 at the half.

- Wilson will be the fifth quarterback to make his Super Bowl debut at age 25, and there's some decent karma that goes with being on that list. Joe Namath was 25 when the Jets shocked the Colts and registered the win that put the AFL on equal footing with the NFL in Super Bowl III. Joe Montana was 25 when he won his first of four rings with the 49ers, edging out the Bengals in Detroit in Super Bowl XVI.

Two other 25-year-old quarterbacks lost their first Super Bowls, but both of them came very close to winning. The underdog Rams and Vince Ferragamo led the mighty, three-time Super Bowl Steelers at the end of three quarters in Super Bowl XIV, but couldn't close the deal. And last year, the 49ers' Colin Kaepernick had the ball in his hands at the Ravens' 5-yard line with a chance to win it in the final two minutes, but couldn't make the one play to give San Francisco the comeback victory.

As for the five quarterbacks who started the Super Bowl when they were younger than Wilson, only the 24-year-old Brady (against St. Louis) and the 23-year-old Roethlisberger (against Seattle) earned wins. Miami's Dan Marino, 23, lost to San Francisco; Miami's David Woodley, 24, lost to Washington; and New England's Drew Bledsoe, 24, lost to Green Bay.

- There was a brief window in late November or early December this season when Wilson started getting some mentions in the media as a legitimate competitor to Manning for the MVP award that seemed -- and is -- a foregone conclusion for No. 18.

But then Wilson in his last four games of the season threw just four touchdowns to go with three interceptions, topped 200 yards passing in a game just once and had three of his six lowest-rated passing games of the season. In addition, Seattle was just 2-2 over that span, falling from 11-1 to 13-3. Bye, bye, MVP bid.

Manning over those same four weeks? Despite playing only 3½ of those games, he threw for 14 touchdowns against one interception, for 1,352 yards, and had three games where his passer rating was 107.8 or higher. Of course, along the way he also broke Tom Brady's 2007 record of 50 touchdown passes in a season, and Drew Brees' 2011 record of 5,476 passing yards in a season.

Make room on the mantle for MVP award No. 5.

Greatest NFL feuds: Richard Sherman vs. Michael Crabtree, T.O. vs. Everyone and more

By Chris Burke
SI.com
January 21, 2014

The NFC title game between the 49ers and Seahawks unfolded as an instant classic. Yet, all that's been discussed in the hours since Seattle wrapped its Super Bowl berth has been the heated feud between Richard Sherman and Michael Crabtree.

Sherman welcomed the world into that tiff with an epic postgame rant aimed at Crabtree. The Seahawks' star cornerback also shot a choking gesture in the direction of 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick. Crabtree responded on Twitter, questioning all the love for Sherman's game. And Sherman then attempted to explain himself — and air some more grievances — on TheMMQB Monday.

No doubt, Sherman's behavior will be front and center in the pre-Super Bowl media blitz. And with both Sherman and Crabtree expected back for their respective teams in 2014, there ought to be more fuel tossed on that burgeoning 49ers-Seahawks NFC West rivalry.

The situation also gives us cause to take a look back at some of the more infamous feuds in NFL history, with Crabtree's coach playing a lead role in two:

Jim Harbaugh vs. Pete Carroll: This one dates back to when Harbaugh and Carroll were the coaches at Stanford and USC, respectively, though their recent clashes in the San Francisco-Seattle rivalry have done nothing to ease the tensions. The highlight here came in 2009, as Harbaugh's Stanford squad ran up a 55-21 blowout victory over Carroll's Trojans. Once the game ended, after the Cardinal had attempted a two-point conversion already up 27 in the fourth quarter, Carroll asked Harbaugh pointedly, "What's your deal?"

Carroll took the Seattle job prior to the following season; Harbaugh landed in San Francisco one year later, in 2011.

Jim Harbaugh vs. Jim Schwartz: The Handshake Heard Round the World, and another spot for the fiery Harbaugh on the list. This feud may have been a one-and-done proposition — Schwartz was fired by the Lions before the pair had a chance to relive their infamous 2011 moment, in which an elated Harbaugh dove a little too eagerly into a postgame handshake after his 49ers won in Detroit, setting off an annoyed Schwartz. The now ex-Lions coach chased Harbaugh down and went chest-to-chest with him, touching off a brief skirmish near the Ford Field tunnel.

The pair appeared headed for another encounter in this season's wild-card playoff round, but the Packers took the NFC North and hosted Harbaugh instead.

Tony Romo vs. the Tony Romo narrative: There is hard statistical evidence that Tony Romo is a top-10 quarterback in the NFL. (Did you know that he's No. 5 all time in QB passer rating?) Good luck telling that to Romo's critics, who watch each close Cowboys game waiting for Romo to collapse. Every so often, he obliges in spectacular fashion, like in Dallas' crushing Week 15 loss to Green Bay — the Packers rallied from 26-3 down and stole a victory late off a Romo interception.

In eight seasons as the Cowboys' full-time starter, Romo has posted a record of 18 games above .500 (63-45) in the regular season. But he's just 1-3 in the playoffs and his team has not been to the postseason since 2009.

Terrell Owens vs. Everyone: Owens butted heads often with coach Steve Mariucci when the two were together in San Francisco. Then, he had multiple dust-ups with Andy Reid in Philadelphia, the last of which led to a team-imposed suspension and later Owens' release. He got into an argument with WRs coach Todd Haley in Dallas, constantly irritated fans and the opposition with his bombastic celebrations, and had more than a few memorable press conference moments.

Keyshawn Johnson vs. Jon Gruden: Johnson and Gruden won a Super Bowl together in 2002, Gruden's first year with Tampa Bay. Johnson was off the roster before the subsequent season ended, after repeated run-ins with his head coach. The Buccaneers deactivated Johnson for the final six games of the 2003 season.

"I didn't want to be there," Johnson, now an ESPN analyst, admitted during a 2011 episode of Sunday Morning Countdown.

"I didn't want to be in the environment. No matter we had just won a championship, and I was playing fine the year that I got deactivated, I was doing great. In fact, we had a chance to go to the playoffs. But it was just something about the way I was being coached, talked to, dealt with. Just didn't want to be there."

Wes Welker vs. Bill Belichick: This one jumped into the spotlight again last Sunday, when Welker's Broncos downed Belichick's Patriots in the AFC title game ... and Welker injured New England corner Aqib Talib with what appeared to be a borderline-illegal pick.

"One of the worst plays I've seen," Belichick said of Welker's hit. "It was a deliberate play by the receiver [Welker] to take out Aqib. No attempt to get open."

That is just the latest hiccup in what became a rocky relationship between Welker and Belichick as Welker's lengthy stay with the Patriots wound down. Welker said in a 2013 issue of Sports Illustrated that Belichick took to berating him in front of his teammates.

"It was just kind of hard," Welker said in August, "one of those deals where you have to endure him, put up with him ... But he does it to everybody, it's the way he is."

Eric Mangini vs. Bill Belichick: Friends turned enemies, with Spygate playing a central role. Mangini coached under Belichick, even following him from New York to New England when Belichick took over the Patriots' gig. But Mangini later took a job as the Jets' head coach, and Belichick responded by locking Mangini out of Gillette Stadium when he attempted to clear out his office.

The duo then embarked on an icy rivalry as coaching combatants — one that really came to a head in 2007 when a Patriots staffer was caught taping the Jets' defensive signals. Rumors then swirled that Mangini helped Roger Goodell and the NFL formulate the Spygate case against New England. The drama ended with Belichick being fined \$500K, the Patriots taking a \$250K hit and the franchise losing a draft pick.

Mike Vanderjagt vs. Peyton Manning: Vanderjagt pinned the blame for Indianapolis' 2002 playoff loss squarely on Manning's shoulders. The current Broncos' QB responded during an interview at the Pro Bowl: "We're talking about our idiot kicker who got liquored up and ran his mouth off."

Vanderjagt remained with the Colts for three more seasons, and in 2003 finished a perfect 40-for-40 on field goals spanning the regular season and playoffs.

Buddy Ryan vs. Mike Ditka: The Super Bowl champion 1985 Bears still hold a place as one of the greatest teams in NFL history. That they accomplished such success with a civil war splitting their coaching staff remains remarkable.

Ditka, the team's head coach, had a very bitter and rather public discord with Ryan, the team's defensive coordinator. With Ditka overseeing the offense and Ryan running the show on defense — usually with very little crossover between the two — there was anger in the air throughout that magical campaign. Practices were notoriously feisty, as the coaches implemented a no-holds-barred approach.

Ryan later provided one of the league's most memorable moments when, as defensive coordinator in Houston, he punched Oilers offensive coordinator Kevin Gilbride on the sideline during a game.

Don Shula vs. Mercury Morris: Special mention here, as this is the only known feud in NFL history to be settled by the use of voodoo. As Sports Illustrated's legendary Dr. Z recalled in the article celebrating Shula as 1993's Sportsman of the Year, Morris was so upset over being asked to split playing time at running back that he attempted to curse his head coach before the 1974 playoffs.

"I went to see this Haitian root man, King Solomon, on 54th and 12th," Morris told Dr. Z. "I told him, 'Shula's trying to kill me. I don't want him hurt, but I want him off me.' I see that you're laughing, but believe me, you'd go down to his place, and

you'd see lawyers there and people like that waiting for him to put some roots on somebody.

"The night before we left for Oakland, I was out in the backyard at 2 a.m., saying chants. I made a Shula doll and put it in a box and buried it. Before the game I was chewing roots on the field. In my shoe I had a piece of paper with a spider web on it, and written underneath was the word confused.

"During the game our starting cornerback, Tim Foley, got hurt, and they put in Henry Stuckey, the third-stringer, instead of Lloyd Mumphord, the regular backup. Cliff Branch ran by Stuckey for a 72-yard touchdown. On the bench everyone's asking our defensive coordinator, Vince Costello, 'Why is Stuckey in there?' Then someone said, 'He must be confused.'

"That was the game where Clarence Davis caught the pass that beat us in the last minute. Afterward our left tackle Wayne Moore, who knew what I'd done, said to me, 'Damn, baby, you should have waited till next week so we could have gotten another check.'"

Adam Gase withdraws his name from Browns' coaching search

By Chris Burke
SI.com
January 21, 2014

In terms of wooing an AFC Championship Game offensive coordinator to the head coaching gig in Cleveland, the Browns finished 0-for-2.

Denver's Adam Gase withdrew his name from consideration for the Browns' job, Mike Klis reported Tuesday. Earlier, the Patriots' Josh McDaniels did the same thing, though Klis noted that Gase's desire to focus on the upcoming Super Bowl was his reason for turning down the possible opportunity.

As a result, the Browns have turned their attention more fully to current Bills and ex-Jets defensive coordinator Mike Pettine — he will have his second interview with Cleveland's front office Tuesday night, according to ESPN's Adam Schefter. Seattle defensive coordinator Dan Quinn, who like Gase has a pretty important ballgame to prepare for, also has interviewed once with the Browns.

Cleveland is the lone team in the league without a head coach at the moment, after Tampa Bay, Washington, Detroit, Minnesota, Houston and Tennessee all plucked new coaches from various spots. In the court of public opinion, the delay has registered as a bit of a black eye for the downtrodden Browns, who have had three coaches in the past five seasons; Rob Chudzinski lasted just one year before being pushed out.

How damaging is all of this in the grand scheme of things? Obviously, a lot of that answer lies not only with what coach the Browns eventually settle on but how he performs early. Any potential free-agent targets of Cleveland could be turned off by the presumed indecision there.

SI's Don Banks, however, cast a vote for the Browns' drawn-out process last week.

As quaint as it might sound in the instant-gratification world in which we live, the Browns deserve kudos for actually showing some restraint in the pursuit of their next coach. Because the speed dating that passes for the NFL head coaching interview and hiring process these days is growing more frenzied all the time. ... Maybe if the Browns had taken a little bit more time to make their coaching decision last year, they wouldn't have felt it necessary to can Chudzinski one year into a four-year contract. Live and learn, I guess.

The recent decisions by Gase and McDaniels may actually tell us more about both of their prospects than about the Browns' issues. McDaniels is believed by some to be

in line to succeed 61-year-old Bill Belichick as the Patriots' head coach whenever Belichick opts to call it a career.

The 36-year-old Gase, meanwhile, could find himself as one of the most highly-sought coaching commodities after the 2014 season. He has excelled in a record-setting first season as the Broncos' offensive coordinator — aided, no doubt, by the presences of Peyton Manning and a loaded receiving corps. By this time next year, Gase should be wrapping his second season calling plays for Denver's Manning-led attack, and it is unlikely that the Broncos offense will suffer too much assuming their QB returns.

Somewhat surprisingly, Gase never really emerged as much of a candidate for the open jobs in Washington and Detroit, where franchise quarterbacks are believed to be in place. Houston, which could land a top QB with the No. 1 pick in this year's draft, also did not turn much attention in Gase's direction.

All the teams that went coach hunting this offseason, including Cleveland, could regret missing out on Gase down the line.

In the meantime, the Browns still find themselves in need of a coach — with the combine, free agency and the draft approaching rapidly on the calendar.

Denver Broncos can win Super Bowl XLVIII with pace, diversity

By Bucky Brooks
NFL.com
January 21, 2014

The Super Bowl XLVIII matchup between the Denver Broncos and Seattle Seahawks pits the NFL's No. 1 offense against the league's top defense. Denver has steamrolled over elite defenses throughout the season, but the Seahawks' D presents a unique challenge with the depth and talent of their personnel.

Adam Gase and the Broncos' offensive coaching staff will take the full two weeks crafting an ideal scheme to exploit any potential weaknesses of Seattle's unit. With that in mind, I took a look at the All-22 Coaches Film of both teams' games. (I'll look at the keys to a Seattle Seahawks victory next week.)

Here are four ideas Denver should consider in game planning:

1) The Broncos should play at a faster tempo.

Any time Peyton Manning is directing an offense, the unit is going to operate at a breakneck pace to take advantage of the wily veteran's ability to control the game at the line of scrimmage. Manning is one of the few quarterbacks in the NFL capable of calling his own plays; he is masterful at deciphering coverage at the line and checking to the ideal play to exploit the vulnerable area of the scheme. Manning manipulates tempo to keep the defense in personnel packages that favor the Broncos, while eliminating defensive substitutions/rotations and wearing down the opponent's front seven. The warp-speed pace also threatens defensive communication, thus limiting the calls available to the opposing coordinator. With physical fatigue and spotty communication spawning defensive breakdowns at every level, the Broncos scored the most points in NFL history during the regular season.

Against the Seahawks, the Broncos would be wise to operate at a frenetic pace to keep Pete Carroll from effectively playing matchup football, particularly along the defensive front. The Seahawks feature one of the NFL's deepest and most athletic D-lines, with a host of big, sturdy run stuffers (Red Bryant, Tony McDaniel and Brandon Mebane) flanked by a stable of explosive pass rushers (Chris Clemons, Michael Bennett, Cliff Avril and Clinton McDonald) adept at wreaking havoc on the pocket on obvious throwing downs. Carroll cleverly tweaks his ideal defensive personnel, based on circumstance, to put his unit in the best position to defend each play.

Here are a few examples of how Carroll shuffles personnel up front:

In the screengrab below, taken from Seattle's Week 17 win over the St. Louis Rams, the Seahawks have Bryant, McDaniel and Mebane on the field, anticipating a run on first down. This defense is an "under" front, which presents a five-man line at the point of attack:

St. Louis did indeed hand the ball off to Zac Stacy on that play, and the result -- as detailed in this full video clip -- is a 1-yard loss, with McDaniel stuffing the Rams running back.

With three big-bodied defenders who are nearly impossible to move off the line of scrimmage, the Seahawks tied for seventh in run defense during the regular season.

The following screengrab comes from Seattle's very next defensive series in that Rams game, but it showcases the Seahawks' NASCAR personnel group. The unit features Avril, Bennett, McDonald and Clemons, which is the team's most athletic set of pass rushers. Seattle deploys this look with the Rams facing third-and-7:

With four athletic rushers on the field to harass the passer, the Seahawks consistently knock down the quarterback or force quicker throws, playing into the hands of the "Legion of Boom" secondary and allowing Seattle to field the NFL's top-ranked pass defense. On the above third-down play -- as detailed in this full video clip -- Rams QB Kellen Clemens quickly uncorks a deep ball to a well-covered receiver, with the pass predictably falling incomplete.

To keep Carroll (and defensive coordinator Dan Quinn) from putting their ideal personnel on the field in key situations, Manning must keep his foot on the gas. By drastically reducing the time between plays, Peyton can exploit the weaknesses of the defensive personnel on the field, while also bringing fatigue into play. This is the premise of every hurry-up offense, and it's something the Broncos should utilize to keep the Seahawks' defense from wreaking havoc in MetLife Stadium.

2) Stick with pick plays and crossing routes from bunch formations.

The Seahawks are one of the few teams in the NFL that employs press-man defense on the majority of downs. The "Legion of Boom" features a set of long, rangy defenders capable of mugging receivers at the line of scrimmage, essentially nullifying the passing game outside the numbers. To combat this, the Broncos will turn to their extensive package of pick plays and crossing routes from bunch/tight formations. These concepts create free releases for receivers at the line of scrimmage, as the tightly aligned formations open up pick and rub possibilities. Additionally, crossing routes force defenders to avoid moving picks and/or communicate potential switches on the fly. With any mistake on the back end resulting in a receiver running free across the field, this is an effective way for the Broncos to create big-play possibilities against the Seahawks' aggressive secondary.

In Denver's Championship Sunday win over the New England Patriots, one particular crossing route took out Pats CB Aqib Talib and drew the ire of Bill Belichick. Regardless, don't expect the Broncos to stray from this tactic. Let's look at some of the pick and rub concepts that the Broncos have employed throughout the season.

In the following screengrab, pulled from Denver's Week 8 win over the Washington Redskins, Wes Welker and Demaryius Thomas are lined up in tandem, set to immediately cross paths:

On the snap, Thomas breaks inside and runs into Welker's man, allowing Welker to bust open underneath:

The result is an easy touchdown gallop for Welker.

In the screengrab below, taken from Denver's thrilling 51-48 OT win over the Dallas Cowboys in Week 5, Welker is in a stack alignment behind Eric Decker. Welker's running a return route against man coverage to take advantage of a possible switch by the two Dallas defenders:

When the corner jumps outside to take away a flat route, Welker plants hard and reverse-pivots to get into the open void:

Once again, Manning hits Welker for six.

In the next screengrab, taken from the Broncos' Week 11 win over the Kansas City Chiefs, the team rolls out three pass catchers to the right, with Decker positioned alone on the left. Denver is running a double-shallow-cross concept, with Decker and Welker crossing at five yards and tight end Joel Dreessen running a dig over top:

The Chiefs are in man coverage, but the various crossing routes create confusion among defenders, leaving Decker wide open running across the middle of the field:

This catch-and-run effort nets 33 yards for the Broncos.

As the various examples illustrate, the Broncos' pick-play package routinely exploits man coverage all over the field. It's tough for defenders to fight through the picks or clearly communicate switches, leading to big plays on the perimeter. With the Seahawks intent on heavily incorporating press-man, these plays loom large. How well Seattle defends these concepts could be the biggest key to the game.

3) Peyton Manning must be willing to take a "dink and dunk" approach.

For all of the attention paid to the Seahawks' man-coverage scheme, the Broncos will also face Cover 3. At times, the Seahawks fall back into a three-deep, four-underneath zone scheme designed to take away the deep ball on the perimeter. Although the use of four verticals is a viable solution against the coverage, the Seahawks' willingness to press the outside receivers reduces the threat of the deep ball to the outside part of the field. Now, that doesn't mean Manning shouldn't attempt to take his shots down the field, but the veteran must display the poise and patience to make underneath throws against umbrella coverage.

Looking at several of the Seahawks' games, the defense feasts off quarterbacks who attempt to fit the ball into tight windows against their suffocating zone. Seattle's linebackers, in particular, are adept at making terrific breaks on the ball from their assigned spots. Part of their success comes from keeping vision on the quarterback throughout their drops and accurately reading the patterns of the offense. Consequently, the Seahawks' linebackers fly to the football to log interceptions, pass break-ups or big hits on receivers.

In response, Manning must quickly and decisively take the open underneath receiver when his primary option is unavailable. Although this strategy will not stretch the Seahawks' coverage vertically, it will force the defense to defend the entire field. The Broncos would be wise to work in various spread and empty formations that can create huge passing lanes for Manning on quick-rhythm routes. By using wide-open formations, Denver can help Manning identify possible mismatches on the perimeter, giving him high-percentage throws to lean on against a fierce pass rush.

Additionally, the quick-rhythm passing game allows the Broncos to get the ball into the hands of their most explosive playmakers in space. With a pair of physically imposing wideouts (Thomas and Decker) and a slot man who possesses extraordinary short-area quickness (Welker), Denver has the ammunition to execute an assortment of catch-and-run plays that produce positive gains before the defense can close on the ball. Most importantly, these plays will allow the Broncos to pick up first downs and wear down Seattle with extended drives -- just like they've been doing to defenses all postseason.

4) Denver can't ignore the running game.

The passing game is obviously the strength of the Broncos' offensive attack, but Manning can't fall into the trap of a one-dimensional game plan. Staying within a 55:45 pass-run ratio is critical in this game, because it will prevent the Seahawks from extensively using their NASCAR package to load up the pass rush. As I mentioned before, Seattle is a matchup football team intent on rotating personnel to exploit advantageous circumstances. So, it is important to mix it up and keep Carroll from getting a feel for what's coming down the pike.

Now, I certainly understand the challenges of running against a formidable defense, but the attempts are more valuable than the actual production in this game. The Seahawks are big and physical at the line of scrimmage; it is hard to move Mebane and Bryant off the ball on power runs. Additionally, the speed and quickness of the Seahawks' linebackers makes it nearly impossible to turn the corner on perimeter runs. However, I've watched the San Francisco 49ers and Arizona Cardinals craft winning game plans around run-heavy strategies against Seattle, relentlessly pounding the ball up the middle despite minimal gains. Persistent ground-and-pound tactics allowed those teams to control the tempo and wear down the Seahawks' imposing front line by the fourth quarter. If the Broncos take those results to heart and muster 25-plus carries on Super Sunday, it is quite possible that Manning and Co. will hoist the Lombardi Trophy at day's end.

Adam Gase pulls out of Cleveland Browns' search

By Marc Sessler
NFL.com
January 21, 2014

The Cleveland Browns won't need to wait around for Adam Gase.

NFL Media Insider Ian Rapoport reported Tuesday that the Denver Broncos offensive coordinator thanked the team for their interest, but made it clear that he plans to withdraw his name from consideration in order to focus on a Peyton Manning-led squad preparing to play in Super Bowl XLVIII, according to a source informed of Gase's thinking.

We saw this one coming from a mile away. Rapoport has said for weeks that Gase would need a perfect situation to pry him away from Denver. Just 35, the Broncos play-caller is one of the hottest young coordinators around, but another year working with Manning should position him well for the job of his choice down the road.

It's an unsettling development for the Browns, widely believed to have fallen hard for Gase while also showing interest in Seattle Seahawks defensive coordinator Dan Quinn and Buffalo Bills defensive play-caller Mike Pettine. Both of those candidates are on the radar for a second interview this week, Rapoport was told.

We still wouldn't be surprised to see another mystery candidate emerge from the haze of this search, but if that doesn't happen, the Browns -- long believed to be seeking an offensive-minded innovator -- might wind up with a coach from the other side of the ball.

Stay tuned, Cleveland.

Peyton Manning skipped Seahawks meeting during free agent tour

By Gary Myers
New York Daily News
January 22, 2014

Peyton Manning and the Broncos were a perfect match when he was a free agent two years ago. He was looking for a team good enough to win a Super Bowl, and after seeing enough of Tim Tebow, the Broncos were looking for a quarterback good enough to win one.

Pete Carroll will try and stop Manning from completing his dream season in Super Bowl XLVIII on Feb. 2 at MetLife Stadium just as he tried to stop Manning from signing with the Broncos in 2012 by making a strong push for him to join the Seahawks instead.

Considering how good the Seahawks have been for the two seasons Manning has been in Denver, there's a pretty good chance if he signed in Seattle he would have made it to the Super Bowl with them, too, especially with the 'Hawks defense being the best in the NFL.

Carroll found out it was a lot easier to recruit high school kids to play at Southern Cal than it was to convince one of the best quarterbacks in NFL history to play for him.

After the Colts cut Manning coming off his fourth neck surgery, his first visit in March of 2012 was to Denver.

His next stop was Arizona. While he was in Denver, he also met with the Redskins coach Mike Shanahan.

Carroll said two years ago that Manning had called him during the process to talk about signing with Seattle.

So, while Manning was with the Broncos, the Seahawks took their shot, following up on what they believed had been interest by Manning. In a story about the Manning recruiting process back then, Sports Illustrated reported that Carroll and Seahawks GM John Schneider arrived unannounced by plane at an airport in nearby Englewood, Col.

Manning was told that Carroll and Schneider were in town and would like to meet with him on the plane, on his flight to Arizona or have him visit in Seattle. Manning apparently was no longer interested in the Seahawks, because he declined the invitation and Carroll and Schneider never got to meet with him. It was certainly worth the trip even though it didn't pay off.

"We took an approach with this just like we've taken at every other opportunity that comes down the line to help your football team. We go for it," Carroll said back then.

He said they were "just competing to try to find a way and we just couldn't pull it off at that time. We had to take a shot at that. It didn't work out for us there."

The Seahawks then signed free agent Matt Flynn and drafted Russell Wilson in the third round. Flynn didn't work out but Wilson is in the Super Bowl in just his second season.

Manning's free agents travels took him from the Broncos to the Cardinals and then back to Indianapolis to meet with the Dolphins. He worked out for the Broncos and 49ers at Duke and for the Titans in Tennessee. The Broncos, 49ers and Titans were the three finalists. The Jets were immediately rejected by Manning when they inquired about his interest.

Archie Manning said in the locker room Sunday after the Broncos beat the Patriots that on the weekend Manning visited the Broncos and Cardinals, he had two more visits planned on the trip.

"He called me and said, 'I can't do this,'" Archie said. "He said, 'They are going to have to come to me or get another plan.'"

Manning then went to Duke, where David Cutcliffe, his former offensive coordinator at Tennessee and now Duke's head coach, was supervising his workouts. Eleven days after he visited the Broncos, he signed with them. And now he faces Carroll and the Seahawks in the Super Bowl.

SUPER BOWL SATURDAY?

Just a thought: Can you imagine if the metropolitan area gets hit with a snowstorm on Feb. 2 like it did Tuesday? It could lead to the first Super Bowl not played on a Sunday. If there is a blizzard coming in, the Super Bowl could be pushed up to Saturday or back to Monday or later, depending on when it's due to arrive.

According to Weather.com, the conditions in East Rutherford on Tuesday at 6:30 p.m., kickoff time for Super Bowl XLVIII : 14 degrees with a wind chill of 1 and 10 mph winds gusting to 18 mph with seven inches of snow already on the ground and snow accumulating rapidly. The NFL is praying Mother Nature gets this out of her system and brings nothing more than flurries on Super Bowl weekend.

'HAWKS BACK IN TOWN

The Seahawks and Broncos will arrive on Sunday at Newark Airport. The team hotels are in Jersey City. The Broncos are due to land about 3:30 p.m. with the Seahawks due in about 7 p.m....It will be the first time in exactly six weeks that the Seahawks are making a road trip. Their last flight was Dec. 15 when they travelled home from their 23-0 victory over the Giants.

Their final two games of the regular season were at home, then they had the bye and their two playoff games were at home.

The Broncos also played at MetLife this season, beating the Giants 41-23 the second week of the season. The last time both Super Bowl teams played a regular season game at the Super Bowl stadium was in 2009 when the Saints and Colts each played in Miami. That was also the last time both No. 1 seeds made the Super Bowl before the Broncos and Seahawks did it this year. Before that, it was the Bills vs. Cowboys in Super Bowl XXVIII following the 1993 season.

BRONCOS ON THE BOAT

Here's a Super Bowl first: The Broncos media sessions on Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Thursday will take place on board the Cornucopia Majesty yacht (it can accommodate up to 1,200 guests), which is docked at their team hotel, the Jersey City Hyatt. The NFL was looking to do something different with Manhattan as a backdrop and also to maximize space at the team hotel. In the past, interviews have often taken place in a big tent rather than a hotel ballroom. Let's hope the Hudson River is calm or it's going to be the first time a Super Bowl team has to treat its players for seasickness, even if the boat is to remain docked.

NO ENEMY TERRITORY

At least with the Broncos winning, the Jets don't have to worry about Bill Belichick and the Patriots practicing at their facility next week. The Broncos will practice at the Jets complex and the Seahawks will be at the Giants. The Jets facility is definitely more extravagant than the Giants except for one thing: The Giants field house is heated and the Jets field house is not. It does get pretty cold in there. It will be interesting to see if Carroll and Fox elect to practice all week outdoors in the cold or take their teams inside. Also, if it snows on the big practice days of Wednesday or Thursday next week: Will they elect to have their teams get used to messy conditions in the event it snows on game day or will they decide to go inside because either they can't get all their work done in the snow or they don't want to risk injury? One day after the Patriots were eliminated, Bill Belichick was asked if he was a fan of the cold weather Super Bowl. "I'm just trying to coach the Patriots," he said. "I'm not trying to schedule games or be a Super Bowl coordinator."

EXTRA POINTS

The last time John Fox was going into the final year of his contract, Panthers owner Jerry Richardson didn't fire him or extend him. Fox went into the 2010 season as a lame duck, finished 2-14 and was fired. Elway then hired him in Denver. Fox's four-year contract is up after the 2014 season and I

don't think getting an extension will be an issue... After Sunday's AFC Championship Game, the three Manning brothers – Peyton, Eli and Cooper – and their father Archie celebrated the Broncos victory at John Elway's restaurant. Elway was also there... According to NFL.com, extra points have a 99.1% success rate since 2004. Roger Goodell told NFL Network that the league could eventually do away with the extra point and adopt a new system. "There's one proposal in particular that I've heard about," Goodell said. "It's automatic that you get seven points when you score a touchdown, but you could potentially go for an eighth point, either by running or passing the ball, so if you fail, you go back to six." This actually is a pretty good idea. It will speed up the game and reduce injury risk. Coaches will go for the extra point the same way they go for two now. They will opt for the automatic seven unless the score dictates in the fourth quarter than they attempt to get the eight points.

Super dream: Seahawks QB Peyton Manning

By Jerry Brewer
Seattle Times
January 21, 2014

It's just a silly what if? two years later.

Russell Wilson is cozy in Seattle, having established himself as the young franchise quarterback the Seahawks were once desperate to find. Peyton Manning is breaking records in Denver and defying earlier fears that a neck injury would end his career. This is your Super Bowl XLVIII quarterback matchup, the legend versus the wunderkind. And to think, they could've been teammates.

Remember two years ago when the Seahawks, before drafting Wilson, were ready to recruit Manning? Coach Pete Carroll and general manager John Schneider were sitting on a plane parked at a Denver airport, hoping to convince Manning to talk with them after he visited the Broncos.

Manning declined. The Seahawks moved on, signing Matt Flynn as a free agent, only to watch Wilson surprisingly win a competition for the starting quarterback job several months later.

Looking back, the Seahawks made a crazy, all-in championship play by going after Manning. And despite the unrequited love, they made a championship play anyway by acquiring Wilson, a third-round selection in 2012 that might go down as one of the greatest draft picks in NFL history.

But what if Manning had hopped on that plane? What if he had been wowed by the recruiting pitch of Carroll and Schneider? What if Manning and Wilson had formed the most intense, studious quarterback room ever?

Hey, the Super Bowl is still 11 days away. Let's have some fun with this.

According to my imagination — a very reliable source — it could've gone three ways.

Scenario 1: Preparation is in the reputation

Overwhelmed that Carroll presented him with a signed copy of "Win Forever" and the opportunity to befriend Carroll's pal, Will Ferrell, Manning spurns Denver's five-year, \$95 million contract offer and accepts \$5 million less to join the Seahawks.

"Pete convinced me that I should take one for the team and save the franchise a little money for my coach's next contract negotiation," Manning says. "The phrase I remember from him was, 'Always compete — and Pete's gotta eat.'"

In return for his monetary sacrifice, Manning makes Carroll shelve his run-first philosophy. The wide receivers are so giddy they offer to take paycuts to make up for the money Manning left on the table.

During the NFL draft in April, the Seahawks select Wilson in the third round. Asked if there will be a competition between Manning and Wilson, Carroll says, "Absolutely. Russell will be given every opportunity to be the first grab Peyton's helmet and carry it onto the practice field for him."

After one extraordinary practice from Wilson, Manning overhears the rookie quarterback say one of his favorite lines to the media: "The separation is in the preparation." But Wilson remains the backup.

Manning laughs.

"Welp," he says, "in this case, the separation is in the reputation."

Manning goes on to lead the Seahawks to Super Bowl XLVIII.

Short quarterbacks remain unaware of the possibilities.

Scenario 2: Competition, a pain in the neck

Manning signs with the Seahawks, but the franchise is still enamored with Wilson. After a rookie minicamp practice, a reporter asks if Wilson can develop into a serviceable backup for Manning.

"Backup?" Carroll asks mockingly. "The competition is on."

Reminded that the Seahawks just gave Manning a mega contract, Carroll says, "But wouldn't it be cool to make history and bench a guy who makes \$90-something million? What kind of message would that send to our team and the league? What free agent could turn down the chance to get paid more to work less?"

Wilson wins the competition even though Manning completes 88 percent of his passes during the preseason.

"Yeah, but have you seen Peyton run the read option?" Carroll asks. "Slower. Than. Carson. Palmer. And. Matt. Leinart."

Later, it is revealed that Carroll was also upset because Manning kept calling audibles, changing run plays to pass plays.

During a confrontation, Carroll asks Manning, "What about our philosophy? What about the formula?"

"Coach, I've had four neck surgeries, and those were less painful than running your offense," Manning replies.

Wilson goes on to lead the Seahawks to Super Bowl XLVIII.

Charlie Whitehurst calls Manning and says, "Look on the bright side: Nobody pays backup quarterbacks like the Seahawks."

Scenario No. 3: The ultimate two for one

After an intense quarterback competition, Carroll decides to carve out roles for both Manning and Wilson.

"It's no big deal," the coach says. "We rotate our defensive line. What's so special about the quarterback?"

Manning and Wilson split reps in practice. Whenever they are guaranteed to throw the ball, Manning plays. Wilson gets the nod whenever the Seahawks call a run play or need the quarterback to evade pass rushers by running 50 yards in every direction before throwing a deep pass. Somehow, this strategy works.

Manning and Wilson make the Pro Bowl. The Seahawks lead the NFL in rushing and passing. They pull off an amazing Triple Crown. They are the league's best offense, the best defense and its most penalized team.

Manning and Wilson go on to lead the Seahawks to Super Bowl XLVIII.

Against Tim Tebow and the Denver Broncos.

Denver's Danny Trevathan bounces back after big drop

By Ryan Divish
Seattle Times
January 21, 2014

Danny Trevathan winces slightly when his memorable mistake in the first game is mentioned. A stout 240 pounds of muscle stacked on more muscle, the thought still stings him a little.

It's not quite as painful as a collision with a charging fullback. Reliving the memory is more like pressing on a blister that won't heal — annoyingly uncomfortable.

Perhaps a win in Super Bowl XLVIII will provide the permanent healing salve. Until then, the second-year linebacker will try not to let one regrettable moment define him or his outstanding season.

A sixth-round draft pick out of Kentucky in 2012, Trevathan has blossomed into a consistent playmaker for the Broncos. He leads the team with 128 tackles (87 solo). He has forced four fumbles and picked off three passes.

Still there's that blister of a memory that won't fade, rubbing and irritating all that is good.

"Life is a game," he said. "It's ups and downs, highs and lows. But I like my lows. Because without my lows, I never know what my highs are."

For the first few days of the season, Trevathan was all over the highlight shows and not in a good way. Thanks to the fury of a 16-game schedule and the passion of the playoffs, fans may not remember. But Trevathan can't forget what happened in the season opener against the Baltimore Ravens on Sept. 6 at Sports Authority Field.

A touchdown passing barrage from quarterback Peyton Manning put the Broncos up 42-17 early in the fourth quarter. The deficit forced the Ravens to go for it on fourth-and-one from their 29-yard line. Baltimore quarterback Joe Flacco dropped back and tried to zip a pass to running back Ray Rice, who was running an out route.

Trevathan pounced on the play, jumping the route and stepping in front Rice. He grabbed Flacco's pass as if it was meant for him and headed in the other direction. The end zone was less than 30 yards away. The only thing in his mind was how he'd celebrate his first career touchdown in front of a national TV audience.

Then it happened.

In his haste to celebrate, Trevathan dropped the football a tick too soon. At game speed, it wasn't noticeable that he jettisoned the football before crossing the goal line. It rolled harmlessly into the end zone. But in the NFL, all scoring plays are reviewed. At slow motion, it was easy to see Trevathan actually dropped the ball on the 1-yard-line.

It was ruled a touchback.

"I saw those lights, and I'm there — I'm going to go ahead, get my little dance in, do whatever," Trevathan said.

On the sideline, Trevathan's celebratory smile disappeared into a look of heartbreak and embarrassment. Defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio tore into him with something more than a scolding. Teammates tried to comfort him. Sure the Broncos won the game 49-27, but it didn't ease the humiliation.

"That was fairly embarrassing," head coach John Fox quipped.

It's easy to joke about now.

"Everybody, you're going to get knocked down," Fox said. "Sometimes setbacks are setups for bigger things to come. I think in his case, it was a learning experience."

Leon Lett of the Cowboys and DeSean Jackson of the Eagles made similar gaffes in the past. So Trevathan wasn't the first, just the most recent.

He didn't hide. He answered the questions, swallowed the teasing and put on a good face. But he made a vow to atone.

"I promised myself I would never put my team in a place like that," he said. "I'll make up for it. I'll do whatever I've got to do. I promised those who were laughing at me, I'm going to make them suffer. I'm going to be here and grind it out, I'm going to pick it off next time, do whatever I've got to do to go ahead and get that off my back."

That moment came in week five in a road shootout with the Dallas Cowboys. Tied at 48 with less than two minutes remaining, the Broncos' defense needed to get a stop. It wouldn't be easy with Tony Romo in the midst of a career passing day. But on second down, Trevathan intercepted a Romo pass over the middle with a terrific diving grab. It would set up Matt Prater's game-winning field goal moments later.

"He's a terrific young player," Fox said. "He has worked very hard. It means a lot to him. Like all young players, every day they're learning more and more about what it means to be a pro. He's had a terrific year."

While the dropped ball memory hasn't gone away, the Broncos' success and Trevathan's newborn daughter, Danoir Louise, have helped him move on.

"It helped me grow," he said. "It taught me to be a little bit more humble. I've settled down now. I had a little baby girl that I love and she's just helped me get myself together, helped me grow a lot and get prepared for the rest of this season."

Broncos anticipate physical Super Bowl against Seahawks

By Don Ruiz
The News Tribune
January 21, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, COLO. — The Denver Broncos haven't yet begun detailed preparations for their Super Bowl opponent, the Seattle Seahawks.

But they spoke respectfully Monday about qualities they don't need much film study to understand.

"I know they're a great football team," coach John Fox said. "I know that Pete Carroll and his staff do a terrific job. I think they've kind of been the 1-seed all through the NFC, at least through the last six, eight weeks. I know they got after us pretty good when we got out there in the preseason. So we haven't dug into them too in-depth yet, but any time you reach the world championship game, I think usually the opponent's pretty good."

The Broncos and Seahawks met in an exhibition game Aug. 17 at CenturyLink Field. Seattle won, 40-10. The stakes will be considerably higher Feb. 2 at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., when the teams meet in Super Bowl XLVIII.

Still, Fox said some things can be taken from the earlier meeting.

"I think you take something away from every experience," he said. "It will be something we look at, I'm sure they look at. We've got plenty of time to look at a lot of tape."

Asked what he knows about the Seahawks, Denver linebacker Danny Trevathan instantly named running back Marshawn Lynch.

"I played running back a little bit, so I grew up watching him a little bit," Trevathan. "(Their offense is) athletic all around the board. If they get the running game going, they can really get going. And they play within their scheme; they play with the people that they have, they use them to their strengths. ... They can get going anytime. We've got to be prepared for anything. It's going to be a good Super Bowl."

Tight end Julius Thomas was asked about finding space in the Seahawks secondary.

"It's the Super Bowl, so it's going to be tough," he said. "Nothing's going to come easy. I'm pretty sure you're going to see two teams playing as physical as possible."

The Broncos will play in their seventh Super Bowl after a 26-16 win Sunday over the New England Patriots.

Among the things Fox liked about his team that day was how it quickly transitioned its thoughts to the one game remaining in its season. .

"I think we were pretty good, even in the locker room after the game," he said. "This group has been pretty focused. They've responded well, and I don't expect that to change moving forward."

DEFENDING WELKER

Fox chose to steer mostly clear of the controversy that arose Monday when New England coach Bill Belichick called receiver Wes Welker's crossing-route collision with Patriots cornerback Aqib Talib "one of the worst plays I've seen."

"It was a deliberate play by the receiver to take out Aqib," Belichick said of Welker, who played for Belichick and the Patriots from 2007-12. "No attempt to get open. I'll let the league handle the discipline on that play, whatever they decide."

Hours after Belichick gave his remarks, Fox said he hadn't heard them and wouldn't comment. However, he added, "I know Wes Welker is a great player, high integrity. I can say we were not doing anything with intent."

With further questioning, Fox added "I think that most pass routes that we run, there's an attempt to get open," and he added that it would be an unlikely job for Welker considering he suffered a pair of concussions this season.

Welker said postgame Sunday that he had no intention of taking out Talib.

"It was one of those plays where it's kind of a rough play and I was trying to get him to go over the top, and I think he was thinking the same thing and wanted to come underneath and we just kind of collided," Welker said Sunday. He was not made available to media Monday. "It wasn't a deal where I was trying to hit him or anything like that."

Teammates also came to Welker's defense.

"I've known Wes for quite a while now, and he's definitely not that kind of guy," Thomas said.

Super coaches

Coaches who have led two franchises to the Super Bowl:

Coach Franchises Super Bowls

Don Shula Colts III

Dolphins VI, VII*, VIII*, XVII, XIX

Dick Vermeil Eagles XV

Rams XXXIV*

Dan Reeves Broncos XXI, XXII, XXIV

Falcons XXXIII

Bill Parcells Giants XXI*, XXV*

Patriots XXXI

Mike Holmgren Packers XXXI *, XXXII

Seahawks XL

John Fox Panthers XXXVIII

Broncos XLVIII

* = Super Bowl winner

Up next: Denver Broncos

By Clare Farnsworth

Seahawks.com

January 21, 2014

This season's Super Bowl will feature the NFL's most-prolific offense (Broncos) and the league's stingiest defense (Seahawks), and be played in the elements at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey.

A look at the Seahawks' opponent in Super Bowl XLVIII, the Denver Broncos:

When: Sunday, Feb. 2, 3:30 p.m. PT, MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford, N.J.

Record: 13-3 during the regular season to win the AFC West and secure the conference's No. 1 seed in the postseason.

Postseason: Beat the San Diego Chargers 24-17 in the divisional round; beat the New England Patriots 26-16 in the AFC Championship game.

Where they rank: No. 1 on offense (15th rushing, 1st passing) and No. 19 on defense (7th rushing, 27th passing) during the regular season

TV: FOX (Q13), with Joe Buck, Troy Aikman, Pam Oliver and Erin Andrews

Radio: 710 ESPN and 97.3 KIRO FM, with Steve Raible, Warren Moon and Jen Mueller

Series: Broncos lead 34-18 in the regular season, including a 31-14 victory in the last meeting on Sept. 19, 2010; Seahawks won the only meeting in the postseason, 31-7 in a 1983 wild-card game – the first playoff game in franchise history.

Star power: Peyton Manning. Is there anyone in the NFL that shined any brighter this season? As Seahawks coach Pete Carroll put it Monday, "Nobody has ever taken more command of the game than he has, at this stage of his career." It starts with Manning's pre-snap routine, which has made Omaha famous as he waves his arms, and points in several directions; flaps his arms, and points some more; steps toward the line, only to retreat; and repeats "Omaha. Omaha" while doing it. But it's what happens after the ball is snapped that has made Manning famous. This season, he broke the NFL single-season records for passing yards (5,477) and touchdown passes (55), while completing 68 percent of his passes (450 of 659) and fashioning a 115.1 passer rating. He also had a 112.7 passer rating in the fourth quarter and a 101.8 passer rating on third downs, making him the only QB in the league with a 100-plus rating in all three categories. Then there's the fact that he had four receivers catch at least 10 TD passes during the

regular season – Demaryius Thomas (14), Julius Thomas (12), Eric Decker (11) and Wes Welker (10). Carroll labeled that situation “crazy.” Also crazy: When Manning threw his first NFL pass in 1998 for the Indianapolis Colts, Seahawks QB Russell Wilson was 9 and Carroll was in his second season as coach of the New England Patriots.

Unsung hero: Danny Trevathan. The Broncos also play defense. In fact, they have allowed the fewest average rushing yards (64.5) during the postseason in their wins over the Chargers, who averaged 122.8 during the regular season; and Patriots, who were coming off a 234-yard rushing performance against the Colts in their divisional playoff game. And Trevathan, the weak-side linebacker who was a sixth-round draft choice in 2012, not only led the Broncos with 129 tackles during the regular season, his 88 solo tackles were four more than the total by second-leading tackler Wesley Woodyard, the middle linebacker.

On the spot: Demaryius Thomas. Say what? The 6-foot-3, 229-pound wide-out has had his way with cornerbacks all season, catching 92 passes for 1,430 yards and those aforementioned 14 touchdowns. But Thomas has not faced a cornerback with the lengthy, athleticism and ability to get into opponents’ heads like Richard Sherman, the Seahawks’ two-time All-Pro corner. As Broncos coach John Fox put it on Monday when asked about Sherman, “First off, he’s a just a wealth of talent. He is big, physical, strong, fast – all the things you look for athletically.” In the Broncos’ 15 victories, including a seven-catch, 134-yard effort in the AFC Championship game, Thomas averaged 6.3 catches. In their three losses, he caught four passes in each game. On Feb. 2, it will be the best receiver on the NFL’s No. 1-ranked offense versus the best corner on the NFL’s No. 1-ranked defense.

Burning question: Offense? Or defense? That is the question. The Broncos scored more points than any team in the league (606) during the regular season, with Manning throwing the ball here, there and seemingly everywhere and Knowshon Moreno also running for 1,038 yards and 10 TDs. The Seahawks allowed the fewest points in the league (231) during the regular season and then held the Saints to 15 points and the 49ers to 17 in the postseason. So, offense? Or defense? “That statement that defense wins championships has been out there for a long time,” Carroll said. “I don’t know that it ever went away. We’ll find out.”

Numbers to know: 0, sacks allowed by the Broncos in two playoff games. ... 30, points allowed by the Broncos in the fourth quarters of their two playoff games. ... 3, points allowed by the Broncos in the first three quarters combined of their two playoff games. ... 6, third-down receptions by Julius Thomas, the Broncos’ tight end, to lead all receivers in the postseason. ... 13, games in which the Broncos scored

30-plus points during the regular season, including at least 50 three times. ... 2, games in which the Broncos have scored fewer than 27 points in the postseason.

Familiar faces: Backup C Steve Vallos played for the Seahawks in 2008-09. QB coach Greg Knapp was the Seahawks' offensive coordinator in 2009. Defensive quality control coach Chris Beake was an assistant coach with the Seahawks in 2008-09. Pro scouting coordinator A.J. Durso worked for the Seahawks from 2005-09.

The last word: "We've got to be prepared for this. This is a powerhouse. Their defense is live, their offense is live. They can get going anytime. We've got to prepare for everything. It's going to be a good Super Bowl." – Broncos LB Danny Trevathan

Adam Gase tells Browns to go on without him

By Darin Gantt
ProFootballTalk.com
January 21, 2014

If the Browns were waiting until after the Super Bowl to try to talk to Adam Gase, they can proceed.

The Broncos offensive coordinator has told them he doesn't want to be considered for their still-vacant head coaching job, via Mike Klis of the Denver Post.

Whether he was a favorite for the job or not, it still creates an embarrassing appearance for a franchise that was left at the altar by Chip Kelly last year. Gase had previously told the Browns he didn't want to interview until the playoffs were over, and now he's telling them no thanks.

Gase's work with Peyton Manning during a record-breaking season has obviously raised his profile, apparently to the point he thinks he can do better next year or in the future.

The Browns, meanwhile, will have figure out a way to save some face in addition to the ongoing coaching search.

Upon Further Review: Broncos vs. Patriots

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
January 21, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- So you're worried about the chilly conditions that are a near-certainty for Super Sunday. And you're probably wondering about the wind speed, and whether the Broncos' showdown with the Seattle Seahawks will take place in gale-force gusts like the ones that blew the Denver offense off-course in Foxborough, Mass. on Nov. 24.

Put those concerns on pause. The Broncos are different now than they were then.

The offense has more ways to move the football. The last two games, it has controlled the clock, limited the total number of possessions and extended the ones they had. Their scoring drives in the postseason have used 40 percent more plays and take 69.4 percent more time off the clock than they did in the regular season.

And the offense showed Sunday that if you give them a wide opening underneath to prevent outside and intermediate passes on third down, it is willing to go to the ground and expose you there. The Broncos' paths to victory continue to multiply, and although the rest of the offseason that begins in two weeks will be welcomed, it's a bit of a shame that this offense can't continue evolving and finding different passages to optimal production.

"EFFECTIVE BALANCE"

It's wise to refer back to those two words offered by offensive coordinator Adam Gase, because the Broncos' offense was never going to have what used to define balance between the run and pass: a 50-50 split.

The Broncos have run on 44.0 percent of their postseason snaps -- 4.1 percent higher than their regular-season rate and 2.7 percent above the league regular-season average. Some of this is due to game situation; the next postseason deficit the Broncos face will be their first this winter.

But a successful conversion of a third-and-10 at the New England 39-yard-line with 10:31 left in the second quarter shows how the quest for "effective balance" has created yet another option.

In the regular season, the Broncos had 44 third downs of 10 or more yards. They knelt down on three of them at the end of games, leaving the pass-run ratio at 39-to-2 in that scenario. They converted 11 of the 39 third-down pass plays, and neither of the runs.

But they had not quite faced a defensive alignment like the one the Patriots offered: two safeties standing at least 14 yards behind the line of scrimmage -- four yards past the line to gain -- and no linebackers in the box behind the defensive line. Beyond the line and safeties, every other defender was lined up outside against Denver's receiving targets.

This left an acreage behind the line of scrimmage, and made the call to hand off to Knowshon Moreno obvious. Assuming the blockers could win their battles off the snap, the only thing that could stop Moreno from the first down was an open-field stumble.

The threat of the run on third-and-long could give the Seahawks pause in 12 days, and might force their defense to play more to the inside, and their safeties closer. If that happens, then the Broncos will have a better chance for a deep third-and-long connection, because now, this kind of run is a potent threat.

ELIMINATING THE RUN: IT STARTED WITH TERRANCE KNIGHTON.

It wasn't that the Patriots did not want to run the football with LeGarrette Blount on Sunday, although they did want to diversify from the divisional round, when they handed him the football on 24 of the 26 non-kneeldown snaps he played.

But it became apparent from the first carry that he would not have the same gaping holes he had against Buffalo in Week 17 and the Colts on Jan. 11. His first carry went for no gain. Paris Lenon made the tackle, but he had the lane to do it because Knighton occupied two blockers, leaving Lenon as the free man in the box. All he had to do was meet Blount.

Blount's next carry went for just one yard, and was stopped by Knighton, who persisted and worked past two blockers to bring the beefy back down by the ankles.

Knighton was in for four of Blount's five carries. On three of them, he drew two blockers. The only time the Patriots devoted one man to him, he easily corralled Blount in the backfield for no gain on a first-and-10 with 4:57 remaining in the second quarter. Blount did not carry the football again.

Knighton's fourth-down sack in the third quarter was fairly simple, by comparison. He was one-on-one against left guard Logan Mankins, used an upper-body move and was gone. No one was picking him up, Tom Brady was crushed, and the Broncos' ability to control the clock and extend drives meant that the Patriots' chances of a three-score rally in the 17-plus minutes remaining were remote.

ProFootballFocus.com graded out Knighton at a plus-5.6 rating for the game -- a massive rating for a defensive tackle who played just 26 snaps (44 percent). The limited work enhances his effectiveness by keeping him fresh against offensive linemen playing every snap, and could continue to be an advantage for him against Seattle.

Super Bowl XLVIII National Anthem Singer Announced

By Stuart Zaas
DenverBroncos.com
January 21, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- World-renowned soprano RENÉE FLEMING will sing the National Anthem as part of Super Bowl XLVIII pregame festivities at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J. on Sunday, Feb. 2, the NFL and FOX announced today. The performance will be televised live on FOX prior to kickoff.

More than 164 million viewers in the U.S. watched last year's Super Bowl, the most-watched television program in history. The pregame show, including the National Anthem and Super Bowl XLVIII will be broadcast worldwide.

In addition, actress AMBER ZION will perform in American Sign Language the National Anthem.

Fleming will make her Super Bowl debut. She is among many great performers who have been honored with singing the Super Bowl National Anthem including: Alicia Keys, Billy Joel, Diana Ross, Neil Diamond, Whitney Houston, Harry Connick, Jr., Garth Brooks, Natalie Cole, Vanessa Williams, Luther Vandross, Jewel, Cher, Faith Hill, the Backstreet Boys, Mariah Carey, Dixie Chicks, Beyoncé Knowles, Christina Aguilera and many more. (See below for a complete list of National Anthem performers from past Super Bowls.)

Fleming, known as "the people's diva", is a four-time Grammy winner, including the 2013 Grammy Award for Best Classical Vocal Solo. One of the world's most beloved and celebrated singers, she captivates audiences with her sumptuous voice and consummate artistry, both on the world's greatest opera stages and in concert halls; even extending her reach to include indie rock, jazz, film soundtracks, and other media. Fleming has performed at other major events worldwide including the Diamond Jubilee Concert for Queen Elizabeth II, the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, and during the Olympics in Beijing. At a White House ceremony last July, the President awarded Fleming the National Medal of Arts, America's highest honor for an individual artist.

The NFL previously announced that BRUNO MARS will perform in the Pepsi Super Bowl XLVIII Halftime Show. The pregame and halftime shows are an NFL NETWORK PRODUCTION and will be executive produced by RICKY KIRSHNER.

Super Bowl XLVIII Officiating Crew Announced

By Stuart Zaas
DenverBroncos.com
January 21, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Referee Terry McAulay, who was the referee for two previous Super Bowls, will lead the seven-man crew of game officials selected to work Super Bowl XLVIII Sunday, February 2 at MetLife Stadium, the NFL announced today.

The other members of the Super Bowl XLVIII officiating crew are Carl Paganelli (umpire), Jim Mello (head linesman), Tom Symonette (line judge), Scott Steenson (field judge), Dave Wyant (side judge) and Steve Freeman (back judge). The Super Bowl XLVIII officiating crew collectively has 110 years of NFL officiating experience and 76 combined playoff game assignments.

All seven of the officials have worked Broncos games this season.

McAulay was the referee for the Broncos' win at Dallas in Week 5 and the Broncos' Week 11 win at Kansas City. Paganelli worked Denver's Week 8 win vs. Washington and the team's Week 17 win at Oakland. Mello was the head linesman for Denver's Week 15 win vs. San Diego as well as the club's Divisional-Round win vs. San Diego. Symonette worked Denver's Week 7 loss at Indianapolis. Steenson was the field judge for the Broncos' games in Week 8 and Week 17. Wyant officiated Denver's Week 6 win vs. Jacksonville and its Divisional-Round win vs. San Diego. Freeman also worked the victory against Jacksonville

McAulay, in his 16th season as an NFL game official, entered the league in 1998 as a side judge and was promoted to referee in 2001. He has officiated 12 playoff games, including six conference championship games and Super Bowls XXXIX and XLIII.

Under the NFL officiating program's evaluation system, officials must be rated in the top tier at their position to be eligible for the Super Bowl. They must have at least five years of NFL experience and previous playoff assignments.

Earnie Frantz is the replay official. The replay assistant is Brian Matoren.

This will be Paganelli's fourth Super Bowl. He worked Super Bowl XXXIX with McAulay, XLI and XLVI. It will be Steenson's second Super Bowl (XXXI).

Freeman is a former NFL player. He played 12 seasons for the Bills and his final season in 1987 with the Vikings.

FAQ for Fans Attending Super Bowl XLVIII

By Mike Morris
DenverBroncos.com
January 21, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- For Broncos fans traveling to Super Bowl XLVIII, the trip to New York/New Jersey promises to be a special experience. Here is a quick rundown of a few things to keep in mind as the big game approaches and an entire week full of excitement unfolds.

Where Can I Purchase Super Bowl Tickets?

Go big on security for The Big Game! Score tickets sold by fans at NFL Ticket Exchange, the only Official Ticket Exchange of the Denver Broncos and the NFL where 100% of Super Bowl XLVIII tickets are verified by Ticketmaster. NFL Ticket Exchange is the only resale marketplace authorized by the NFL and the only one that features Ticketmaster's barcode authentication technology. For fans, this means access to the safest, most secure online resale marketplace to buy and resell NFL tickets. Purchasing your tickets from NFL Ticket Exchange is the only way to guarantee that you will receive authentic resale tickets. Don't get stuck with fake tickets! Visit NFL Ticket Exchange today!

What Super Bowl Packages Are Available?

Broncos fans who want to join the team at the Super Bowl can use PrimeSport, the Broncos' official Fan Travel Partner for Super Bowl XLVIII, to book their trip. Information on Official Denver Broncos Fan Travel Packages can be found at PrimeSport.com/denverbroncos -- or by calling 877-211-9371.

For more information on using PrimeSport, [click here](#).

Fans seeking a VIP Super Bowl experience need to look no further than the NFL On Location Premium Ticket Package. Interested fans can select from either gameday only or multiday hotel accommodation packages.

NFL On Location also allows fans to book full service options and amenities -- and a Premium Ticket Package includes admission to the NFL On Location Super Bowl Club at IZOD Arena, with a party featuring regional cuisine, live entertainment and musical performances.

What Fan Housing Options Are Available?

Hotel accommodations for Super Bowl Weekend in the New York/New Jersey area can be found on the Super Bowl XLVIII Fan Housing web site, a preferred service

provider for the Super Bowl. Fans using the service have access to both online and toll-free booking for a wide range of hotel accommodation options throughout the region.

Fans are advised to note, however, that many hotels in the region will require a three-day minimum from Friday, Jan. 31 through Monday, Feb. 3.

How Do I Get Around?

Fans with any questions about transportation and parking should visit the Click and Park Super Bowl XLVIII Transportation Center website. It's here that fans can reserve and pay for parking, get transit directions and learn of any special rules to be aware of that are in place for the Super Bowl.

The website also provides customer service information for call centers, as well as email support, should fans have any further questions. For ADA customers, there is also information regarding transportation and parking.

What Should I Know About MetLife Stadium?

When the big game finally arrives, there is plenty of important gameday information that fans can access by going to the official Stadium Info website.

Included on this website is important information regarding the Stadium Entry Pavilions, which all fans arriving through the stadium will pass through, and which will serve as the main security checkpoint. Fans also can locate information about the Gameday Fan Plaza Presented by Gillette and Covergirl, as well as learning some basic facts about MetLife Stadium.

How Can I Get Involved?

There truly will be no shortage of excitement and unforgettable opportunities for fans during Super Bowl week. The best way to stay on top of the multitude of fun events, activities and community volunteer opportunities is to go to the New York/New Jersey Super Bowl Host Committee website. This website will serve as headquarters for finding out what's going on and what to plan to see to make this a once-in-a-lifetime experience to remember.

How Should I Dress?

Well, in short: very, very warmly. More specifically, however, fans should wear plenty of layers in preparation for the chilly weather. To ensure that fans have the best experience possible, here's a nifty guide on how to stay warm during the biggest weekend of the year.

Championship Games Draw Large TV Audience

By Brandon Moree
DenverBroncos.com
January 21, 2014

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- An average of 53.7 million people tuned in for the Conference Championship games this weekend, tying for the most watched championship weekend since 1982.

In 2012, the Championship games after the 2011 regular season also averaged 53.7 million viewers. The two conference title games that year were between the Ravens and the Patriots in the AFC and the Giants and the 49ers in the NFC.

In January of 1981 the NFC Championship game between the Cowboys and the 49ers drew an audience of 68.7 million and the AFC Championship game between the Chargers and the Bengals drew 51.6 million for an average of 60.2 million.

That Cowboys-49ers game remains the most watched conference championship game in NFL history. This past weekend's NFC title game between the Seahawks and the 49ers ranked as the fifth most watch conference championship game as 55.9 million people tuned in.

For the Broncos-Patriots game there were 51.3 million viewers making it the third-most watched AFC Championship game.

Also, the two conference championship games from this past weekend represent the two most-watched programs on television since Super Bowl XLVII.