

Kiszla: John Elway is NFL's top executive in 2013 as Broncos boss

By Mark Kiszla
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Looking to win a Super Bowl, Broncos executive John Elway gambled \$5 million on the idea that cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie hadn't forgotten how to play winning football.

"If I win the Super Bowl, I'm done. I'm retiring," Rodgers-Cromartie said Thursday.

C'mon, now. No Pro Bowl-caliber player quits football at age 27, in the prime of his NFL career.

"I've got six years in this league. My goal was to get five coming out of college," Rodgers-Cromartie said.

If the Broncos win the championship, would he really walk away from the game?

"It's going good. I might go one more year," said Rodgers-Cromartie, signed by Elway to a low-risk, one-year contract after two forgettable seasons in Philadelphia left the once-ballyhooed cornerback looking for work.

In 2013, Denver has been the prohibitive favorite to win the AFC from wire to wire, despite the losses of key players such as offensive tackle Ryan Clady, linebacker Von Miller and cornerback Champ Bailey.

That's a testament to strength and depth of a roster assembled by Elway and his front-office staff.

In 2013, has any NFL executive done a better job than Elway? No.

While he was often mentioned as executive of the year candidate a year ago after landing Peyton Manning to play quarterback, a compelling case can be made that Elway actually made shrewder personnel moves this season.

The three Denver players most deserving of an invitation to the Pro Bowl are Manning, guard Louis Vasquez and Rodgers-Cromartie. All were brought to town by Elway.

While the fax machine faux pas with pass rusher Elvis Dumervil hogged headlines, Vasquez and Rodgers-Cromartie were part of a free-agent class that also included wide receiver Wes Welker and defensive tackle Terrance Knighton. Where would the Broncos be without those acquisitions?

Nowhere near first place in the AFC with a 12-3 record.

The faith Elway showed in Rodgers-Cromartie paid off big. He might not make the Pro Bowl, when rosters are announced Friday. But, without question, Rodgers-Cromartie has been the No. 1 performer on a Denver defense that has been forced to play short-handed all season long.

Rodgers-Cromartie played in the Super Bowl with Arizona at the conclusion of his rookie season in 2008, and made the Pro Bowl a season later. A trade to the Eagles in 2011, however, sent his career into a tailspin. Denver acquired him with the belief Rodgers-Cromartie's production could again match his potential.

"There are a lot of talented people. I think it comes down to performing consistently and I think he understands that better now," Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio said. "I think he's worked at it well and been a good teammate, and so I think he's had a good, solid year.

"I think his best football — I'd like to say — is in front of him. I believe that. I think he's a guy that continues to be on the rise."

Vasquez is the rock-solid foundation of a Denver offensive line that has prevented Manning from being sacked no more than 17 times, giving him the cleanest uniform among starting quarterbacks in the league.

"He's been one of the fewest-hit quarterbacks in the league. That is the main goal at the end of the day," Broncos offensive coordinator Adam Gase said. "And Luis has been a big part of that."

Elway has made mistakes in personnel. While quarterback Brock Osweiler, selected 57th overall in the 2012 draft, sits and learns behind Manning, it's hard not to imagine how much better the defense might be had the Broncos instead taken linebacker Lavonte David with the pick. Rookie running back Montee Ball has slowly become a contributor, but how much more potent could this offense be if Denver had ignored its long-term health concerns about Alabama star Eddie Lacy?

Nobody, however, can quibble with the fact Denver has won its third consecutive AFC West title under the guidance of Elway.

Maybe the guy in charge should get an award.

Kiszla: Broncos' Manning can teach Seahawks' Sherman a lot

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. — Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning is the king of New York.

Seattle cornerback Richard Sherman is a clown in the Super Bowl hype machine.

Clown time is over.

Hate to break this to you, Mr. Sherman. But the Broncos are laughing at you.

"Sherman, Sherman, Sherman," said Denver defensive lineman Jeremy Mincey, stealing a movie line from "The Nutty Professor."

Manning leads by example and can intimidate teammates without raising his voice. His MVP awards do the talking.

"I've been nervous around him since I met him. And I'm still nervous. I don't want to mess up," Broncos receiver Demaryius Thomas said Monday.

Peyton Manning Face is the most famous frown in football, and it's a look worth 1,000 hollow words from Sherman. Smack talk makes for a good sound bite. But it doesn't win football games.

"When you were a kid, you had a neighbor who always wanted to play you outside in the street," Broncos tight end Julius Thomas said. "And if you let him beat you, he was going to keep on talking. He was going to keep on ringing that doorbell, saying: 'Come on, give me more.' You can't be focused on what somebody is saying to you. We have so much to focus on (during the Super Bowl), words will be the last thing."

At this Super Bowl, somebody has to be the adult here. We know it's not Sherman. He's amusing. He's harmless.

But do not be fooled by his Stanford diploma. Is Sherman brilliant? Please. Anybody with a handful of seeds can attract pigeons to a park bench in New York City. Sherman knows all he has to do at the Super Bowl is stand in front of a microphone, and the lazy, bloated media will be eating out of his hand.

After a brilliant play — swatting away a pass in the end zone intended for San Francisco receiver Michael Crabtree — that punched the Seahawks' ticket to the Super Bowl, Sherman went out of his way to show up Crabtree on the field and

disrespect him during a television interview. Popping a testosterone gasket certainly did not make Sherman a thug, but can we also pardon America for wondering if a sore winner might be wise to lose a little of his anger?

Trying to milk the Super Bowl fortnight out of his 15 seconds of infamy, Sherman cribbed all the good lines from a classic unapologetic apology. After briefly taking responsibility for his words, Sherman went to diversionary tactics quicker than he jumps a pass route to make an interception. He suggested anybody who found his tirade in poor taste might be a racist, and added hockey players have far worse anger management issues. When backed in a corner by your own stupidity, sometimes moral equivalence is the only way out.

While Sherman trashed Crabtree, he's smart enough to know those bullying tactics won't faze Manning. "You can't get in Peyton's head," Sherman recently joked. "If you get in his head, you'll get lost."

After leading Denver with 1,480 receiving yards and being selected to the Pro Bowl for the second straight year, Thomas doesn't have to scream at America how great he is.

"It's not about being boastful and making sure everybody knows you make a play. It's about trying to help your team," said Thomas, who won't talk trash with Sherman.

"I think it's pointless," he said.

In January, the streets of New York can be colder than the devil's home, frozen over. The championship game will be played at a truck stop in New Jersey. But, in a lot of ways, the Big Apple is the perfect spot for Super Bowl hype. It's as subtle as a cab horn honking. Hurry up and wait for something to happen. Hey, we're all in a hurry to get a story here, lady.

This week, the hype is all about Manning vs. Sideshow Sherman.

And it's no contest.

Even in these made-you-look times, substance beats style. Every time. Over the din of the Super Bowl hype machine, here's what Sherman can learn from Manning:

When you're league MVP, there's no need to be boastful.

Broncos' Terrance Knighton enjoys finally becoming a winner

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. — Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, everyone in the expansive NFL galaxy loves Pot Roast. "I guess," said Broncos defensive tackle Terrance "Pot Roast" Knighton. "It's crazy what one sack can do."

Until this season, Knighton knew losing. As a freshman at Temple, the Owls went 0-11. Then came the NFL and the Jacksonville Jaguars. In his final year there, the Jags went 2-14. In the six years in between — the last three years at Temple and first three years in Jacksonville — Knighton's team didn't post a winning record.

"You kind of get used to it after a while," said Rochelle Knighton, Terrance's mom, laughing incredulously at the thought.

Look at Knighton now. Sports Illustrated is picking the Broncos to beat the Seattle Seahawks in the Super Bowl on Sunday in part because the magazine's senior NFL writer, Peter King, is smitten with the defensive tackle nicknamed Pot Roast.

This 330-pound star was born in recent weeks. Knighton is slimmed down from the 345 pounds he carried into Denver when he signed a two-year contract as a free agent last March. And to think Knighton was benched for most of last season.

"As a coach, we spend a lot of time trying to define players," said Broncos coach John Fox. "Basically, our approach is, 'Don't let us define you. You are going to be held accountable. It is going to be based on your performance, where you are on the depth chart, how much you are going to play. All of those things, you earn or don't earn.'

"In Terrance's case, he worked very hard. ... He lost 30 pounds. He changed his physical look as far as his body content with our strength and conditioning people. Really, everything Terrance has done, he did. You can have all kinds of talks. You can talk until you are blue in the face. But until you start seeing actions, they basically make that decision."

The sack Knighton spoke about came in the AFC championship game last week against New England left guard Logan Mankins. The Patriots went for it on fourth-and-3 from the Broncos' 29 late in the third quarter. Mankins is the Patriots' best blocker, but before the play, Knighton had set up him with repeated power moves.

Knighton beat the off-balance Mankins with a finesse "swim" maneuver to tackle quarterback Tom Brady.

"He was expecting me to power him again," Knighton said in the lobby of the Broncos' Super Bowl hotel. Suddenly, a replay of Knighton's sack was playing on a TV screen behind the young lady at the front desk. Knighton looked at the play, and continued his explanation. "He lunged at me, and I caught his hands. I knew I would beat him."

"Father to his brothers"

Born on the Fourth of July and raised in the inner city of Hartford, Conn., Knighton, 27, is the oldest of four brothers. Joaquann, 23, works for United Airlines. Malquann, 20, is in the Navy. Jaden, 6, was adopted at 8 months old because he stole Rochelle's heart while she worked in child welfare, a job she still has today.

"He was like Papa Bear," Ken Smith, Windsor (Conn.) High School's legendary basketball coach, said of Knighton. "He was a father to his brothers. Rochelle did a heck of a job bringing him up. Teaching him morals. He never got in trouble."

This is Terrance Knighton's family. He is not married. Has no children. Rochelle said Terrance was more like an "uncle figure" to his younger brothers than a father figure, because he was not stern, as dads can be. More encouraging, like uncles. But he was always mature for his age, and not just physically.

"I think it was something where he and I grew up together, although I was the mom," Rochelle said. "I was young. So we had that open relationship. But he knew his boundaries."

Knighton was more of a natural in basketball than in football, Smith said.

"He could dunk off the (standing) vertical (jump)," Smith said. "He was our center, but I could have played him at point guard. He could move. He could handle the ball. He was a great passer. Really saw the floor well. But we used him inside. He had that rump. We used to tease him: 'You can put a tray on there and eat off it.' "

The rump helped Knighton play center despite being just 6-foot-3. Those quick, nimble feet served Knighton well as a defensive tackle. And it was on a flight during his rookie year that all those roasts on his rump became "Pot Roast."

"It was late and it was dark in the plane, and most everybody was asleep and the stewardess kept saying, 'Pot roast, pot roast,' " Knighton said. "I raised my hand as if I was pot roast."

Clint Ingram, his teammate sitting behind him, was not asleep. The nickname stuck.

Close call with eyesight

Trouble did once find Knighton. It was Mother's Day weekend, 2012 when a fight involving one of his friends broke out at a Jacksonville, Fla., nightclub.

"He slipped on the ground, I picked him up off the ground and a bottle hit the ground next to me," Knighton said.

Shards pierced his eyeball, lacerating his cornea. He wound up with 22 stitches in his eye, and a medical staffer said "I would never see again," Knighton said. "I would have a glass eye."

Luckily, he woke in that hospital one morning and could see small spots of light. That meant his football playing days weren't finished. His vision would return.

His starting days with the Jaguars, though, were numbered.

"I think what happened to my eye at that bar, it gave coach Mike Mularkey a bad first impression," Knighton said. "I don't think he liked me very much. For some reason, I absorbed the D-line leadership role. Guys just gravitated to me. I don't think he wanted me to be the leader of the group."

Knighton has been leading all his life, starting with his brothers. But he responds to people of influence who strongly believe him. Coach Smith. Then Temple coach Al Golden. And Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio, who, while serving as Jacksonville's head coach, was part of the process that selected Knighton in the third round of the 2009 draft.

"He was part of it, but more so I wanted to be on a winning team," Knighton said when asked if Del Rio was the reason he signed with the Broncos last year. "I wanted to be around good players. I haven't had a winning season playing football since high school."

And now, as at Windsor, Knighton is a star again.

"It's sunk in in some ways, and it hasn't sunk in," Rochelle said. "I was telling someone today I was nervous as to how I would handle it if they did win. And if they lose, how would I comfort or what would I say to him. He hasn't really changed to me. He's still Terrance."

Broncos' Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, the only cornerback with Super Bowl experience

By Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. — Brash-talking Seattle Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman has been cast as the villain of Super Bowl XLVIII.

Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey, a likely future Hall of Famer playing in the first Super Bowl of his 15-year NFL career, provides the sentimental story line.

Lost in the plot, until Monday at least, was the Broncos' Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, the only cornerback taking the field Sunday at MetLife Stadium who has played in a Super Bowl.

Rodgers-Cromartie, 27, created media buzz Monday when he reiterated that if Broncos win the Super Bowl, he might retire. He first divulged those plans to The Denver Post on Dec. 26. Asked if he still plans to hang up his jersey, he said: "Yes, somewhat. Coming out of college, I gave myself a five-year goal. If I could just make it five years, I would be all right.

"Coming from a small school (Tennessee State) and of course playing six years, it has been a long journey and I am weighing my options. I am still a young guy and not a Champ Bailey or Peyton Manning, who have a legacy of going out on top. I had a goal of five years, and I reached that. I will see how I feel after the game."

Regardless of his post-NFL plans, of more relevance this week is how Rodgers-Cromartie plays against Russell Wilson, Seattle's second-year quarterback.

"You can trust him," Denver defensive tackle Terrance Knighton said of Rodgers-Cromartie. "You know he's going to win his matchup. He's probably the most gifted athlete I have ever been around.

"Sometimes we watch him in practice and we are in awe of how quickly he moves and the things he reacts to. When the whole side of the field is shut down, it makes things a whole lot easier for the defense."

Without "DRC," the Broncos' Super Bowl chances likely would have been DOA. Bailey missed most of this season because of a foot injury. And the Broncos lost cornerback Chris Harris to a season-ending knee injury during the fourth quarter of their Jan. 12 playoff victory over San Diego.

Rodgers-Cromartie has been on this big stage before — and failed. As a rookie in Super Bowl XLIII, he was one of three Arizona defenders in the end zone when Pittsburgh wide receiver Santonio Holmes caught a 6-yard touchdown pass from Ben Roethlisberger with only 35 seconds remaining, lifting the Steelers to a 27-23 victory. Never mind that the catch was one of the greatest in Super Bowl history, and that Rodgers-Cromartie wasn't the main man assigned coverage.

Five years later, he still thinks about that play.

"Yes, I do. Not to the point where it beats me up, but just to the point that we were that close to getting a ring," he said. "Anytime the Super Bowl comes back around, they tend to show that play. You can't dwell on it. That was the main thing I learned from that game. I am looking forward to playing in this one."

Broncos staging first practice in N.J. on Monday, to resume Wednesday

By Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. — As the Baltimore Ravens proved last year, it's often the hottest team that hoists the Lombardi Trophy.

If that's the case, Broncos coach John Fox is feeling good about his chances against the Seattle Seahawks in Sunday's Super Bowl.

"I think we have played our best football the last two months of the season," Fox said Monday on the cruise ship Cornucopia, where he addressed the media. "I think our last two games (playoff victories over the Chargers and Patriots) showed that.

"But Seattle is also playing its best right now. So I think that formula will stay true."

In other news, starting cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie reiterated that if the Broncos beat the Seahawks on Sunday, he might retire from football.

"That is a possibility," he said. "I will need to take some time to think about that."

The Broncos will host their first practice in New Jersey on Monday afternoon at the New York Jets' complex in Florham Park, N.J. It's about 30 miles from the Broncos team hotel in Jersey City. On the way to practice, the Broncos plan to study game film on their iPads.

Practice should last about an hour, with a weightlifting session to follow. The weather at practice: 36 degrees, cloudy skies, windy.

The Broncos won't practice Tuesday, in part because the traditional Super Bowl media day will be held. The Broncos will resume practice on Wednesday as they return to the schedule they followed during the regular season.

The players' families will begin arriving on Thursday

Seahawks fans to outnumber Broncos fans at Super Bowl as prices drop?

By Andy Vuong
The Denver Post
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Paging Denver Broncos fans.

Seattle Seahawks supporters are expected to outnumber Broncos fans by a clear margin at Super Bowl XLVIII, according to reports from ticket-reselling giant StubHub and two ticket-search firms.

Data from the three companies also show that prices for Sunday's game in East Rutherford, N.J., have dropped significantly over the past week.

StubHub said Monday that 18 percent of its Super Bowl ticket sales have come from the state of Washington, followed by New York with 14 percent. Colorado residents have snatched up 12 percent of tickets sold, StubHub said.

That information jibes with a report from SeatGeek, which aggregates ticket listings from a wide array of reseller sites. The company said 18 percent of all Super Bowl ticket shoppers are originating from Washington versus 8 percent from Colorado.

"If we had to make any bets about the composition of the crowd on Super Bowl Sunday, we'd speculate that Seahawks fans will outnumber Broncos fans in the building by a fair margin," SeatGeek spokesman Will Flaherty said in an e-mail.

The traffic gap on TiqIQ's ticket-search engine isn't as big, though Washington residents still lead with 9 percent compared with 7 percent for Colorado.

TiqIQ said Monday that the average price for ticket listings is \$3,007.77, down 25 percent from just more than a week ago. The current "get in price" — the cheapest available ticket — is \$1,395, down 37 percent from \$2,233.

Tickets have sold for an average of \$3,102 on StubHub, which had more than 4,800 listings Monday.

"Prices have gone down, though this isn't unusual as we generally see prices go down as we get closer to an event as sellers want to unload their tickets," said StubHub spokesman Cameron Papp.

SeatGeek said the average price paid for a ticket purchased this past weekend was \$2,056.

Flaherty said pricing trends indicate that this year's Super Bowl will be the least expensive since the 2002 game, which was just months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

On Monday, there were 18,000 tickets posted online, more than double the number of tickets available in the wake of the conference-championship games.

"We're seeing a glut of supply in the market," he said. "Strong supply and uncertainty about the weather forecast has helped to keep prospective buyers on the sideline for now — driving prices downward at a record rate."

SeatGeek data show that prices on club seats, which feature access to a heated interior concourse, have held steady with an average of around \$6,000 to \$7,000.

Now hear this: \$25,000 can buy some great headphones

By Patrick Saunders, Troy E. Renck, John Wenzel and Joe Ngyuen
The Denver Post
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Listen up. Super Bowl players are tuning in to their tunes in high style. Graff Diamonds and Beats By Dre partnered to create diamond-encrusted headphones for each Super Bowl player. Offensive tackle Michael Bowie of the Seahawks tweeted a picture of his headphones and said they are worth \$25,000.

Read all about it. Big Apple tabloids are notorious for their provocative headlines. All-pro cornerback Richard Sherman, who went into a shell Sunday on his first day facing the Super Bowl media, prompted this gem from the New York Daily News: "The Mouth That Bored ... Seahawks' Sherman suddenly goes soft, gets Super Bowl week off to sorry start"

International support in writing. "For those of us die-hard Broncos fans Down Under, you can call this Super Bowl 'MMF' ('Monday Morning Football'), because the game will be tele-vised here at 10 a.m. Monday.

"We will be playing hooky to watch and can help you with all of your betting needs, since we will be watching it from the future.

"Our greatest challenge on Super Bowl Monday will be to find a U.S. television feed with all of the new commercials, getting our hands on some Coors Light and keeping the koalas off the antenna. (Can you believe most folks here don't have cable TV?)

"Oh, and we must work to stay cool on Super Bowl Monday too. We had a week of 105- to 115-degree temperatures recently. Sorry to rub that in, given the winter y'all are having.

"We can't wait, so "hurry hurry" for game time!"

Signed: Diana and Susan, Broncos fans exiled in Adelaide, South Australia

Road trip. The Broncos have a 31-mile trek from their hotel in Jersey City to the New York Jets' practice facility in Florham Park, N.J.

Although the Broncos get a New Jersey State Patrol escort to speed things up, coach John Fox doesn't want his players wasting valuable time. He has encouraged them to use their team-issued iPads to watch video of the Seahawks.

Zeros to heroes. Three players who were members of the 2008 Detroit Lions team that went 0-16 are Super Bowl XLVIII participants: Broncos guard Manny Ramirez, Broncos linebacker Paris Lenon and Seahawks defensive end Cliff Avril.

"I'll say this: When you're in a situation like that, you have a certain amount of guys that pack it in. That's difficult for me," Lenon said, "because I'm not that type of person. I'm going to compete to the end, so that's the most difficult part about being in a situation like that. Now, it's a complete reversal."

Rapping good time. Seattle coach Pete Carroll, on rapper Macklemore's success at the Grammys:

"That was amazing. I think I fell asleep at about four Grammys. It was a cool thing for our area. A guy growing up in Seattle. He had an extraordinary following locally that nobody knew about and didn't really understand why at the time. The story has been told that we found him on the first night of his Heist tour at our stadium and had no idea what was going to happen. The place was just going crazy because the fans knew him already, then he kicks off this tour and is arguably the best performer in the world this past year. It was really fun for us. Knowing that he loves sports and loves Seattle and he's so connected to the 12th man and all that, it's been a blast. Every time we score a touchdown, we play his music. It's a big deal to us."

Successful simulation. Matt Prater kicked a 48-yard field goal in overtime, lifting the Broncos over the Seahawks 31-28 to win the Super Bowl. Wait a minute. The game isn't until Sunday?

Well, according to Electronic Arts' simulation in Madden NFL 25, you don't need to wait.

Peyton Manning was selected the game's MVP. He completed 32-of-44 passes for 322 yards, three touchdowns and one interception.

For what little it's worth, EA has correctly predicted the winning team in eight of the past 10 Super Bowls.

"Maybe my game is 20 years too late. I studied Muhammad Ali, Deion Sanders, Jerry Rice."

By Troy E. Renck
The Denver Post
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. — A few blocks from the Westin, the Seattle Seahawks' hotel, is Jersey City's department of sanitation. Twenty-three miles from East Rutherford's MetLife Stadium, the site of Super Bowl XLVIII on Sunday, Tony Soprano waged a fictional garbage war in Essex County.

Trash talk is everywhere you look in this Super Bowl buildup.

Tuesday it will be on center stage — or on the 17 daises at the Prudential Center in Newark — during media day. Every member of the Broncos and Seahawks will be available to the media, leaving countless opportunities for the teams to slight each other.

Noise was once considered the classic defense against fear. It's now fuel for a society that measures outrage by retweets. As such, all-pro Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman, known for his 18-second rant against San Francisco 49ers wide receiver Michael Crabtree after the NFC championship game, will have reporters 50 deep at his podium.

"I am looking forward to it," Sherman said. "It will be fun."

But truth is, this Super Bowl is more about recycled clichés than trash talk. Sherman arrived Sunday and promptly went acoustic, leaving New York tabloids crying ink tears. "The Mouth That Bored" screamed the headline in the Daily News. Sherman admitted that he's not going to try to get into "Peyton Manning's head." And the Broncos won't instigate or bite, even if Sherman does pop off.

"I am not saying I am going to 'shut him up,' but I am going to go out and try to make some plays so I don't have anybody coming up to me saying I got shut down by Sherman," said Broncos wide receiver Demaryius Thomas.

Trash talk is a polarizing topic. It's viewed with disgust by critics, the ultimate me-first over team-first attitude. Others see it as confidence gone wild, which can motivate a player to perform at his highest level. Jets quarterback Joe Namath represents the origin of Super Bowl trash talk. Sitting poolside in Miami in January 1969, he guaranteed that the Jets, huge underdogs, would beat the Baltimore Colts, a prediction that remains a defining marker in the sport's history.

The last time the Broncos were in the Super Bowl, 15 years ago, Hall of Fame tight end Shannon Sharpe played to the press. With a nudge, a wink and maybe a little tongue-in-cheek, Sharpe traded oral jabs with Atlanta Falcons safety Ray Buchanan.

"Shannon is the loudest smack talker in the history of football, but Shannon is not a run-the-streets, cost-his-football team kind of guy," said former Broncos teammate Mark Schlereth, a longtime NFL guard. "I mean, for crying out loud, Shannon doesn't eat ice cream and he eats whole-wheat pancakes with no syrup. You didn't have to worry about Shannon running the streets. Shannon was just running his mouth."

Sharpe hasn't stopped talking, parlaying his verbiage into a career as an NFL analyst for CBS. He said there was always an easy solution available for those who wanted to zip his lip. "I always said, 'If you can keep me out of the end zone, then you can shut me up,'" Sharpe said. "But nobody could."

Sherman has been cast as this Super Bowl's loudmouth. He talks trash, but it is more organic than contrived. "You have hands like feet," is one of his popular jabs to receivers.

"It's an alter ego," Seattle defensive back Walter Thurmond said. "He just reacts."

Sherman saves his best work for game day, jawing at receivers, a skill he refined while playing the Madden video football game.

"Maybe my game is 20 years too late. I studied Muhammad Ali, Deion Sanders, Jerry Rice. I am more old school," Sherman said. "My passion shows (on the field)."

Michael Irvin, a Hall of Famer who trash talked while starring as a Dallas Cowboys receiver, came to Sherman's defense.

"He's only doing what makes him the best player," Irvin said. "If you don't have some Shermans on your team, you never win Super Bowls, I promise you. The game is too hard. You have to have people push people farther than they are willing to go. And the only way to push others is be willing to go farther than they are. Then back it up."

Seahawks coach Pete Carroll backs researching medicinal pot

By Troy E. Renck
The Denver Post
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. — The connection goes beyond being Super Bowl teams.

The Broncos and Seahawks also are linked because they're from the states where recreational marijuana use is legal.

It was only a matter of time before the use of the drug was broached in a Super Bowl news conference. Seahawks coach Pete Carroll said Monday it's worth the NFL pursuing whether players should be permitted the use of medicinal marijuana. Commissioner Roger Goodell raised the subject last week, suggesting the NFL might look into the idea.

"First off, I can't speak for anybody else in that regard," Carroll said. "We have to continue to explore and compete to find ways that are going to make our game a better game and take care of our players in the best way possible. The fact that it's in the world of medicine is obviously something the commissioner realizes and him making the expression that we need to follow the information and the research, absolutely I'm in support of. Regardless of what other stigmas may be involved, I think we have to do this because the world of medicine is trying to do the exact same thing and figure it out, and they're coming to some conclusions."

Ex-Broncos receiver Nate Jackson recently said pot should be allowed to help relieve pain.

Runs like a verb? Left tackle Russell Okung admitted that Seattle's offensive linemen "feed off" Marshawn Lynch's destructive style. His love of contact is unique among NFL running backs. Just don't ask Okung how to explain Lynch, who rarely talks to reporters but remains immensely popular with his teammates.

"He's an adjective," Okung said. "Which adjective? I couldn't even begin to tell you. I don't know."

Candy man. Seahawks defensive lineman Michael Bennett is looking for a super endorsement. He has one in mind — combining with his brother Martellus, a tight end with the Chicago Bears.

"We could do blue and orange M&Ms (in a commercial)," Bennett said.

Bennett, who will be a free agent, said he is open to joining his brother with the Bears if the opportunity presents itself.

Footnotes. Safety Kam Chancellor leaves the trash talking to all-pro cornerback Richard Sherman. Chancellor uses cues to get under an opponent's skin. "It's a certain look they give me. I just smile back. Then their eyes become big," he said. ... Returning to the practice field, even at the New York Giants' facility, offered a sense of normalcy for the Seahawks. "It was great to get back to football because it hasn't really been about that the last couple of days with the travel and all that. Now we can kind of roll into a regular week," said tight end Zach Miller.

NFL is vague on fuzzy Super Bowl ticket math

By Jennifer Brown
The Denver Post
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The NFL doesn't want Denver Broncos season-ticket holders to know how many seats to the Super Bowl it gave the team, but the number was "extremely limited" and less than fans realize.

Angry Broncos fans have been calling and writing the Broncos, as well as The Denver Post and talk radio shows, to complain about the lack of transparency.

"What this really comes down to is that they are driven by profits, and selling the tickets to their suite owners, the advertisers and travel package companies, they can make more money," said Tim Hoops, a Broncos season-ticket holder since 1967 who has not won any of the seven Super Bowl lotteries since then.

The league says the Broncos and the Seattle Seahawks each got 17.5 percent of tickets to the game, but what the NFL will not say is 17.5 percent out of how many.

And the answer is not 82,566 seats, the capacity of MetLife Stadium in New Jersey, Broncos and NFL sources said.

"I can't give you an exact number," said Corry Rush, an NFL spokesman.

Nor will the Broncos say how many tickets the organization received.

"We received an extremely limited inventory of tickets from the NFL, and those were made available to our season-ticket holders and the general public in a manner that met all league guidelines," said Broncos spokesman Patrick Smyth.

The number is controversial because the Broncos and the Seahawks sold an undisclosed portion of the tickets they received from the NFL to a company called PrimeSport, which is offering the seats as part of vacation packages that include airfare and hotel stays.

"We certainly wish every Broncos season-ticket holder and fan had an opportunity to purchase Super Bowl tickets, but the amount of tickets allocated by the league was so limited that unfortunately we were unable to do that," Smyth said.

The Seattle Seahawks also aren't saying how many tickets they offered to season-ticket holders and how many they sold to Prime-Sport. The Seahawks did not return several calls from The Denver Post.

Broncos season-ticket holder Gary Cranston is among many who want answers.

"The price we pay for regular seats, and especially the club level, I think we deserve transparency," said Cranston, who didn't win the ticket lottery for any of the last three Super Bowls the Broncos played.

"What is the distribution of the allocated tickets? Season-ticket holders, the team, travel company, corporate sponsors, etc. I think we have the right to know this."

The NFL distributes its tickets at face value according to this breakdown: Seventy-five percent go to the teams, including 17.5 percent each to the two teams playing in the Super Bowl. The host teams — the New York Jets and the New York Giants — share 6.2 percent of tickets. The remaining teams get 1.2 percent each, comprising 33.6 percent.

The league retains 25.2 percent of tickets for corporate sponsors and media.

It would appear the Broncos, receiving a 17.5 percent share of the stadium's seating, would get about 14,500 tickets from the NFL. But league spokesmen said that number is not accurate and that they could not reveal the total number of seats.

"The Super Bowl is one of the world's most popular events, and we would like for as many fans as possible to attend," NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said. "We can never fulfill all the requests for tickets. The NFL's Super Bowl ticket distribution process has been in existence for years and is well documented. We are confident it is in compliance with all applicable laws."

It's unclear whether the number of tickets sold by teams to brokers such as PrimeSport has changed in recent years.

Worst of the seats Broncos season-ticket holder Ken Heller was one of the lucky ones who won the lottery and a chance to buy two Super Bowl tickets at face value, for a total of \$1,700.

But Heller, who has had season tickets since the 1960s, was disappointed to find out his seats were in a far corner of the stadium, in the upper deck about 10 rows from the top.

Several others who won the lottery said the same, wondering whether the Broncos gave the worst of the seats the team received to fans and sold better seats to PrimeSport, which turned around and sold those seats as part of packaged vacations. It seemed "the seats that were allocated to season-ticket holders were those no one would accept as part of the package," Heller said.

Broncos' spokesman Smyth said he could not confirm whether season-ticket holders received seats in the far corners of the stadium.

The Broncos organization was trying to manage growing fan discontentment.

"Our fan support has been absolutely extraordinary, and we'd like nothing more than a stadium filled with orange on Super Bowl Sunday," Smyth said. "But this is a league game, and we receive a very limited allotment of tickets to distribute to our fans."

It isn't just Broncos fans who are annoyed by the lack of tickets sold directly to the public. In New Jersey, one football fan has sued the NFL after paying \$2,000 apiece for two tickets to Sunday's game.

The NFL, according to the class-action lawsuit, is violating New Jersey's anti-ticket-scalping law, part of the state's Consumer Fraud Act, because it sells just 1 percent of Super Bowl tickets directly to the public through its lottery system. The remaining fans are forced "into a secondary market for the tickets where they must pay substantially more than the ticket's face value to attend one of the most popular and iconic sporting events of the year," says the lawsuit filed by the Nagel Rice law firm.

New Jersey law prohibits withholding more than 5 percent of tickets to an event from sale to the public.

Of the tickets the NFL disperses to teams, many are resold by the teams to brokers that "grossly inflate the price and then repackage the tickets into costly packages," the lawsuit says.

The NFL denied fan Josh Finkelman's claims.

"We strongly disagree with the plaintiff's interpretation of the N.J. Consumer Fraud Act and his claims, which we do not believe are supported by law or the plain language of the statute at issue," the NFL's McCarthy said.

Cold-weather Super Bowl choice in future might even consider Denver

By Thomas George
Special to The Denver Post
January 28, 2014

NEW YORK — Why host a Super Bowl in an icy Apple?

Or play it in a frozen Garden?

New York Jets owner Woody Johnson and New York Giants co-owners Jonathan Tisch and John Mara counter "Why not?"

Johnson, Tisch, Mara and the New York/New Jersey committee/"choir" sang a swank, pushy, deliberate "Why not us" tune Monday as they told the world a couple of things: 1) Super Bowl XLVIII is here, so, grin (shiver) and bear it; and 2) You are in store for a cool treat that only New York can serve.

Actually, New Jersey is serving it too, but that touchy note of the Garden State appearing second-fiddle to Manhattan's monstrous stature and promotion was shoved aside by the group. New Jersey is feeling pinched, even though the Super Bowl teams are residing in Jersey City, N.J. — which, by the way, is like planning to hang in downtown Denver while staying in Arvada.

No, this was about the owners, the committee, the NFL, the local politicians and police force crowing about their Super Bowl coup, calming fears and imploring all to hang in, wait and see and, better yet, jump in.

It is a coup. Tisch said he hopes the league puts a cold, outdoor-game site like this on its regular rotation once every 10 years. If this one works, if it clicks, it could lead to other cold-weather cities with open stadiums snatching the Super Bowl.

Including Denver, Mara said.

"It's a great city," Mara said of Denver after his news conference. "Why not?"

That is how it started for New York/New Jersey: a "why not" attitude that scored. A "make some history" theme that resonated. An "old-school game in a new-school stadium" idea that sold.

There has never been anything like this in the previous 47 Super Bowls. The game played outdoors, more than two-thirds traveling to the stadium via mass transit, more than 400,000 people visiting, nearly \$600 million expected in economic impact, and a strong New York connection of Wall Street and Broadway — big cash and bristling show business — that enhanced this bid.

It had the 9/11 factor.

"There is little question that going back to the 9/11 tragedy in 2001 that then-commissioner Paul Tagliabue always wanted to do something special for New York," Johnson said. "Paul understood, like Pete Rozelle did with Dallas, that when something tragic happens in one of our NFL cities, we can be a part of the healing in many ways. Roger Goodell has continued that legacy."

Embrace the cold. Sell the uniqueness of New York. Ride the fervent football fan base here.

Promise big dollars and big backing.

"I called each one of the other 30 owners," Mara said. "I tried to convince them. And I was surprised early on how receptive they were. Of course, they could tell you one thing knowing the vote was going to be private. But I got a feeling from them that we really had a chance."

This game was awarded to New York/New Jersey on May 26, 2010, at an owners meeting in Dallas. Tampa, Fla., and Miami were the competitors. New York/New Jersey won on the fourth ballot.

"I didn't care if it was the fourth ballot or the 48th ballot," Johnson said.

Mara explained: "I usually count the NFC ballots. They wouldn't let me do that this time. I think the owners agreed that it was time to be bold."

How this cold-weather venture fares will impact the choice of Super Bowl LII in 2018, the next one to be selected. The contenders are New Orleans, Indianapolis and Minneapolis.

Denver has shown it wants to be in the Super Bowl discussion.

Playing in it "today." Hosting it "tomorrow."

"I'd be interested in hearing that bid," Johnson said. "It starts with one important thought when everyone else wants to shoot it down. And that's 'Why not us?' "

Otis Armstrong recalls Broncos' first Super Bowl in 1977 season

By Irv Moss
The Denver Post
January 28, 2014

Former running back Otis Armstrong remembers the Broncos' first trip to the Super Bowl as an experience of a lifetime and an emotional trip for the Broncos that hasn't been duplicated.

"There's nothing like the first time," Armstrong said. "There was tremendous excitement on everybody's part. The town went crazy."

The outcome of the game on Jan. 15, 1978, didn't have the same impact. The Dallas Cowboys won 27-10, sending the Broncos back to Denver from the Louisiana Superdome with their heads down. Denver's 10 points came on a 47-yard field goal by Jim Turner, a 1-yard touchdown run by Rob Lytle and an extra point by Turner.

Craig Morton completed 4-of-15 passes for 39 yards and threw four interceptions. Armstrong gained 27 yards on seven carries. During the regular season, Armstrong had rushed for 489 yards and scored four touchdowns.

"We forgot to play the way we knew how when we got there," Armstrong said. "There was a lot of excitement. We were young and inexperienced. I remember looking over to the other sideline and seeing players such as Too Tall Jones, Tony Dorsett and Roger Staubach. Their defense gave us a lot of trouble that day. We didn't get back to the Super Bowl for (nine more) years, but that year was really special."

Armstrong lives in Centennial and is semi-retired after a career in sales and marketing of health food supplements.

Toronto mayor Rob Ford wears Broncos jersey to press conference

By Ryan Parker
The Denver Post
January 27, 2014

Embattled Toronto mayor Rob Ford attended a press conference Monday afternoon wearing an orange Denver Broncos jersey over his dress shirt.

Ford wore Orlando Franklin's No. 74.

Canadian media — which referred to it as a “football shirt” — were not expecting Ford in NFL gear in CFL territory.

Ford has been in the media spotlight for months after he was taped, and later admitted to, smoking crack cocaine. There have been numerous controversies surrounding Ford since that time.

Ford offered no explanation as to why he was wearing the jersey during the press conference. But he did say other politicians “stabbed” him in the back when he was stripped of his powers following his scandals.

Franklin was born in Jamaica, but moved to Canada when he was a kid. He grew up in Toronto where he played football.

Super Bowl week gets underway: N.Y./N.J. to see some 400,000 tourists

Bianca Prieto
The Denver Post
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK — Super Bowl week has officially kicked off — culminating four years of planning and work by the New York/New Jersey host committee.

League representatives, team owners and government agencies are anticipating a smooth week for the approximately 400,000 tourists who will descend on the area in the coming days.

"It's been an amazing journey," Al Kelly, president of the Super Bowl host committee, said at a news conference here. "We are thrilled to welcome" Super Bowl XLVIII.

Despite the planning there are a few factors that can't be controlled. For starters, the weather.

As of Monday, meteorologists were calling for near optimal winter weather — about 40 degrees with little to no precipitation on Sunday for the Broncos-Seahawks game. But if it does snow, stadium workers will be called in to clear it off the field and seats, then use specialty equipment to melt the tons of snow.

"The ideal lead time is 18 hours," said Eric Grubman, executive vice president of the National Football League. "It could be done in less (time), but it will not take more."

When asked what kind of weather the host committee hoped for, New York Jets owner and committee co-chair Woody Johnson said: "Perfect weather," adding that he wants some sunshine and snow flurries.

New York Giants co-chairman Jonathan Tisch expressed more concern for the stadium workers and visitors who would be subjected to the cold conditions. He cautioned fans to dress appropriately for any kind of weather.

Sunday's game is being touted as the first outdoor, cold-weather Super Bowl and if it goes off without a hitch, it could clear the way for sites such as Denver to host a future big game.

Sports Authority Field at Mile High, an open-air stadium in a traditionally cold-weather state, could be a contender in the future. Johnson said NFL owners selecting New York/New Jersey broke "the ice barrier. The game is played in all weather, so why shouldn't the Super Bowl be played in all weather?"

Asked if cities like Denver had a shot at serving as host, Johnson said, "I would think so. ... I would hope so."

Visitors and game attendees are encouraged to plan ahead.

"This is not a game where you can just hop in your car and pull up to the stadium," Kelly said. "You need a ticket to the game, but you also need a ticket to the site. ... Don't show up without a plan and be disappointed."

In addition to being the first cold-weather game, the hosts are claiming it to be the first mass-transit Super Bowl.

Roughly 80,000 fans will pack MetLife Stadium in New Jersey and roughly two-thirds of them are expected to arrive via public transportation. Parking is limited and access near the stadium is restricted. An estimated 45,000-50,000 fans will take the bus to the game and an additional 10,000-12,000 people will take the subway, Kelly said.

The host committee has also learned from recent lessons of the past — including prepping for and working to prevent a repeat of last year's blackout in New Orleans. The stadium was inspected repeatedly to avoid this situation, Kelly said.

For the fans who want a piece of the action, but can't afford to shell out extra cash for a seat to the game, they can head to Times Square where a large outdoor "fanfest" area has been created and dubbed Super Bowl Boulevard. It's free and open to the public with various events taking place each day.

Broncos Insider: Peyton Manning to return in 2014-15 ... Taking your barber to the Super Bowl?

By Daniel Petty
The Denver Post
January 27, 2014

Good Monday morning, Broncos fans. Tonight the Broncos Insider comes to you from New York City, where we're staying for the next eight days to cover Super Bowl XLVIII.

MANNING IS BACK IN 2014-15: The Denver Post's Mike Klis in Jersey City, N.J., from Sunday's first media briefing at the Super Bowl. "The Broncos have a guaranteed \$20 million salary waiting for Manning next season. The grand plan is for Manning to collect that dough while hopefully defending the Super Bowl championship the Broncos can earn Sunday by defeating the Seattle Seahawks at MetLife Stadium in nearby East Rutherford."

"A number of players have walked away as champions,' Manning said. 'I'm sure that's a great feeling for those people. John Elway. Ray Lewis did it last year. Michael Strahan. Talking to Ray Lewis and talking to John Elway, they couldn't play any more (physically). That was all they had to give. They truly left it all out there.'

"I still enjoy playing football. I feel a little better than I thought I would at this point coming off that (neck fusion) surgery.'" <http://dpo.st/1e8IW3E>

MILE HIGH SENDOFF: The Broncos boarded a United charter plane from Denver International Airport Sunday. At noon, hundreds of fans gathered at Civic Center to send the Broncos off: <http://bit.ly/LcJSIw> ... PHOTOS showing the inside of the plane: <http://bit.ly/1giatSe>

AND THEN THEY ARRIVED IN NEW JERSEY Mike Klis reports: "After inching through the mob that awaited the Broncos in front of their hotel, the buses stopped and Denver football operations boss John Elway walked out of one. He was immediately approached by a handsome young man wearing a blue overcoat who somehow managed to fight his way through fans, media, security and state troopers.

"Mr. Elway,' the man said. 'Would you sign this for me?' Patrick Smyth, the Broncos' media relations director, quickly took control of the situation.

"Sir,' Smyth said. 'He has to keep moving. He has to meet the mayor of Jersey City.'

"The young man smiled. 'I am the mayor of Jersey City,' said Steven Fulop, 36, who has been the mayor since he was 28. 'I have here a welcoming proclamation on behalf of Jersey City.'" <http://dpo.st/1hD3Y9p>

FORECAST for East Rutherford, N.J. on Super Bowl Sunday Mostly cloudy, with a high near 39 degrees.

MATT PRATER should be well enough to practice Monday, he tells Mike Klis in the Broncos' hotel. "Prater ... at New York Jets headquarters in Florham Park, N.J., [will] kick for the first time since the Broncos beat the New England Patriots 26-16 in the AFC championship game."

THE BRONCOS WILL TAKE their Super Bowl team picture Monday ... Players and coaches are on their own until Thursday, when they're joined by their wives and family members. <http://dpo.st/1ckqjs8>

AND MAYBE WES WELKER WILL BE wearing this for the team photo: The Broncos slot receiver showed up in a bright orange blazer for media availability on Sunday. See the photo: <http://usat.ly/1brJM5Q>

Hochman: For Broncos in Super Bowl, it's year of the horse of course

By Benjamin Hochman
The Denver Post
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK — I'm not trying to put the cart before the horse here, but... Denver's horses, your Broncos, will win the Super Bowl.

This is because Sunday's Super game will be played during the Year of the Horse, of course. Yes, the Chinese zodiac year of the divine equine begins Friday.

"So, if your team is the Broncos and it's the Year of the Horse, that is good news for you — I think it's a good omen," explained Denverite Greg Sobetski, who lived in China for a year after studying international relations as an undergraduate and international economics as a graduate student at DU.

"I think it's the best possible year for the Super Bowl to be played. I think that you have the Year of the Horse, tying in the Broncos and their 'Time To Ride' theme. I think we're going to ride into New Jersey and kick some Seahawk butt."

The Chinese calendar cycles 12 different animals, one each year, so the horse only pops up every dozen years, making this a serendipitous twist on the Broncos' season.

And not only that, but Broncos coach John Fox was born in a Year of the Horse, the one that began on Feb. 3, 1955, with Mrs. Fox giving us the hoarse head horse five days later.

Oh, and offensive coordinator Adam Gase, who is the closest thing Peyton Manning has to a horse whisperer, was also born in the year of the horse (March 29, 1978).

Not convinced yet? Guess who else was born in 1978? Champ Bailey.

I decided to call my go-to horse source. Ann Judge-Wegener rides Thunder at the Broncos games. Because I couldn't get quotes straight from the horse's mouth, I figured I'd go straight to the horse's mount.

"Everything seems to be clicking," she said while her Arabian gelding signaled a desire for a carrot. "The playoffs, getting the bye, home field advantage and getting to the Super Bowl — and having it approved for Thunder to be out there on the field — it really does make sense that it all fits together. The Year of the Horse and the Broncos at the Super Bowl? It seems like fate to me."

It's been so long in Denver — high school freshmen have never seen the Broncos win a title — one wondered if the Broncos would win another Super Bowl when pigs fly. Well, how about when horses fly? Thunder and Ann will board a flight Thursday morning to head to Newark (Thunder requested an aisle seat).

Now, to give you some background, according to the thorough web site travelchinaguide.com: "The spirit of the horse is recognized to be the Chinese people's ethos — making unremitting efforts to improve themselves. It is energetic, bright, warm-hearted, intelligent and able. Ancient people liked to designate an able person as 'Qianli Ma', a horse that covers a thousand li a day (one li equals 500 meters)."

As such, I expect Manning to throw for one li on Sunday. As for other Broncos who could make some hay, here's betting on Montee Ball and Danny Trevathan, two Broncos born in 1990, a Year of the Horse.

"I just got an e-mail from a former student," Sobetski said. "And this shows you how Chinese people perceive these different animal years in their tradition. He writes to me, and his English isn't great, but he says: 'Hi Greg, Happy New Year. This is the year of the horse in Chinese tradition. I wish you can get promoted in your work like a running horse and wish our friendship forever like a long-lasting horse race.'"

"New Year's Day in China is on Friday, but really, it's a multi-day festival, it goes on for about a week. So Sunday, when the game's being played, there still will be fireworks going off in China, horse decorations up everywhere and people celebrating pretty enthusiastically."

From Shanghai to the Mile High.

Julius Thomas' skills honed on the hardwood

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. (AP) — Broncos third-year tight end Julius Thomas began the season with more NCAA tournament trips (two) on his resume than catches in the NFL (one).

Now, the former power forward at Portland State is the key to Denver's record-shattering offense, freeing up Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker and Wes Welker, especially in the red zone.

The 6-foot-5, 255-pound late-bloomer is also a bulls-eye for some of Manning's biggest moments, like when he caught his 51st TD throw that broke Tom Brady's single-season record, one of a dozen touchdown passes he caught this year, breaking Hall of Famer Shannon Sharpe's team record for tight ends.

He was Manning's main target in the AFC Championship, too, with eight receptions for 85 yards a week after his two clutch third-down catches helped ice Denver's win over San Diego.

"Sometimes I have to remind myself," Manning said, "that he hasn't played a ton of football."

A giant banner of Thomas hangs outside the media hotel in Times Square, an indication of just how far this relative football toddler has come.

"Is my helmet on?" Thomas asked sheepishly Monday while aboard the Cornucopia Majesty ship, docked outside the team hotel across the Hudson River.

Yes.

"OK, that's good. So, I won't get recognized too much," Thomas said. "That's a lot of people walking by seeing that thing."

He might want to get used to the spotlight.

With the wintry weather and Seattle's stingy secondary sure to stifle some of Manning's other options, Thomas could be Denver's X-factor in the Super Bowl.

"No, this isn't something that I imagined doing when I was 20 years old getting ready to play in the NCAA tournament," Thomas said. "I wasn't thinking, 'Man, if you just fast-forward that clock a little bit, you'll be competing in the biggest game

in America.' It's just a blessing to be here. I've been very blessed in my athletic career, so I'm going to enjoy it."

Thomas played just one year of football in college after exhausting his eligibility on the hardwood. He tried to line up with the receivers on his first day of practice but was ushered over to the tight ends group.

"I was like, 'What? Hold on, I don't know about all that,'" Thomas recounted. "But Coach (Nigel) Burton, he sat me down and we talked about it and he told me that he felt if I played tight end I'd be able to create matchup problems."

Sure enough, he caught 29 passes for 453 yards and earned All-Big Sky Conference first-team honors in 2010, and he caught a touchdown pass and the attention of scouts at the East-West Shrine Game.

"I really thank him for helping me decide to play tight end," Thomas said. "It was a great move on his part to not let me play receiver. I've loved playing tight end ever since."

Broncos boss John Elway said Thomas reminds him of Sharpe, who was his co-pilot when he was leading the Broncos to Super Bowl titles from the huddle.

"It was like Shannon, who do you cover Shannon with? A corner? Or do you cover him with a safety or a linebacker," Elway asked. "So, the matchups were always very favorable."

Thomas' only obstacle was staying healthy.

He got hurt on his first catch as a pro, hobbling off the field with a high right ankle sprain on Sept. 18, 2011.

When Manning picked Denver as his destination that following spring, Thomas was among a handful of guys who gathered on local high school fields for clandestine workouts during the lockout, but soon he needed surgery and wouldn't catch a single pass in 2012.

He gained confidence, however, running with the scout team and capitalized on extra time with Manning last offseason when it was Jacob Tamme and Joel Dreessen who were hurt to gain his quarterback's confidence, too.

He was pretty sure only friends and family picked him up in fantasy football leagues before his five-catch, 161-yard, two-touchdown performance against Baltimore in the NFL opener on Sept. 5 — 729 days since his first NFL reception.

He finished with 65 receptions for 778 yards and added 14 receptions for 161 yards in the postseason. All the while, he flashes some of the same moves on the football

field that he used to showcase on the basketball floor, where he was a bully on the blocks.

Shielding a defensive back to give the quarterback an opening, he said, is just like posting up a player under the basket to give the point guard a clear passing lane.

Tight ends with power forward in their DNA are matchup nightmares because they're faster than linebackers and bigger than safeties, said Thomas' position coach, Clancy Barone, who's also tutored the alpha hoopster-turned-gridiron great, Antonio Gates.

What set Thomas apart was being such a quick study after walking on as a college senior.

"We knew he was very grown-up football-wise," Barone said. "What's the best way to put this, he wasn't immature as a football player. He wasn't like your typical guy with the big eyes that say, 'This is all so new to me.' He's a guy that you could tell knew football. He had studied football and he was acting like a pro already. That's a rare find."

Super Bowl a happy homecoming for Broncos' Moreno

By Dennis Waszak Jr.
Associated Press
January 28, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. (AP) — Knowshon Moreno still cherishes the weekly phone calls and texts from his high school coach.

After all, they've helped the Denver Broncos running back through some tough times and celebrated great moments in the years since he graduated from New Jersey's Middletown South High School. There have been plenty of both for Moreno, who is back home this week and preparing for the biggest game of his life.

And, of course, he can count on hearing from Steve Antonucci. Just like always.

"I told him from the moment he graduated from high school that I didn't care if he carried the football or not," said Antonucci, who won three state titles with Moreno setting records in his backfield. "I told him, 'I'm always going to be here. I'm not just your coach. I'm your friend.' He's always come to me.

"He's as much a part of my family as anybody."

Moreno, who was in and out of shelters and apartments with his father as a youngster, moved to the town of Belford in New Jersey with his maternal grandmother Mildred McQueen when he was 11. She raised him through his formative years, and did all she could to steer him in a positive direction.

By the time he got to high school, Moreno had dealt with more adversity than many adults. It's a journey upon which he reflects before every game, usually during the national anthem, and usually accompanied by tears — a pregame ritual that became a hot topic when TV cameras caught him crying before a game last month.

"It made me into the person that I am today," Moreno said Monday. "Just learning from my experiences, going in and out of doing what I was doing, shelters and things like that, that's part of life. Everyone goes through different things. It's how you battle back from that and see the positive in all the negative.

"I think I did a good job of that."

Moreno graduated from Middletown South as New Jersey's career leader in total touchdowns (128) and scoring (782 points). He also ranked second in state history with 6,268 career yards rushing and established himself as one of the country's most gifted football players.

"When I tell you that he was an ultra-competitor, he really was one," Antonucci said. "It didn't matter what game he was playing or what he was doing. He had to win. Just had to. He would compete at chess or volleyball or a bike race, or we'd play golf sometimes and it would become a competition."

Moreno followed that up with a terrific career at the University of Georgia, where he rushed for 2,734 yards and 30 touchdowns in two seasons after redshirting as a freshman.

"When you watched him playing high school football games, you saw how dominant he was and the way he took games over," Antonucci said. "When he decided to go to Georgia and made that decision, what really stood out to me was he dominated the SEC for two years. When you talk to people about SEC football, they say it's the next-closest thing to the NFL."

He was a first-round pick of Denver, going 12th overall in 2009, and considered by many to be the top running back available that year.

But the road to stardom in the pros was filled with plenty of potholes, including injuries, a DUI arrest, bouts of ineffectiveness and a bust label that grew increasingly larger. He was benched last season and not active for two months after dealing with fumble issues. Moreno then promised himself he'd not let a second chance slip through his hands — if he got one.

"You make mistakes and things happen," Moreno said. "For me, I just wanted to get better. My role was not to be playing on Sundays. Wednesday was my Sunday. Thursday was my Sunday when I was out there on the scout team trying to make the defense better."

Sundays became, well, Sundays again this season as he regained the trust of coach John Fox and became a major part of the offense with Peyton Manning. Moreno ran for a career-high 1,038 yards and 10 touchdowns, while also setting personal marks with 60 catches for 548 yards.

All without losing a single fumble.

"I just feel very comfortable with No. 27 standing next to me," Manning said. "He has been through a lot in his life and his football career. He has paid his dues, and I'm happy for him that he has this opportunity to play in his first Super Bowl. And I'm looking forward to playing in it with him next Sunday."

Antonucci had no doubts Moreno would turn things around. He had already seen him do it off the field. But to know that Moreno could walk off the field a Super Bowl champion at MetLife Stadium — less than an hour away from where he used to make jaws drop in high school — excited his former coach.

"I try to keep finding a word, and maybe I'll look one up later today, to express how proud I am that's even better than 'proud,'" Antonucci said. "I'm as proud as anybody could be. There's no better word right now, but if there was, I would use it.

"It's just so satisfying because this whole journey started way back when Knowshon was a freshman and it has finally come to fruition."

5 things to know from Monday's Super Bowl scene

By Dennis Waszak Jr.
Associated Press
January 28, 2014

NEW YORK (AP) — The Denver Broncos and Seattle Seahawks are all settled in for Super Bowl week.

Next up: media day.

And who knows what will be heard — or seen — on Tuesday at the Prudential Center in Newark, N.J.

After two days of minimal media appearances, the AFC and NFC champions will face hordes of reporters looking to further break down the matchup between the Broncos' top-ranked offense and the Seahawks' No. 1 defense.

Oh, and there will also be plenty of non-journalist types, celebrities and wacky wardrobes to create the spectacle that has become a media day staple.

"We want to enjoy the moment, but you never forget why you're here and we're here to play the biggest game in football," Seahawks tackle Russell Okung said Monday. "That's what we're here for. We stay true to who we are and while we're here, all those distractions won't get in our way."

Both teams got their first practices in, with the Broncos working at the New York Jets' facility in Florham Park, N.J., and the Seahawks at the Giants' training center in East Rutherford, N.J.

"It's been pretty unusual for a trip like this, just getting used to everything," Seattle tight end Zach Miller said.

Here's a quick look at a few of the Super Bowl story lines from Monday:

NEW YORK-NEW JERSEY REDUX? Jonathan Tisch, a co-owner of the New York Giants and co-chairman of the Super Bowl Host Committee, wants the NFL's big game to return to the area every 10 years.

This will be the first Super Bowl played outdoors in a cold-weather site, and Tisch believes it will be a huge success. And not just on the field. Tisch said holding the game in New York and New Jersey is expected to generate \$550 million to \$600 million for the region.

"This is a legacy that will live beyond the game itself," Tisch said. "For years to come, young people, men and women will feel this game was important for the region. And hopefully, when we do all the tallying in the weeks to come, the other 30 owners will say to themselves, if there is a chance to do this again, Super Bowl 48 in New York and New Jersey was a huge success. Let's try to do this once every 10 years."

MARIJUANA STUDY: Seattle coach Pete Carroll supports Commissioner Roger Goodell's message last week that the league could consider medicinal marijuana as a treatment if science proved it could benefit players who have sustained concussions.

While there are some stigmas attached to marijuana use, Carroll believes the medicinal value should be fully researched.

"The world of medicine is trying to do the exact same thing and figure it out," he said, "and they're coming to some conclusions."

STEPPING AWAY? Denver quarterback Peyton Manning isn't ready to retire, even if he wins the Super Bowl. But Broncos teammate Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie might be.

The 27-year-old cornerback is giving serious consideration to hanging it up after Sunday's game, even though he's in his playing prime.

"I had a goal of playing five years," Rodgers-Cromartie said, "and I reached that."

He already plans to go back to college, study psychology and become a guidance counselor at his old high school — whenever he does walk away.

"I had my fun in this league," he said.

NO NAMES, BIG GAMES: For all the megastars and All-Pros in the Super Bowl such as Manning, a handful of hardly household names could have a major impact for their teams.

You know, kind of how Washington running back Timmy Smith did in 1987 or Dallas cornerback Larry Brown in 1996.

Denver defensive tackle Terrance Knighton is one, signed as a free agent after four mostly nondescript years with Jacksonville. He's coming off a big-time performance in the AFC championship game against New England. That's after the man nicknamed "Pot Roast" for his rotund physique was buried on the Broncos' depth chart in training camp.

"It is going to be based on your performance, where you are on the depth chart, how much you are going to play," coach John Fox said. "All of those things, you earn or don't earn. Really, everything Terrance has done, he did (himself)."

Other players to watch for on Sunday include Seattle's Jermaine Kearse, Michael Robinson and Malcolm Smith, and Denver's Manny Ramirez and Paris Lenon.

WHAT'S THE WEATHER? The forecast for Sunday's game remains a hot topic of conversation because of how chilly it might be.

On Monday, the area saw relatively mild temperatures with a high of 44 degrees and partly sunny skies. But then the clouds rolled in and so did a frosty wind, dropping the temperature to 22 by the early evening.

That's nothing, though. The forecast for Tuesday is for a high of 20 with wind chills making it feel below zero in the morning.

As for Sunday, National Weather Service meteorologist Anthony Gigi said the current forecast calls for temperatures to reach a high of 39 with a low of 27 — with little threat of snow or rain.

"It's not going to distract us," Miller said of his Seahawks. "It's not going to be any reason why we don't win on Sunday."

Super Bowl megastars, All-Pros _ and everyone else

By Barry Wilner
Associated Press
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. (AP) — The names are hardly as familiar as Peyton Manning and Richard Sherman. Yet, for all the megastars and All-Pros in this Super Bowl, there are guys like Jermaine Kearse and Paris Lenon.

Like Michael Robinson and Terrance Knighton. Malcolm Smith and Manny Ramirez.

Players who have gone from pretty much nowhere on the NFL landscape to the doorstep of a championship.

Perhaps no one is more grateful for the opportunity to grab a ring than these men. Some are veterans who fit the term journeymen. Some are youngsters who went in late rounds of the draft — or were ignored altogether.

All recognize they will play some sort of role in Sunday's championship game. Some might even sneak into a starring part, the way running back Tim Smith did in 1987 or cornerback Larry Brown did in 1996.

"You never know who it might be," said Knighton, the massive defensive tackle coming off a sensational AFC championship game performance.

Knighton could be the poster child for players who graduate from the depths of the NFL — "I did my four years in Jacksonville," he said — to the top of the pro football ladder. He's been practically unblockable in the last few weeks, rising from obscurity to recognizability as a leader of an improving defense.

"Well I think that's naturally going to happen when you're in the middle of the defense and you're the anchor of the defense," the 335-pound Knighton said. "I feel like I'm a natural leader; I think wherever I am, people just gravitate towards me, and with that it requires a responsibility to help other guys and bring them along."

Coach John Fox praises the work ethic of Knighton, who was buried deep on the depth chart in training camp after being signed as a free agent away from the Jaguars.

"I'll always put it on players," Fox said of Knighton's emergence from a who's-he to a watch-out-for-him performer. "As a coach, we spend a lot of time trying to define players. Basically, our approach is, 'Don't let us define you. You are going to be held accountable. It is going to be based on your performance, where you are on

the depth chart, how much you are going to play. All of those things, you earn or don't earn.'

"Really, everything Terrance has done, he did (himself)."

Ditto for Seattle's Kearse, who played at the University of Washington but went undrafted in 2012. He made all of three catches that season after catching on with the Seahawks, and his job was anything but secure when Percy Harvin was acquired in a trade, and with Sidney Rice, Golden Tate and Doug Baldwin in the receiving corps for 2013.

All Kearse did was go from afterthought to touchdown threat, and his 35-yard catch for the winning score against San Francisco keyed Seattle's NFC title win.

Some credit Kearse undergoing Lasik eye surgery last winter with his becoming a force, but coach Pete Carroll can't confirm that. He can confirm that Kearse's importance has steadily risen this season.

"I don't know for a fact that it changed things, but it sure seems like it did," Carroll said of the surgery. "He has great athleticism, great hand-eye coordination, but he has been over the top since he came back from that. So, subjectively I would say that it had an impact, but he was good anyway.

"He has been extraordinary for us in so many ways, but it seems like it gave him confidence. I don't know what the difference was, but he's better because of it."

Broncos linebacker Lenon's confidence had to be waning at various points in his 12-year career. He was on the 0-16 Lions of 2008, eight years after he was not selected in the draft. He was cut by Carolina in 2000, worked for the post office and then wound up in the XFL — if anybody remembers that short-lived league.

Yet here he is, a backup to middle linebacker Wesley Woodyard who gets snaps in the regular defense, and plays some special teams.

Lenon learned a lot from all that losing with the Lions. By applying those lessons, well, he's managed another half-decade in the NFL.

"When you're in a situation like that, you have a certain amount of guys that pack it in," Lenon said. "That's difficult for me, because I'm not that type of person. I'm going to compete until the end. That's the most difficult part of being in a situation like that.

"Now, it's a complete reversal."

And a great place to be after you've been mired in the other side.

Broncos' Rodgers-Cromartie might retire at age 27

Associated Press
January 27, 2014

Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie is 27 years old, right in his prime as an NFL player.

Perfect time to retire.

The Denver Broncos cornerback said Monday he's giving serious consideration to hanging it up after the Super Bowl. He's not burned out, not worried about his health.

He just figures he's had a good run.

"I had a goal of playing 5 years, and I reached that," Rodgers-Cromartie said.

He's completed six seasons in the NFL, in fact, and could be in line to command plenty of money after making three interceptions in 2013. But Rodgers-Cromartie insisted that depending on how he feels after Sunday's game, he might call it quits.

He even knows what he would do instead of football. He'd go back to college and study psychology to become a guidance counselor at his old high school.

"I had my fun in this league," he said.

Rodgers-Cromartie came out of Football Championship Subdivision Tennessee State and figures he wasn't supposed to make it in the NFL at all from a small school, let alone surpass the average 2 to 3 years that players last in the league.

He wasn't a typical lower-division prospect, though, selected by the Cardinals with the 16th overall pick in 2008. Rodgers-Cromartie played three years in Arizona and two in Philadelphia before joining the Broncos.

He regularly tells his teammates about his plan.

"They always think I am joking about it," he said.

Even if he sticks around next season, Rodgers-Cromartie can't imagine repeating the feat of fellow Denver cornerback Champ Bailey, who's in his 15th year in the league.

Asked about Bailey's longevity, Rodgers-Cromartie exclaimed a curse word in admiration, then added, "He can have that."

GIANTS GUESTS: The Seattle Seahawks are preparing for the Super Bowl against the Broncos at the New York Giants' training facility, which opened in 2009 and is adjacent to MetLife Stadium.

When the Giants and Jets were picked to co-host the title game in May 2010, the owners of the teams had hoped they would become the first to play the game in their home stadium.

Neither was so lucky. The Broncos are training at the Jets' headquarters in Florham Park, N.J., a half-hour's drive away, which opened in 2008.

"It's what we signed up for," Giants co-owner John Mara said. "We certainly would rather be playing the game ourselves, but we knew there was a good chance someone else would be using our facility."

Broncos coach John Fox was assured by the NFL that the Jets' outdoor fields would be in good shape despite the cold weather and inordinate amount of snow that has hit the area this month. Because the Broncos have a bubble instead of a permanent indoor venue — that is being built now — Fox says his team might be jealous of the Jets.

"Our operations guy tells me that the guys will be complaining that it is so much nicer than ours, so he is not real excited about it," Fox said. "We've heard nothing but great things."

The Seahawks have a multi-million dollar training facility in Renton, Wash., complete with a mammoth indoor field. The Giants' complex is similar to Seattle's, and the Seahawks worked indoors Monday.

"It's bonus Monday," Carroll said of the extra practice day.

Most teams don't work out on Mondays unless they are coming off an off week, which both Super Bowl clubs are.

The Giants, who were 7-9 this season in missing the playoffs for the fourth time in five years, had to clean out the first floor of their facility. They left their four Super Bowl trophies in a glass case on the first floor for the Seahawks to admire.

When asked if they were worried leaving any notebooks around with trade secrets, Mara laughed.

"If they were looking at our notebooks from this year, there's definitely not a heck of a lot that would help them," he said.

Jets owner Woody Johnson said it was bittersweet seeing another team in the game. Mara's response: "It could be worse," a clear reference to NFC East rivals Dallas or Philadelphia using the grounds.

QUIET MARSHAWN: Star running back Marshawn Lynch was not one of the 17 Seattle players or coaches assigned to podiums for media day on Tuesday. That's not surprising considering Lynch's reluctance for media attention.

Getting Lynch to speak with the media this season has been as difficult as trying to tackle him. He was originally fined \$50,000 by the league after the end of the regular season for not speaking to the media. The fine was appealed and put on hold as long as Lynch complied with league policy during the playoffs.

But Super Bowl media day is an entirely different environment than the few times Lynch has made himself available in front of his locker at the Seahawks' team facility.

Asked how he'd handle it, Seattle fullback Michael Robinson chuckled.

"I think I'll probably be there with him," he said.

COLEMAN'S FORUM: The Seahawks plan to have backup fullback Derrick Coleman, who lost his hearing when he was 3 years old, sit in the stands on media day. That way Coleman can read the lips of reporters.

Had he been placed on a podium, the team felt he would be too far removed from the questioners.

The second-year player from UCLA has become an integral part of the NFC champions, and coach Pete Carroll calls Coleman's story "inspirational." Carroll also believes Coleman has not been at a disadvantage because of his lack of hearing.

"He does his job impeccably well in all areas and everything that we ask of him," Carroll said. "He's a terrific effort guy. ... He's been a fantastic part of the team and it's been a really cool story. Not because he has issues, because he's made this team and he's made a spot for himself and he's claimed it. The fact that he has a hearing issue is really not even something that we deal with."

Even museums get Super Bowl fever

By Donna Bryer
Associated Press
January 27, 2014

DENVER (AP) — The mayors of Seattle and Denver have salmon and green chile on the line. The directors of the art museums in the two cities have put up iconic statues in a wager on the NFL championships. And both cities are awash in team colors as Super Bowl Sunday approaches.

Christoph Heinrich, director of the Denver Art Museum, said Monday the fever surrounding the game is an opportunity for both cities to show off what makes them special, on and off the field. If Seattle were to win, Heinrich will send a Frederic Remington bronze of a cowboy on a bucking bronco to Seattle for three months. Heinrich calls the small statue, which is so detailed that wind seems to be ruffling the horse's mane and the rider's moustache, "one of the stars of our American West collection."

Kimerly Rorschach of the Seattle museum said in a telephone interview that when the idea of a bet was raised, she immediately thought of a Remington bronco.

"I want the trophy of their mascot," she said. "Then, I thought about what's the equivalent in our collection."

If the Broncos win, Rorschach will send an elegantly carved Seahawk mask, embellished in black, blue and red paint, from her museum's North Coast Native American collection to Denver for three months.

"But of course, it's not going there," Rorschach said in the genteel museum director's equivalent of trash-talking.

The losing museum will pay for the costs of packing and shipping the piece to be loaned. That would include a courier to accompany the bronze, Heinrich said. But he said he wasn't thinking about shipping logistics "since we'll win."

In the event of a Broncos win, Seattle Mayor Ed Murray said he would send Denver Mayor Michael B. Hancock salmon, Dungeness crab, a bicycle made by Rodriguez Bicycles in Seattle and auction off a blown-glass piece by internationally known Seattle artist Dale Chihuly to benefit a Denver program for the homeless. Murray will also wear Broncos pajamas in public if the Broncos win.

Hancock is putting up green chile, Denver's favorite fiery stew; a hoodie; ball cap; and handmade skis. Should the Broncos lose, Hancock will also auction off a Denver-themed item to support the Seattle-based Lifelong AIDS Alliance and wear an ensemble put together by the Lifelong AIDS Alliance thrift shop.

Denver is encouraging all business owners to light up their buildings in orange and blue. Even the home of the Colorado Supreme Court has "Go Broncos" banners, and a buffalo statue at the history museum is wearing a giant Peyton Manning jersey. Airport trains are playing a recorded message from cornerback Champ Bailey asking them to "Unite in Orange."

Blue and white flags in groups of 12 — representing the "12th man," the fans — are sprouting around Seattle.

Denver's museum director Heinrich jokes that he would have gone for a bigger bet if his museum, instead of the city, owned "Mustang," a giant, red-eyed, blue horse sculpture that will be familiar to anyone who has driven near Denver's airport. An eerie mystique has grown up around the piece since its sculptor, Luis Jimenez, was crushed and killed by the horse during its construction.

In return, Heinrich suggested Seattle put up Jonathan Borofsky's "Hammering Man," a metal kinetic sculpture that towers over the art museum there. Seattle's Rorschach chuckled at the idea of offering a piece so central to the museum's identity.

"There's an emotional connection to art, like there can be for sports," she said.

Football betting more popular than ever in Vegas

By Hannah Dreier
Associated Press
January 27, 2014

LAS VEGAS (AP) — With the Super Bowl approaching, fans are talking trash, buying snacks, and, more than ever, placing bets.

Fans bet an unprecedented \$99 million on the Super Bowl last year, and the Nevada gambling industry expects to break the record again Sunday, barring a snowstorm. Nevada sports books collected record amounts of football wagers during the tail end of 2013.

All of this is changing the role of the humble sports book, which casinos used to see as a low-profit perk that kept customers from going next door.

"It's not just an amenity anymore; it's not just icing on the cake, it's part of the meal," said Jay Kornegay, who runs the LVH sports book. "We've seen crowds like we've never seen before."

Professional gamblers and odds makers alike attribute the rise in wagering to the increase in televised games, and the increasing ubiquity of sports analysis.

Amateur gamblers are more likely to bet on a game they can watch, because the emotional journey is part of the fun.

The proliferation of sports podcasts, blogs and websites, as well as the debates that rage on social media, have all made fans feel more educated and confident in their opinions, according to Kornegay, who spent last week furiously working with four staffers to figure out hyper-specific data points like the number of receptions Denver running back Knowshon Moreno is likely to have.

Proposition wagers, in which gamblers bet on elements of the game aside from the final score, account for as much as 60 percent of Super Bowl bets in Nevada.

Johnny Avello, who runs the luxurious sports book at Wynn, where the chairs are made of fine leather and the carpet is thick enough to pass out on, believes the stigma is also falling away from the pastime.

Avello, who speaks with a Goodfellas-type Brooklyn accent even though he grew up in upstate New York, says this is the biggest change he's seen in the past decades.

"Even Al Michaels on (Sunday) Night Football will say, 'Wow, they covered the spread,'" he said, grinning in disbelief.

When casinos figure out how to attract fantasy sports players to the Strip, profits may soar even farther.

Some of this growth was hidden by the recession. People scale back on gambling before other discretionary spending, and the handle— the total amount of money wagered — plummeted in 2009. It was the only fiscal year of the past ten that saw a decline in sports betting.

Odds makers believe the previous Super Bowl record, set in 2006, would have been upended years before 2013 if not for the hard times.

Last fall, gamblers set records in September, October and November. In November, the last month for which statistics have been released, sports books handled \$490 million in wagers.

On Sunday, the Super Bowl will be played outdoors at a site with cold weather for the first time, and the industry is worried that snow could throw off the handle when the Seahawks meet the Broncos, favored to win by 2.5 points, in New Jersey. Casual gamblers might be spooked, unable to predict how the weather would affect their favored team.

The surge in betting means that sports books are now expected to contribute to the bottom line.

So while casinos are throwing elaborate parties for Super Bowl weekend, selling table service and luxurious suites, don't expect to get so much as a free bottle of water at the sports book. At Wynn, a customer has to bet \$150 before the book will think about giving out a drink ticket.

Books remain less profitable per square foot than table games, where the house always wins. An oddsmaker's goal is to neither win nor lose on the games, but to get equal money coming in on both sides — and clean up in commissions.

This commission, also known as the vigorish or juice, amounts to about 4.5 percent of the handle at most Strip sports books.

Don't start wringing your hands for the sports books, though. They've only lost twice on the Super Bowl in the past 20 years.

And they have another advantage. While betting is becoming more popular, the physical books are becoming smaller. That's in large part because of the demise of one sport in particular: horse racing.

In days past, racing aficionados would hang around the books and watch contests from morning till night, with new ones starting every four minutes.

For the past decade, football has represented nearly half of the sports book handle, with most gamblers buying their tickets well ahead of the games.

"If you walk in to any sports book, 99 percent of the time the place is mostly empty," said RJ Bell of Las Vegas-based Pregame.com.

Anjelko Markobis, 22, is one of the rare young men who still like to hang out in that smoky, mahogany environment. He spent a recent afternoon at the Wynn sports book. He switched between watching a soccer game he had \$100 riding on and monitoring the shifting Super Bowl line on a huge LED screen, bantering with his friends about whether he should have placed his bet when it was still at 1.5.

Markobis used to spend his free time with Blackjack, but now focuses on sports betting, placing three major bets a week.

"It's more entertaining," he said, "to watch a game than sit at a table."

THC-Hawks? Pot puns pack this Super Bowl

By Gene Johnson
Associated Press
January 27, 2014

SEATTLE (AP) — The way Bryan Weinman sees it, he and his friends already won their Super Bowl bet.

Two weeks ago, the nightclub DJ and a few buddies were sitting at a sports bar in Denver, joking about how funny it would be if the Seattle Seahawks and Denver Broncos — the NFL teams from the two states that have legalized marijuana — made it to the big game.

They decided to plunk down a \$44 wager — the fee for registering the Internet domain www.stonerbowl.org — just before the Seahawks and Broncos won their conference championships.

It paid off. They're now using the site to hawk T-shirts and hats celebrating the coincidence. One shirt features the Vince Lombardi Trophy, reserved for the game's victors, refashioned into a bong. Another features a spoof of the league's logo, with the letters "THC" — for marijuana's active compound — replacing "NFL."

From weed-themed Super Bowl parties to a Denver company's "Stoner Bowl" tours of recreational pot shops, this year's Super Bowl offers a twist on a sporting event better known for its beer commercials. Thanks to the recreational marijuana laws passed by voters in 2012, sales of taxed pot to adults over 21 began at Colorado pot shops Jan. 1 and are due to begin in Washington later this year.

There have been a slew of predictable, ready-made puns, most of which have to do with "bowl" being the part of the pipe where pot goes. Some fans have issued not-quite-serious calls for a cannabis-friendly musician — say, Willie Nelson or Snoop Dogg — to sing the national anthem.

"I'm staying home and will be watching the Super Bowl while I light up my own Super Bowl," well-known stoner Tommy Chong, of the comedy duo Cheech and Chong, wrote on its Facebook page. The pair released a publicity photo doctored to show Chong in a Seahawks headband and Cheech Marin in a knit Broncos hat.

The Washington chapter of NORML, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, said it would be rooting on the "THC-Hawks." It made a friendly bet with Colorado NORML for what they're calling "Bud Bowl XLVIII."

If Denver wins, the Washington chapter has to dress in Broncos colors and sing John Denver's "Rocky Mountain High." If Seattle wins, the Colorado chapter must

dress in Seahawks colors and sing "Purple Haze," by Seattle native Jimi Hendrix. Video evidence is to be posted on the winner's Facebook page for at least a week.

In deference to the importance of good officiating, High Times magazine offered a guide to spotting "Stoner Bowl" party fouls, including the offense of "holding": "When the violator takes, two, three, maybe eight hits before passing the joint."

On Twitter, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals promoted its recipe for vegan "Colorado catnip" brownies, with caveats: "Note: This recipe is for humans only. Also note: This recipe is for legally obtained marijuana. PETA does not condone the purchase or sale of illegal drugs."

At the sports bar, Weinman, 35, and his friends scribbled down their T-shirt ideas — first on coasters, and then paper. Their motto: "One team and a lot of fans are gonna get smoked."

"There's so many easy jokes," he said. "I hope the average person finds comedy in what we're doing."

Even if the average person might, it's not clear the NFL does. "We do not have any response," league spokesman Greg Aiello wrote in an email.

Derek Franklin, president of the Washington Association for Substance Abuse and Violence Prevention, said all the attention about the "Weed Bowl or the Bong Bowl, what have you, it drives home the wrong public health message."

He noted that Washington NORML's Facebook page featured a cartoonish version of the Seahawks logo, with bloodshot eyes and a joint in its beak.

"That's the kind of thing that for kids, it's going to stick in their heads," he said. This Super Bowl is "incredible for the 'Hawks, but tough for those of us in prevention."

Medical marijuana advocates also suggested the joking over the big game underscores a serious issue: The NFL doesn't allow its players, even those in states that have approved medical or recreational marijuana, to use it to ease the pain from the beatings they take on the field. Commissioner Roger Goodell said Thursday the league could reconsider that.

"I'm not a medical expert," he said. "We will follow science. We will follow medicine. If they determine this is a proper method, we would consider it. Our medical experts are not saying that right now."

Among those hoping to make a buck on the Denver-Seattle matchup is Matt Brown, co-founder of My 420 Tours in Denver. The company is offering a three-night "Stoner Bowl" package starting at \$1,409. It includes tours of local marijuana shops

and indoor gardens, lots of free samples, a cannabis cooking class and a private viewing party for the game.

Brown, who grew up in Kansas City and has mixed loyalties between the Chiefs and the Broncos, said he expected about 50 customers.

"We've been joking about the 'Stoner Bowl' for a couple weeks now," he said.

Denver, Seattle art museums bet on Super Bowl

Associated Press
January 27, 2014

DENVER (AP) — Art is also on the line Super Bowl Sunday as the Denver Broncos and Seattle Seahawks vie for the NFL championship.

In a friendly wager announced Monday, if the Broncos win, the Seattle Art Museum will send a Seahawk mask from its North Coast Native American collection to Denver for three months.

If the Seahawks win, the Seattle museum gets a Frederic Remington bronze of a cowboy riding a bucking horse for three months.

In a museum director's genteel version of trash talk, Seattle's Kimerly Rorschach says she's already making plans to display the Remington.

Denver's Christoph Heinrich is equally confident, saying in a statement: "We know the Broncos won't be busted."

A Super Bowl economic boom for NYC? No so much...

By Meghan Barr
Associated Press
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK (AP) — Will the snowy New York City area really reap an estimated \$600 million economic boost from the Super Bowl? Probably not.

Despite such lofty predictions, sports economists say the financial impact of the Super Bowl could fall far below expectations, in part because visitors often spend their cash at NFL-sponsored or corporate events rather than at tourist attractions. Some hotels say Super Bowl bookings are running behind what they hoped for, prompting them to ease demands for minimum stays and room deposits. And academic studies show that at best, past Super Bowls generated tens of millions, not hundreds of millions.

"Move the decimal point one place to the left," said Robert Baade, a professor at Lake Forest College in Illinois, who has studied the Super Bowl's impact on local economies. "The NFL says \$500 or \$600 million? I think \$50 to \$60 million would be a generous appraisal of what the Super Bowl generates."

The NY/NJ Super Bowl Host Committee, which has worked closely with the NFL to prepare for the Feb. 2 game, has claimed in the yearslong run-up that it would generate \$500 to \$600 million for the region, but it refused to provide any information on how it tabulated that estimate. An NFL spokesman said the league does not conduct economic impact studies on the Super Bowl.

A study Baade conducted in 2000 showed that the average Super Bowl from the 1970s through the late '90s only accounted for about \$32 million each in increased economic activity at the most. The study, which examined tax revenue and other economic factors before and after the Super Bowl, concluded that the 1999 Super Bowl in Miami, for example, only contributed about \$37 million to the South Florida economy.

The NFL, by comparison, claimed that 1999 game between the Denver Broncos and Atlanta Falcons generated \$396 million, the study said.

County sales tax data in Jacksonville showed hardly any increase in 2005 when it hosted the Super Bowl compared to non-Super Bowl years, according to a study conducted by Philip Porter, an economics professor at the University of South Florida.

"No one's ever been able to find a footprint that an event occurred," he said.

Porter found that visitors spend money at NFL-funded events and buy NFL-branded memorabilia during Super Bowl week instead of frequenting local establishments.

Die-hard Denver or Seattle fans won't necessarily attend a Broadway show or visit the Statue of Liberty during their stay, as tourist attractions often report lower attendance than usual during major sporting events. They're more likely to visit Super Bowl Boulevard in Times Square, which is filled with NFL-sponsored activities that funnel money directly back to the league.

Economic impact studies commissioned by past Super Bowl host committees — based largely on spending surveys distributed among fans at the game — claimed that the 2008 Super Bowl in Glendale, Ariz., generated a record \$500 million and the 2006 game in Detroit brought in about \$274 million. But those studies, which aren't made publicly available, are widely disputed by economists.

"Here's how the NFL gets the huge numbers that they get. They ask the people, 'How much are you spending while you're here?'" Porter said. "They ought to be asking: 'How much did we sell you while you were here?'"

The Super Bowl is a weeklong business bonanza for people who work in marketing, advertising, product development and sales, said Robert Boland, a professor of sports management at New York University.

"The Super Bowl has a life of its own as a trade show apart from a football game," Boland said. "It's about 10 days of celebration, trade show and tourist event, and then it's a game. And not necessarily the same people attend both."

Experts note that the pre-game madness may also deter tourists or business travelers who might ordinarily plan a visit to the host city.

In New York, some hotels realized by mid-autumn that the expected surge in bookings had not materialized, so they began to scale back, in some cases reducing required minimum stays from four nights to two and ending demands for non-refundable room deposits. Rates for the week leading up to the game, which had been at a premium, were dropped back to normal pricing.

Kate Martin, general manager of the Hotel Chandler in midtown Manhattan, said the hotel was only 50 percent booked during Super Bowl weekend, with fewer than usual bookings lined up for the week preceding the game.

"All of the anticipation and the hype about what this was going to bring for hotels in New York City has not materialized," she said.

Part of the problem lies in the tri-state area's large hotel room inventory, which at 150,000 rooms is at least triple the inventory seen in the past 10 Super Bowl host cities, said Adam Jones, a director at consulting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers. That

leaves more lodging options for visitors and makes it harder for hotels to jack up rates.

Still, some hoteliers are more sanguine about the prospect of a football-fueled revenue jump. Langham Place Hotel, a luxury hotel on Fifth Avenue, is approaching the Super Bowl like another holiday, with prices on par with New Year's Eve at about 20 percent higher than normal. As of two weeks before the big game, the hotel was not yet sold out, with 70 percent occupancy for the days leading up to the game.

"For us, it's a bit like another holiday," general manager Francois-Olivier Luiggi said. "Suddenly you throw another Thanksgiving in the middle of a cold winter."

Economists say that's the one bright spot for New York City: The months of January and February are usually the most sluggish tourism months of the year, so it's possible the game might provide a boost.

Another potential benefit — exposure — could also be muted. While prior host cities in less populated cities, such Indianapolis and Jacksonville, have been enticed by the chance to showcase themselves on a worldwide stage, there's no evidence that the game has any lasting brand impact for any city, said Smith College sports economist Andrew Zimbalist.

And in any case, more exposure isn't exactly something New York City needs.

"You can't say that a Super Bowl is going to put New York on the map," he said.

Fox learned lessons well from Chuck Noll

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- John Fox's introduction to NFL coaching was a bit rude, but it has also provided some of the best teaching points from a mentor he believes was simply a great teacher.

Fox joined Hall of Famer Chuck Noll's staff in Pittsburgh in 1989 after Fox's three-year stint at the University of Pittsburgh. And as a 34-year-old defensive backs coach in his first two NFL games, Fox saw the Steelers lose 51-0 to Cleveland in Week 1 and 41-10 to Cincinnati in Week 2.

With that he also learned some things from Noll that Fox says he still applies now as he closes in on the finish of his 12th season as a head coach.

"I was very blessed to be with Chuck Noll as head coach," Fox said. "We kind of had a bizarre season. We started the first two games -- I think we got beat 51-0 at home by Cleveland ... then, we went to Cincinnati, which was a very good football team, and we lost. It wasn't a very tremendous start. Everybody was down. And of course, fans as they are, were a little bit honest. He stayed even keel. That is the most valuable lesson: to be the same guy and don't go through the highs and lows because it is very easy to do, especially with outside influences."

Fox talks about that season often. The Steelers finished 9-7, winning their final three games of the regular season and Fox has consistently said Noll handled it all with grace and focus.

This season, the Broncos' bumpy ride included the offseason arrests of two front-office executives in separate DUIs, Von Miller's six-game suspension, a pile of injuries and Fox's own health scare when he had open-heart surgery in early December. Fox said the team, from the front-office, to the coaches, to the players, simply kept working through all the issues.

"(Noll) was a tremendous technician in the individual fundamentals of football, which was something very important to him. I still believe it comes down to blocking and tackling, even at this level," Fox said. "Sometimes, we lose sight of that with the schemes and stuff. I really think it is staying even keel, not experiencing the highs and lows that a football season can bring to you. And really, the technique, and not more of the 'want to' but the 'how to' play football."

Broncos need containment procedures

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. – When Denver Broncos linebacker Von Miller opened the season with a six-game suspension for violating the league's substance abuse policy, the team was forced to mix and match their pass rush unit as their plans were pushed aside right from the start.

They got plenty of help from defensive end Shaun Phillips, who led the team with 10 sacks, as well as a variety of personnel groupings to generate the pressure they believe they need.

But to get to Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson, the Broncos know they not only have to be aggressive, physical and careful not to allow the mobile Wilson an escape route, but to also not give him the room to move around to reset and a throw.

"His tendency is that he is a right-handed quarterback; he wants to get out to his right and throw," defensive tackle Terrance Knighton said. "He's more successful that way. So we've got to do a good job of keeping him in the pocket and force him out of his comfort zone. When he's moving left he'll tend to run it more and when he's moving right he wants to pass it more. We just have to do a good job of containing him. He'll get out and he'll make his plays during the game, but we'll just have to limit them."

Wilson was sacked 44 times in the regular season – only Ryan Tannehill and Joe Flacco were sacked more. But not all sacks are created equal.

The Broncos don't consider Wilson a quarterback who was trapped in the pocket behind a leaky offensive line. No, they see a guy who has taken his team to the playoffs in each of his first two seasons who will hold the ball because he believes he can, and often does, make a play if he can simply buy a little more time.

"Some mobile quarterbacks use their legs to just take off and run and some use their legs to create opportunities to throw the ball," Broncos linebacker Paris Lenon said. "I think he does a little bit of both. You see him avoid pressure, create time, throw the ball down the field and sometimes he does keep the ball and move the chains himself. He's a difficult guy to deal with, but you have to have a plan."

The Broncos, who dropped the read-option offense on the NFL in 2011 with Tim Tebow at quarterback, have defended offenses with that element in the playbook well this season. The Broncos limited Washington Redskins quarterback Robert Griffin III to 139 total yards this season and sacked Oakland Raiders quarterback Terrelle Pryor five times combined in two meetings.

Neither Pryor nor Griffin III had the season Wilson did this year, but the Broncos did have success against both the Redskins and the Raiders with a more 3-4 look on defense. Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey has talked about the importance of not leaving the Seahawks receivers to try to tackle Wilson once Wilson is on the move, because Wilson routinely finds those players for big plays.

"Have a plan to try to not allow him to have that extra time," Lenon said. "If he does have that extra time, you have to find a receiver and you blast him in that situation because those guys are uncovered and they can make big plays."

Broncos share a lot of wealth on offense

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- Before the start of the season, one of the most popular questions put to Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning, offensive coordinator Adam Gase and all of the team's wide receivers was how could Manning possibly keep all of those pass-catchers happy?

A multiple-choice exam, as it were, played out on the field.

On the way to his pile of NFL records and touchdowns this season, Manning simply didn't play favorites. He picked all of the above.

"I think we all understand how the offense works," tight end Julius Thomas said. "And our job is to make sure we are in the right position, where we are supposed to be, and Peyton will get you the ball."

Indeed, Manning's spread-it-around numbers were historic. The Broncos had five players with at least 60 receptions this season, and Denver became the first team in NFL history with five different players who scored at least 10 touchdowns. No other team has had more than three.

"I think it's probably hard to just focus on one guy," wide receiver Demaryius Thomas said. "We want to be able to move things around if Peyton sees something he likes. So, we get to the right spot, get open and he gets you the ball. You never know when it will be your turn, so you're just ready for it always to be your turn."

Defensive coaches around the league say it starts with Manning, his comfort level in Denver's offense and the team's depth chart. Four of the five players who scored at least 10 touchdowns -- Demaryius Thomas, Julius Thomas, Knowshon Moreno and Eric Decker -- are Broncos draft picks, homegrown players still on their rookie contracts.

Two of those players -- Demaryius Thomas and Julius Thomas -- also have exploded on the developmental curve since Manning's arrival in March 2012.

The Broncos then added Wes Welker to the mix this past offseason. So when the Broncos go to their three-wide receiver look -- with both Welker and Julius Thomas lined up in the slot and Moreno in the backfield -- Manning has an array of options, with each capable of beating man-to-man coverage in the short, intermediate and deep areas of the field.

So, Manning reads the defense and throws to the more favorable matchup. As Welker puts it, "You can't really double everybody."

"I think just the way [Manning] has spread the ball around has really been key," Gase said. "I'm not sure I've seen anything like it ... He just works with what he sees."

Manning targeted four players at least 90 times this season -- Demaryius Thomas (142), Decker (136), Welker (111) and Julius Thomas (90) -- along with 74 targets for Moreno. Gase also has kept the carrot of opportunity extended for every player in the formation as well.

Including the Broncos' two playoff wins, Gase has kept the team in a three-wide receiver look on 73.6 percent of its snaps this season. That keeps all of Manning's top targets on the field at the same time and Moreno in the backfield. Among the team's running backs, Moreno is the most reliable in pass protection.

The Broncos were in a three-wide set for all but one snap -- the kneel-down to finish the game -- in the divisional-round win over the Chargers. They employed the same formation in all but 11 snaps in the win over the Patriots in the AFC Championship Game.

With Gase's aggressive play calling, his quick rapport with Manning and the quarterback's ability to deliver the ball regardless of matchup, the recipe for the record 606 points in a season was in a place.

"[Manning] challenges you because every day you're going to have a question that could possibly come up and you have to have an answer," Gase said. "So as a full offensive group, we do have a lot of smart guys, not just him. And he's able to kind of lead that charge with the players if there's something that comes up and there could be an issue, but most of the time we're trying to head him off because we know those kinds of questions are coming."

Said Manning: "I think Adam has done a good job taking the different strengths of the players that he has and putting those guys in the best situations out there. I always think that's the key to a good offense is putting players in positions where they feel comfortable, where they can thrive. I think Adam has done that. He has studied what players do well, what players don't do so well and has kept them out of those situations. That has allowed guys to go out there, play fast and play with confidence."

It all creates a series of choices for the Seattle Seahawks' defense. The Seahawks led the NFL in quarterback pressures and interceptions with an aggressive front and their decorated secondary. Seattle finished the regular season as the league leader in both scoring defense and total defense.

And the defenses that have had the most, albeit limited, success against the Broncos this season have chosen not to send extra rushers at the ultraprepared Manning. Rather, they have tried to disrupt the timing of the Broncos' offense by getting physical with the team's receivers.

"Yeah, exactly ... but if you've got a quarterback that throws the football very well, you want to try to disrupt that timing," Decker said. "A way to do that is a lot of press coverage, and you see it across the board throughout the league."

"I think we're good -- whatever we put out there, we have to be able to execute it," Demaryius Thomas said. "They are the No. 1 defense. They have a great defense and we have a great offense. This is what you play for."

Rodgers-Cromartie mulls retirement

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- Cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie is 27. The Denver Broncos say he's played at a Pro Bowl level this season. And he's on the doorstep of a Super Bowl appearance that will be followed by unrestricted free agency.

But Rodgers-Cromartie re-affirmed Monday he would be prepared to retire if the Broncos won Super Bowl XLVIII.

Rodgers-Cromartie said he's told teammates of his plan and that they're not sure they believe him.

"I don't think they think I'm serious ... I'm serious," Rodgers-Cromartie said.

He added: "Coming out of college I gave myself a five-year goal. If I could just make it five years, I would be all right. Coming from a small school and of course playing six, it has been a long journey and I am weighing my options. I am still a young guy and not a Champ Bailey or Peyton Manning who have a legacy of going out on top. I had a goal of five years and I reached that. I will see how I feel after the game."

The Broncos signed Rodgers-Cromartie to what was technically a two-year, \$10 million deal last March. But language in the deal shows the second year will be voided five days after the Super Bowl. Rodgers-Cromartie got a \$4.2 million signing bonus to go with a \$800,000 guaranteed base salary this season.

After Champ Bailey suffered a left foot injury in a preseason loss to Seattle (he was limited to five games in the regular season), Rodgers-Cromartie became one of the Broncos' most important offseason acquisitions. He finished the regular season with 31 tackles and tied for the team lead with three interceptions.

Rodgers-Cromartie also is a free spirit, known to have used a "Dora the Explorer" backpack during his time with the Arizona Cardinals.

"I still have it somewhere," Rodgers-Cromartie said earlier this season.

NFLN survey/player safety: Broncos

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
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The Denver Broncos dealt with several concussions this season, particularly wide receiver Wes Welker, who suffered two in a four-game span during the regular season.

Welker actually left a Nov. 17 game against the Kansas City Chiefs, returned for four plays before being pulled and held out for the remainder of that game. He then worked through the concussion protocol the following week and was cleared to play in the next three games before suffering a second concussion Dec. 8 against the Tennessee Titans.

Welker was held out of the last three regular-season games before playing in the Broncos' two playoff games and he is on track to play in the Super Bowl.

The Broncos said Welker's return, like all of their players who have been through the concussion protocol this season, was "in the hands of our medical people," head coach John Fox said. Welker called the whole process "what needed to be done, that we just had to make sure everything was OK with the doctors."

And on the protocol he added: "I think we've taken a lot more action than what we would have in the past with this whole ordeal."

But in a survey of more than 320 players, conducted by ESPN.com's NFL Nation reporters, players were asked "True or false: I'd play in the Super Bowl with a concussion."

Eighty-five percent of the players said they would play in the championship game. Of the 10 Broncos who were surveyed, six said they would play in a Super Bowl with a concussion if the decision were left up to them while four said they would not, thinking of the long term.

And when players league-wide were asked "True or false: The NFL is committed to player safety," 60 percent said the league was, while 40 percent said no.

For the Broncos it was an even split, with five players offering they believed the NFL was committed to player safety, while five said the league was not. And all of the Broncos surveyed who did not think the league was committed to player safety all cited the continued discussions of an 18-game season and two of the players cited Thursday night games as well.

As one player surveyed said: "Don't tell me you're concerned about my safety and then tell me to play on Thursday or go to 18 games."

Broncos once saw great future for Wilson

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- In many ways Super Bowl XLVIII will simply be a confirmation of sorts. A confirmation of what the Denver Broncos thought of a prospect they brought into their suburban Denver complex in the weeks before the 2012 NFL draft.

A quarterback named Russell Wilson.

Jonathan Ferrey/Getty Images
Russell Wilson met briefly with Peyton Manning and the Broncos prior to the 2012 draft.

"Wilson, we had him in, we loved the kid," said Broncos executive vice president of football operations John Elway. "To see what he's doing, you knew when you met him that he had the capability because of the presence that he has, that he had the ability to do what he is doing right now. He's athletic, can make all the plays and has the right attitude."

The Broncos liked Brock Osweiler as well. And when their pick rolled around in the second round, they selected Osweiler. In large part the decision was made because of Osweiler's size -- 6 feet 8, 240 pounds -- a presence Elway says quarterback prospects must have.

Also, Osweiler was just 21 at the time of the 2012 draft and the Broncos knew whatever quarterback they selected would be sitting behind newly signed Peyton Manning for what the team hoped was several seasons.

But Wilson has now guided the Seahawks into the postseason in his first two years, including this season's Super Bowl.

"I met Russell Wilson ... I believe it was after I signed with the Broncos, so let's call it March or April (of 2012)," Manning said. "They were having players come in for visits before the draft. I was actually in the film room watching some tape, and someone brought Russell in. He was in town for a visit. I had a chance to shake his hand. It was an exciting time in his life, getting ready for the draft. So, I wished him luck and told him I enjoyed watching his college career."

Broncos head coach John Fox said he met Wilson during Fox's nine-year tenure as Carolina Panthers head coach. Wilson had been the starting quarterback at NC State before transferring to play his final college season at Wisconsin.

"I spent time in that part of the country when he was a quarterback at NC State with Tom O'Brien and his staff," Fox said. "So I actually got to meet him even when he was still in college at NC State, even before he transferred to Wisconsin. He's a tremendous young man. What he's accomplished in a very short time in our league

doesn't surprise me at all; just his makeup, his leadership ability and just the kind of competitor he is."

Moreno hopes for 'awesome' homecoming

By Dan Graziano
ESPN.com
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. – That the Super Bowl will be played Sunday in East Rutherford, N.J., 45 miles from his childhood home, still seems weird to Knowshon Moreno. That he'll be playing in it as the starting running back for the Denver Broncos? Well, that's something out of the storybooks.

"Very special," Moreno said Monday before the Broncos' first practice of Super Bowl week. "Everyone goes through different things. It's how you battle back from that and see the positive in all of the negative. I think I did a good job of that."

Moreno was a long shot to make it anywhere, born to parents who found themselves incapable of raising him and finally sent to live with his maternal grandmother in the New Jersey shore town of Belford. He found comfort in the home of Mildred McQueen after years spent bouncing around. His gifts as a football player carried him to stardom at Middletown South High School, where his teams went 36-0 and won three state titles from 2003-05.

"That was a good time," Moreno said with a laugh Monday. "Went three years, never losing -- 36-0 and all state championships. Putting all that work in, and then finally at the end of the day, at the end of the season, being rewarded with a trophy, that's what it's all about. You don't remember the hard times in training camp. You don't remember whatever happened throughout the week. You remember that moment."

Those moments propelled him to the University of Georgia and into the first round of the NFL draft, where the Broncos picked him 12th overall in 2009. But the hardships didn't stop there. Moreno struggled to develop as an NFL player, sliding down the Broncos' depth chart amid injuries, fumbles and off-field problems

He was an afterthought by November 2012, no longer even dressing with the rest of the active players on game day, until starter Willis McGahee got hurt and Moreno was somewhat surprisingly elevated to the starting running back role. He played well and kept the job into 2013, even after the Broncos drafted running back Montee Ball in the second round. And to hear folks around the Broncos tell it, Moreno's first 1,000-yard season was the result not just of perseverance but also of determined improvement.

"The thing with Knowshon that he's really improved is his accountability and dependability," Broncos coach John Fox said Monday. "He's been a professional as far as his preparation goes, and he has become one of the more dependable guys

as far as assignment detail and those types of things. He's done a tremendous job, and he's maybe one of our most improved players this past season."

Success at the NFL level has brought Moreno back to his home state for a chance to cash in on every football player's dream.

"It would be awesome, especially in your hometown," Moreno said of winning the Super Bowl in New Jersey. "My family will be there to enjoy the moment."

Moreno said his high school coach is coming to visit him this week at the Broncos' hotel, and so will his family. He said it "would be cool to get back" and see his old high school, but the team is pretty tightly scheduled with practices and media obligations that could make it tough. Perhaps, he'll get a chance to visit after the game's over, and bring a Lombardi Trophy to show off. That would mark the completion of a truly remarkable journey.

From prison, two fans root for No. 88

By Ian O'Connor
ESPNNewYork.com
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On the phone from Tallahassee, Fla., Katina Smith and Minnie Pearl Thomas made it clear they would do anything for the chance to confront some unforgiving New Jersey weather on Super Bowl Sunday. If they could, they would pay top dollar for the top row of MetLife Stadium to watch Smith's son and Thomas' grandson, Demaryius, catch passes from Peyton Manning while being covered by Richard Sherman.

But Smith, Inmate No. 89426-020, and Thomas, Inmate No. 89378-020, have no choice but to settle for their room-temperature seats in front of a community TV inside the low-security federal correctional institution that houses them. They will watch the Denver Broncos play the Seattle Seahawks with dozens of fellow female inmates, many of them wearing T-shirts carrying Demaryius' number, 88, and some wearing his number and initials on their cheeks.

"It will be a bittersweet situation," Smith said Monday night. "Sweet that my son made it to this point, and bitter that I'm not there to celebrate this time in his life."

They are convicted drug traffickers, Smith and her mother Minnie Pearl, and you'd never know it by talking to them and measuring their yes-sir, no-sir approach for close to an hour. Some 15 years after the cops stormed their Georgia home and busted their crack cocaine operation while 11-year-old Demaryius lay terrified in his bed, Smith and Minnie Pearl serve as mentors and role models among the 1,116 women incarcerated in the FCI. According to Edith Barefoot, the facility's public information officer, Demaryius' mother and grandmother are so respectful of staff and so committed to their jobs and classes, and to the betterment of younger inmates, that they've been granted preferred housing as a reward.

They bunk together, Smith and Minnie Pearl, the grandmother rising early to work as a clerk, the mother rising early to work in the commissary from 6:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., five days a week, before attending church or exercise class.

Demaryius visits when he can, and talks to them all the time by phone. Smith and Minnie Pearl already called him this week, and plan to call again before kickoff Sunday.

The ongoing conversation helps get the women through their day, and for Smith, so does the prospect of a release to a halfway house on Christmas Day 2016, Demaryius' 29th birthday. Minnie Pearl, 57, stands as a three-time drug offender and the chief maker and seller of the crack cocaine, leaving her with no such scheduled reprieve. On the FCI website, her listed release date reads like this:

LIFE.

"I had four kids and didn't have the means to make ends meet," Minnie Pearl said. "My husband and I were separated, and I just couldn't get the things that they needed, that I wanted them to have, like the other kids. I know I shouldn't have done it, but I did it anyway.

"That was an entirely different person. That person was mean, hateful, she didn't care, she was boastful, but she's none of that anymore. She's a totally different person."

The kind of person, and grandmother, worthy of the forgiveness Demaryius ultimately granted Minnie Pearl and her daughter.

"I am a woman of integrity," Minnie Pearl said. She explained that she has a rock-solid reputation among the officers and inmates alike, that she was entrusted to serve as a companion on another woman's suicide watch, and that her daughter joined her in the cause of making Demaryius proud.

"We don't want his peers to see us acting out of order in no kind of way," Minnie Pearl said. "We want to uphold a certain standard."

The Demaryius Thomas standard. Raised by an aunt and uncle after his mother's arrest, and after his father realized his life in the Army made full-time parenting impossible, Demaryius grew into a world-class wide receiver who doesn't believe in trash talk, and who has never put himself on the wrong side of the law.

"It's been a blessing to watch him evolve," Smith said. "I don't want to sound too boastful, but I'm a very proud mother. He had the choice of taking the wrong path or the right path, and he chose the right path even though he had all those negative situations around him."

In the wake of her February 2000 conviction, Smith could tell through her son's body language on visits, and through his lack of engagement on the phone, that he felt betrayed by her. Young Demaryius had asked her to stop dealing drugs, had shared a nightmare he'd had of her being hauled off to jail, and she didn't heed his warnings.

As the cops broke through her door in the early morning hours of March 15, 1999, Smith was jolted from her sleep by what she called "a big boom." Demaryius and his two sisters were in their bedrooms, and Minnie Pearl said it was "very scary waking up to infrared lights and screaming." Smith asked the police if she could at least walk her children out to their school bus, free of handcuffs, and the police obliged. She kissed her kids on their foreheads, assured them she loved them, and told them to look out for each other.

Smith would reject the prosecution's offer of a reduced sentence in exchange for her testimony against Minnie Pearl, and ended up with 20 years. "I couldn't live with myself if I was the reason my mom was in prison," Smith said. "At the same time I let my kids get raised by someone else. It was a no-win situation for me."

And one Minnie Pearl tried to manage for her.

"She's very loyal," she said of her daughter. "But I told her many times that she could talk, that she could testify."

All these years later, Smith doesn't regret her decision. She only regrets the fact that her son -- the child she gave birth to as a 16-year-old child herself -- grew up without her, and that she never saw him play high school, college or professional football.

Except on the prison TV. When Tim Tebow threw that touchdown pass to Demaryius to beat Pittsburgh in a playoff game, Smith said she was screaming so loudly that other inmates had to calm her down. Denver's AFC Championship Game victory over New England was met with a similar response.

Smith expects as many as 50 women to gather around their dormitory TV to watch Demaryius play in the Super Bowl, with at least a few carrying pompoms. Of course Minnie Pearl will be there, too. She still believes that somehow, some way, she'll be paroled out of her life sentence in time to see Demaryius play in the NFL. But just in case, she'll find a way to will herself into the MetLife stands.

"It's like I'm in the stadium when I'm watching," Minnie Pearl said. "I go there. I'm not there, but I take myself there. I visualize. ... I don't have the words to explain it."

Just knowing that his mother and grandmother will be watching, Demaryius said Monday, inspires him to "try to go out and play my best because I always know they can talk about it to the people in the jailhouse." Smith said she'd called him while he was attending Georgia Tech for the purpose of explaining everything that had gone down, for the purpose of apologizing and reconnecting and asking for forgiveness. This is why the good son now wants to play what he called "the game of his life."

But before he gets the chance to play his inspired brand of football against Sherman's Seahawks, Demaryius will get a phone call from his mother. She always calls on the morning of game day. She always tells him to find a way to stay healthy, and to not be too hard on himself if he makes a mistake. She always prays with him, too, sometimes quoting from scripture.

The call this Sunday likely will be more emotional than most. It's the Super Bowl, after all, an event tailor-made for a loving parent.

"I won't be there in the stands," Smith said. "I won't be able to look at his face, to kiss him, to tell him how proud I am."

She'll stay warm on Super Bowl Sunday at the Federal Correctional Institution in Tallahassee instead, and it's a damn shame. Like her own mom, Katina Smith would much rather freeze on February's answer to Mother's Day at MetLife.

Curtis Martin on Peyton: Chess master

By Rich Cimini
ESPNNewYork.com
January 27, 2014

Curtis Martin always has been an admirer of Peyton Manning. Two years ago, the Hall of Famer wanted to see the New York Jets pursue Manning as a free agent. On Sunday, Martin believes Manning will be the difference in Super Bowl XLVIII.

"I think the advantage comes with Peyton Manning, his mind and his understanding of the game," Martin said Monday during an appearance on ESPN's "Mike & Mike" radio show. "He can go out there and it's like playing chess. He's like a good football chess player. I would give the advantage to Peyton and to the Broncos just simply because of (his) wisdom and knowledge, just because of Peyton's football IQ."

Another edge for the Denver Broncos, according to Martin, is Super Bowl experience. No one on the Seattle Seahawks has played in a Super Bowl. Martin played in only one, for the 1996 New England Patriots, and he lost to the Green Bay Packers. He said the Patriots' lack of experience that year was costly.

"We were so pumped up, it was almost as though we were too hyped for ourselves," Martin said. "It took us a while to settle down. By then, Green Bay had already jumped out on top of us. I do think there are nerves and excitement, and the entire week leading up to the Super Bowl does have an effect on the players. Everyone wants to say it's just another game, but it's bigger than a game."

Super Bowl forecast: high of 36

By Jane McManus
ESPNNNewYork.com
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK -- With less than a week to go before the Super Bowl, the forecast is starting to shape up.

AccuWeather now predicts a high of 36 degrees for Sunday with possible snow showers. There is a possibility that it will be a milder day and that precipitation turns to rain, but it doesn't look as though a Super Bowl blizzard will materialize.

Jeff Smith, a meteorologist at WABC-TV, said that seven days out is about the first glimpse at an accurate forecast, but it's only an estimate until 96 hours (four days) before.

"We're pretty confident that temperatures will be close to normal, the 30s, by the time the weekend rolls around," Smith said.

If this forecast bears out, after all the drama, the NFL will arrive at a Super Bowl Sunday in New Jersey that feels like an average winter day.

Like a lot of fans, Broncos coach John Fox isn't sweating the cold.

"I think in order to be a championship football team we've got to be weatherproof," Fox said, "and I think our football team played in all different elements this year. I feel comfortable with where we're at as far as the elements, but it's a part of the game. I think traditionwise, it's been a part of the league and a part of a lot of championships."

The first outdoor Super Bowl in a cold-weather climate should be the coldest weather ever for the 6:30 p.m. kickoff, with the record being 39 degrees set at Tulane Stadium in New Orleans on Jan. 16, 1972.

Fans in the area may be starting to get forecast fatigue, with all the speculation about the weather piled on top of an already snowy and cold winter. But weather is inextricably part of this historic game.

In the unlikely event that a lot more snow, ice or extreme cold gets added to the forecast, the NFL would need 72 hours' notice to move the game to Saturday or Monday, which is the backup plan. The league could also move the time of the game and would need to decide 48 hours ahead to prepare.

In the meantime, Tuesday and Wednesday will be extremely cold, but by the time fans have to climb into their seats at MetLife Stadium, it shouldn't be unbearable.

The NFL has created welcome bags for each ticket holder that include a seat cushion, texting gloves and a neck gaiter, among other warming items.

Super Bowl breakdown, prediction

By Herm Edwards
ESPN.com
January 27, 2014

After an impressive 26-16 win over the New England Patriots in the AFC Championship Game, the Denver Broncos and Peyton Manning have earned the right to play in another Super Bowl. They'll meet the Seattle Seahawks on Sunday, as Seattle came back and held off the San Francisco 49ers 23-17 in a terrific NFC Championship Game.

Will Manning win his second Super Bowl? Will Russell Wilson win his first? Can Seattle's defense slow down Manning and the NFL's highest-scoring offense?

Let's preview Super Bowl XLVIII as I did the conference title games last week: looking at which team has the advantage on offense, defense and special teams, along with an X factor. I'll also give my pick on the game.

Seattle Seahawks vs. Denver Broncos

Offense: Denver's offense is truly multidimensional, and as I've mentioned before, Manning is a pure distributor of the football. He likes to work inside the hash marks out, and will find the open man. But the biggest thing to understand about this offense is that it's predicated on moving the chains and not making any negative plays. Manning understands just about every defense you can throw at him and is continuously processing more information about your defensive game plan on every successive offensive play he runs.

If you play a single safety high, he's going to pick you apart by finding the one-on-one matchup he likes. If you go to a Cover 2 shell with two safeties deep, he'll check to a run or a play with crossing routes to exploit man coverage. A perfect example of this came in the second quarter of the AFC title game against the Patriots. On a third-and-10 from New England's 39, Manning saw there were only five men in the box and a two-deep shell with man coverage underneath. He knew that if Denver could block the Mike LB (who had responsibility for Knowshon Moreno in coverage), then there was no one else there. He audibled to a run, which picked up 28 yards and a first down. That play is evidence of why he's so special and why this will be a great matchup against Seattle's defense.

The Seahawks are primarily a running team, as the offense flows through the legs of Marshawn Lynch -- and Wilson. Lynch is the bell-cow running back, and a lot of what they like to do is based off play-action, bootlegs and QB waggles. I thought Wilson looked much better in the NFC title game than in the previous round against

New Orleans, and it was important for him to come back after that early fumble. He never loses his poise and he's special because of his ability to make the unannounced play, like the incredible scramble and 51-yard pass to Doug Baldwin against the 49ers. If Percy Harvin is able to play, he will make a huge difference for this offense, which is lacking a true vertical threat.

Advantage: Denver. There's a reason this was the highest-scoring offense in NFL history.

Defense: This is a tremendous Seattle defense and one that I enjoy watching on a weekly basis. The front four does a nice job of getting to the quarterback, and free-agent additions Michael Bennett and Cliff Avril have been huge in allowing Seattle to rotate in pass-rushers and get pressure on opposing QBs by only rushing four. This group plays with an attitude and it rallies to the football. Its calling card is its physicality, whether that's Richard Sherman on the outside or Earl Thomas and Kam Chancellor at safety. Sherman will line up on the left side of the defense most of the time and match up against the opposition's top target. Chancellor could be very important in this game, because he'll likely have the task of slowing down Julius Thomas one-on-one.

Seattle plays a base 4-3, but shows some 3-4 looks and has been playing a lot of combo coverages with Sherman in man on one side. If the Seahawks can continue to get pressure with four and drop seven into coverage against Manning, they have a great shot to win.

Denver has an opportunistic defense, but they have some holes now because of injuries. The Broncos' best cover man, Chris Harris, is out. Their best pass-rusher, Von Miller, is also out. They have struggled getting to the QB without blitzing, as evidenced by the three hits they got on Tom Brady in the AFC title game.

The strength of this unit is up front with its run defense, and defensive tackle Terrance Knighton has done a terrific job taking on double teams and occasionally pressuring the QB when he has a one-on-one matchup. Denver's D-line doesn't want any runs going in the A-gap, so it tries to force runners to bounce it outside and let the linebackers make plays. This defense is predicated on not giving up the big play and buckling down in the red zone. It will mix both man and zone looks, and especially likes to send zone dog blitzes when offenses are behind in the chains. The Seahawks should feel like they have an opportunity to throw the ball against this secondary, although Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie is the one corner to avoid. He has terrific ball skills. If Bailey is matched up with Harvin in the slot, that could be a fun matchup.

Advantage: Seattle. The Seahawks have the best defense in the NFL, and that unit is the reason they are playing in New Jersey on Sunday.

Special teams: The Broncos' Trindon Holliday is a special player on kickoffs and I think it's a good move that they have put Eric Decker back on punt returns. He has sure hands, which he'll need in that New Jersey weather. Harvin, if he plays, is an electric returner as well and makes you nervous when he has the ball in his hands. Both kickers are experienced and have had great postseasons.

Advantage: Seattle. Harvin is such a special player that he makes the difference if he's able to play and contribute effectively.

X factors

Denver, defensive end Shaun Phillips: He was signed to be only a part-time player, but he's stepped up and filled the void left by Miller and Elvis Dumervil. He can rush the passer and win one-on-one matchups, but his most important job on Sunday will be setting the edge against Wilson and making sure he doesn't escape the pocket.

Seattle, Percy Harvin: This may seem like the obvious choice, but he can affect the game in so many ways. Seattle's offense was so much more dangerous against New Orleans when he was in the lineup, as he draws the defense's attention and is a playmaker in space. Seattle will look to get him involved with runs, bubble screens, option routes and any other way it can.

Prediction: I'm a fan of coach John Fox and I'm glad that Manning got back to the Super Bowl, but I'm picking the underdog in this one. I picked Seattle over Denver before the season, so I'm not going back now. I think Seattle will be able to get Manning off his spot and make him hold the ball longer than he wants. He won't get guys running free like he has been used to all season. And that Seattle rushing attack should be able to keep Manning and his offense off the field for long enough. Winner: Seahawks.

Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie may retire if Broncos win Super Bowl

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY — When Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie arrived in the NFL in 2008, he told himself he'd play five seasons.

As a player from tiny Tennessee State, he figured five years would be plenty.

Now Rodgers-Cromartie is nearing the completion of year No. 6, and he said Monday that if his Denver Broncos win the Super Bowl, it would likely be his last.

Rodgers-Cromartie said he's thought about retirement for a while and has told teammates about his leave-on-top dreams.

"They think I'm joking," Rodgers-Cromartie said.

Rodgers-Cromartie signed a one-year \$4 million deal with the Broncos last March. Retiring would prevent him from cashing in on what will likely be substantial offers in free agency after a strong season as Denver's starting right cornerback.

But he said the money doesn't matter, not if could leave with a Super Bowl Ring and return to his hometown near Tampa.

What would he do?

"I'd just chill," Rodgers-Cromartie said.

And if the chilling became too boring, he'd like to use the psychology classes he took in college to become a high school guidance counselor.

Demaryius Thomas' biggest fans will cheer from prison

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY — Countless Denver Broncos fans will don Demaryius Thomas' orange No. 88 jersey on Super Bowl Sunday. In a women's prison in Tallahassee, Fla., Katina Smith will make her own.

Just as she has on so many other NFL Sundays (and a few Mondays, too) over the last four years, Smith will use tape to put her son's number on the back of her khaki-colored shirt.

Thomas' most devoted fan base might be inside the Federal Correctional Institution in Tallahassee, a minimum-security women's facility where his mother and grandmother, Minnie Pearl Thomas, have been incarcerated since 2000. Both were convicted of charges of conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute crack cocaine.

Smith, 41, is scheduled to be released in June 2017. Minnie Thomas, who had two prior convictions for selling drugs, received a life sentence. Neither has ever seen Demaryius play a football game in person — not in Pop Warner, not in high school and not with the Denver Broncos, for whom he has become a star receiver and two-time Pro Bowler.

"That drives me more, to know that they're in there and they're watching me," Thomas said Monday. "I try to go out and play my best, because I know they're going to talk about it to all the people in the jailhouse."

Thomas speaks by phone to his mother and grandmother after every game, and it was no different after the Broncos' 26-16 victory in the AFC Championship Game against the New England Patriots. Thomas caught a touchdown pass in the win — his second of the playoffs.

Smith was boastful, telling Thomas how confident she had been in him. Minnie Thomas, like always, was the emotional one.

"It was just happy," Thomas said.

Thomas was 11 when his mother and grandmother were arrested and 12 when they were convicted. With his father serving in the Army, including time stationed in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, Thomas went to live with his Aunt Shirley and her husband, James Brown, a preacher in tiny Montrose, Ga. The Browns raised him,

sent him to church, enrolled him in sports, cheered for him as he starred at Georgia Tech and have supported him through his career in Denver.

But what happened to his mother and grandmother also shaped him — and that's what Smith wanted. In an interview with The Denver Post in 2010, shortly after her son was selected in the first round of the draft, she s

aid she hoped her travails would lead her son to live a better life.

"I tell him to be the only example he needs of what can happen and the need to obey the laws of the land, down to wearing your seat belt," Smith said. "Just look at me and my mom."

Thomas will visit his mother and grandmother after the season, and surely they will recount Thomas' role in a record-setting passing game. His 14 TD receptions led all wide receivers.

When the Super Bowl kicks off Sunday, he is the receiver most likely to draw the man coverage of Seattle's top cornerback, brash-talking Richard Sherman. But unlike with Sherman's now-famous showdown with San Francisco 49ers receiver Michael Crabtree in the NFC Championship Game, there has been nothing but mutual respect between the corner and receiver this week.

Sherman this week called Thomas a top-five receiver; Thomas said he welcomed the challenge of facing a guy he considers to be among the NFL's elite corners — even if he has no plans to engage in any sort of battle of words with Sherman on the field.

"I'm not going to say, 'Shut him up,' but I'm going to go out and try to make some plays so I don't have anybody coming up to me saying I got shut down by Sherman," Thomas said.

Indeed, he knows he can't let down his fan club in Tallahassee.

"They get to watch every game," Thomas added. "They've got the T-shirts. All of the ladies have the T-shirts and watch me, so that's special."

Broncos DT disputes more than half of players use pot

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY – Denver Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton said he doesn't think more than half of NFL players smoke marijuana, as reported by HBO's "Real Sports."

"That's way too high. I don't know," Knighton said Monday. "I really can't speak on that because it doesn't involve my personal life, so I can't speak for other guys."

With recreational marijuana legal in Colorado and Washington -- homes of Super Bowl XLVIII contestants the Denver Broncos and Seattle Seahawks -- the drug would have been a hot topic this week even before that HBO story, and subsequent comments last week by Commissioner Roger Goodell that the NFL could consider allowing a medical exemption for marijuana.

Seahawks coach Pete Carroll echoed that sentiment Tuesday.

"We have to continue to explore and compete to find ways that are going to make our game a better game and take care of our players in the best way possible," Carroll said. "Regardless of what other stigmas may be involved, I think we have to do this because the world of medicine is trying to do the exact same thing and figure it out and they're coming to some conclusions."

Knighton said he was unaware of comments by former Broncos tight end Nate Jackson to HBO in which Jackson said marijuana can help players manage the pain that comes with playing football.

"I think with something like that, it may be helpful, but it is also something that can be abused. So I think that's why it's banned and that's why it's on the list, because it can be abused and it can backfire," Knighton said. "It's a touchy subject, but whatever is best, they'll figure it out. Until then, I'm going to follow the rules."

Knighton's responses to a series of questions about marijuana on Monday made it clear the Broncos are trying to avoid talking about drug use in their home state, where on Jan. 1 the first recreational marijuana stores opened for business. Colorado residents over the age of 21 can buy up to an ounce of marijuana.

Marijuana remains banned by the NFL and any players who test positive are subject to discipline by the league, regardless of the state laws where they play.

Audio of Peyton Manning's audibles is no fun for Broncos

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY — The city of Omaha, Neb., might be relishing in the fame Peyton Manning has brought in recent weeks, but the Broncos aren't thrilled that one of Manning's pre-snap calls has become so famous.

The NFL requires teams to put microphones on its centers, and that combined with how quiet the home crowd is at Sports Authority Field at Mile High is when Manning and the Broncos are on offense has resulted in many of Manning's calls becoming public.

"It's not real fun for us," coach John Fox said Monday.

It isn't just Omaha, though Manning used it dozens of times in each of the Broncos' AFC playoff wins. Other calls that were clearly picked up by the CBS broadcasts of the playoff games against San Diego and New England. Others include "Marshall" (the name of Manning's young son), "Montana" (unclear if Manning is making reference to the home state of his backup, Brock Osweiler, or Hall of Famer Joe) and "apple apple" (maybe he's hungry?).

"When you give people 18 hours a day to think of stuff, this is what we do," Fox said. "We are very blessed. (Manning) is very sharp. He's done it a very long time in his career, and he is as good — I am not going to say he is the best — but he is as good that I have ever been around of doing it."

Fox on Monday declined to elaborate about what Manning might mean with his specific language, and Manning has only offered sarcastic explanation about the nexus of the Omaha call.

That's because Fox and Manning don't want the Seahawks to be able to pick up any sort of hints to what Manning might be signaling to his teammates.

"I know we have to change a lot, and all of those kinds of things," Fox said. "In today's NFL offensively, there are more and more people doing things at the line of scrimmage, whether it is audibles, and I don't want to get into too much."

Gov. Chris Christie: New Jersey proud to host Super Bowl

By Keith Sargeant
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

NEWARK — In his first public appearance to talk about Super Bowl XLVIII this week, Gov. Chris Christie reminded everyone assembled at the city's recently refurbished Boys & Girls Club where the NFL's championship game will be played.

"It was good to sit at home yesterday and watch the two teams arrive," Christie said Monday afternoon. "And to all my friends in New York, I want to remind you they did not land at LaGuardia Airport, (and) God knows they did not land at JFK. They landed at Newark Liberty International Airport, because as I've been saying from the beginning ... the Super Bowl is in New Jersey."

Christie joined NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, Jets owner Woody Johnson, Giants co-chairman Jonathan Tisch, Jets lineman Brandon Moore and other NFL officials in unveiling a project at the Boys & Girls Club of Newark that benefited from the N.Y./N.J. Super Bowl Host Committee's Snowflake Youth Foundation's charitable donation.

The club, which provides services to thousands of Newark families, underwent what Super Bowl Host Committee president Al Kelly called "a top-to-bottom renovation" that included a transformation of the welcome area, games room, visual arts room, technology center, dance and fitness studio, instructional kitchen and garden, gymnasium and aquatics center.

"It's great to be in New Jersey for the Super Bowl," Goodell said. "We're thrilled to be here and also thrilled to be in Newark with the young people of this community and also support the Boys and Girls Club of Newark. The NFL is all about communities, and we believe we have a responsibility to leave a legacy well beyond the event."

Kelly said the renovation of the 43-year-old Central Ward-based facility cost nearly \$1.2 million and was funded by gifts from the NFL Foundation, Prudential, Public Service Electric

and Gas Co., Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Gibbons law firm.

Christie, who reminded everyone of his Newark roots by noting he was born in the Brick City, credited the Giants' and Jets' ownership families for rehabilitating 32 facilities from around the metropolitan area, including Sandy-affected projects in Belmar, Highlands, Hoboken, Rahway and Sayreville.

"These clubs have a motto," Christie said. "It is, 'Great futures start here.' "

Christie made no mention of any of the controversies that have enveloped his administration in recent weeks, but did address the debate over whether Super Bowl XLVIII is New York's or New Jersey's game.

"Now people can go have some fun in New York, I'm fine with that. They have a couple good restaurants over there," Christie said. "But in the end, this is about the game. It's not about all the other stuff, and when the game starts at 6:30 and when the announcers come on they're not going to say, 'Live from New York City,' because that would be a lie. They may show that skyline that you can see from where the game is actually being played, which is the state of New Jersey.

"So we're proud to be the host of the game," he added. "We're proud to share some other festivities with our neighbors on the wrong side of the river."

Decade after playing for John Fox, Dan Morgan wants to beat him

By Tom Pelissero
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY — Dan Morgan admits he felt nervous before Super Bowl XXXVIII, but he doesn't think that's why he spent the previous night vomiting.

Morgan still blames a bad burger he ate the night before the game, at a resort then-Carolina Panthers coach John Fox took his team to about an hour outside of Houston, but he said the sickness actually might have helped him.

"I felt really light on my feet," said Morgan, who received an IV before kickoff, started at middle linebacker and had a game-high 18 tackles (11 solo) in a 32-29 loss to the New England Patriots in February, 2004.

"I think maybe part of it was just because of all the throwing up I did. I did lose a good 8 pounds. I filled the whole bathtub up. It was pretty bad."

A decade later, Fox will be back on the sideline for Super Bowl XLVIII with the Denver Broncos. Morgan — a one-time Pro Bowl pick before injuries derailed his playing career — is also back, though in a less visible role.

Retired since 2009, Morgan is in his third season as a scout for the Seattle Seahawks, who brought him aboard as an intern, hired him full-time in 2011 and promoted him to assistant pro personnel director last summer.

"It's nice just being in the background, working your butt off and helping the team out as much as you can," Morgan said. "I have a ton of fun with it and it's a great group of guys in Seattle that we work with."

General manager John Schneider gave Morgan a chance on the recommendation of Trent Kirchner, now the Seahawks' pro personnel director, who was scouting for the Panthers during that Super Bowl year and often would discuss opposing players with Morgan on the sideline.

Now Morgan is helping mold a Seahawks roster that's a win away from the franchise's first NFL title — but must get past the Broncos, led by his old coach.

"I get to see him around a lot. I think he's the same guy," Morgan said of Fox, 58, who spent nine years with the Panthers (2002 to '10) before his contract wasn't renewed after a 2-14 finish in his final season, then made the move to Denver.

"He's a players' coach, and guys always liked him. He knows when to be tough on you, and he knows when to back down and take it easy. He was good. He was a lot of fun to play for."

Another coach who was on that 2003 Panthers staff, tight ends coach Dave Magazu, now coaches the Broncos' offensive line. Defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio is among a handful of others who were on Fox's staffs in Carolina, but not during the Super Bowl year.

Setting aside his stomach issues the night before, Morgan said his most vivid memory of that game was the streaker who ran onto the field as players awaited the second-half kickoff and got decked by Patriots linebacker Matt Chatham.

"We're all serious and then it kind of broke the ice a little bit, because you've got a guy running around the field in a G-string," Morgan said. "It's definitely a different kind of nervousness. You know there's a whole lot on the line."

Being out of the spotlight makes Super Bowl week "definitely more relaxing," Morgan said. But there are sure to be some nerves Sunday for both him and Fox, who hasn't gotten any smack-talking texts from his former middle linebacker yet.

"No, I figured I'd stay away from them and let him enjoy himself a little bit," Morgan said. "I'm sure I'll see him. It's weird, definitely, playing against him. But hopefully, we come out on the winning end."

Peyton Manning halts retirement talk for Super Bowl

By Jarrett Bell
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. - Peyton Manning arrived in the Greater Big Apple on Sunday for the chance to pad his legacy in Super Bowl XLVIII. One of his first pieces of business — and he looked the part, with his conservative gray suit accented by blue — was to set the record straight about what he does not envision this big game will be.

Manning did not come to town to ride off into the sunset.

Or to get swept away by a blizzard, either.

He does not see this as a grand farewell.

In a nice way, the Denver Broncos star suggested saving that narrative for another time.

"I know there have been a number of players who have walked away as champions," Manning said aboard the Cornucopia Majesty, a cruise ship that the Broncos will use for press conferences this week.

"I'm sure that's a great feeling for those people. John Elway. Ray Lewis did it last year. Michael Strahan. In talking to Ray Lewis and talking to John Elway, they couldn't play anymore. That was all they had to give. They truly left it all out there."

Manning had four surgical neck procedures, missed a season, had to find a new team — and just produced the greatest season by a quarterback in NFL history.

It took so much to get back here and he's hot. And he still loves getting into Caveman mode, relentlessly breaking down the videotape and turning over every stone as part of the preparation.

This is not the time to give that up. This is not some broken down has-been hanging on.

Said Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey, "You'd think after a season like this, he'd want to play 10 more years."

Yet people wonder. Manning is 37. He has nothing to prove, perhaps, beyond whether he can rack up more championships and MVP trophies to go with his place among the all-time greats.

Lewis understands. A year ago, he was a lot like Manning, the biggest name on the biggest stage in sports. Unlike Manning, though, Lewis knew that he was on his last legs as an iconic linebacker as the Baltimore Ravens hit New Orleans.

That realization, nor leaving with a Super Bowl victory, didn't make it any easier for Lewis.

"Even when you know that it's it, you really don't want to let it go," Lewis told USA TODAY Sports on Sunday night.

Lewis can see both sides of it, when it comes to Manning.

"If he can keep playing, he should play," Lewis said. "But there's no shame in going out on top."

Lewis said that he has talked about retirement with Manning on multiple occasions over the past year or so, most strikingly during an extended conversation that went for roughly a half hour after the quarterback came over to see Lewis in the locker room after the Ravens upset the Broncos in the AFC divisional playoffs last January.

He indeed remembers telling Manning that he pretty much had two games left on his last ride. And as Manning discussed it on Sunday, he dutifully took mental notes about the internal process.

Yet Lewis also recognizes a key difference.

"At my position, linebacker, it is so physically punishing," Lewis said. "There are only so many hits that your body can absorb. At quarterback, you're at a position where you have a better chance of taking fewer hits."

If Manning can guide his Broncos past the Seattle Seahawks in the classic matchup pitting the NFL's best offense vs. its best defense, he will match Lewis, Elway and Strahan with two Super Bowl victories.

In any event, it's so notable that if Manning wins on Sunday, his case would include the distinction of becoming the first quarterback ever to win two Super Bowls with two different franchises.

He's also healthy, with much of the strength in his arm that was sapped by the nerve issues attached to his neck, restored well enough to pass for 55 TDs and 5,477 yards during the regular season.

"I feel a little better than I thought I would at this point," Manning said, referring to the post-surgery stage of his life.

At this point, that's making the decision of whether it's time to contemplate retirement so much easier — assuming that he escapes Sunday's tilt in one piece.

But the other key component is the fire for his pressure-packed job.

"As soon as I stop enjoying it, when I can't produce, if I can't help the team, that's when I'll stop playing," Manning said. "If that's next year, maybe it is, but I certainly want to continue to keep playing."

If Manning wins on Sunday and doesn't ride off into the sunset amid a shower of confetti, Lewis chuckles when imagining the quarterback's mindset.

"If he came back next year after winning it all, what's he going to do?" Lewis said. "He's going to try to win it again."

One way or another, there's so much to be said for going out on your own terms.

Broncos reveal Russell Wilson's tendencies

By Brent Sobleski
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

The NFL is comprised of some of the finest athletes in the world. What separates players and teams from one another is dedication to their craft.

A player's technique and ability to recognize tendencies is nearly as important as their natural ability. Everyone in the NFL is talented. Not all of them put in the work to achieve greatness.

The Denver Broncos are on the precipice of greatness. Super Bowl XLVIII is six days away, and the Broncos are attempting to identify every weakness in the Seattle Seahawks roster.

It starts with Seahawks QB Russell Wilson. Broncos DT Terrance "Pot Roast" Knighton told reporters Monday he's already spotted tendencies in Wilson's game Denver can exploit.

"You've just got to watch a lot of film. Quarterbacks have tendencies. His tendency is that he is a right-handed quarterback; he wants to get out to his right and throw. He's more successful that way. So we've got to do a good job of keeping him in the pocket and force him out of his comfort zone. When he's moving left he'll tend to run it more and when he's moving right he wants to pass it more. We just have to do a good job of containing him. He'll get out and he'll make his plays during the game, but we'll just have to limit them."

The Broncos' finished 13th in the NFL with 41 sacks. Denver can apply pressure, but they may slow-play their pass rush, keep contain and force Wilson to beat the defense with his arm.

Wilson struggled to find any rhythm as a passer the past six weeks. Since playing his best game of the season Dec. 2 against the Saints, Wilson is 84-of-145 passing (57.9 percent) with five touchdowns and three interceptions.

If Wilson is able to complete a few early passes and starts to beat the Broncos offense, Denver and defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio can then bring blitzes from the edge to prevent Wilson from rolling to a particular side.

Wilson may be athletic, but Seahawks' offensive line play has been poor throughout the season. The pressure will eventually get to Wilson.

The biggest concern for the Broncos is what happens when Wilson finally gets out in space. He is always looking down-field to complete a pass. The coverage has to stay with their receivers. The Seahawks generally do more damage when Wilson throws on the run than when he simply takes off with the football.

Wilson has made enough plays for the Seahawks to advance to the Super Bowl. It may not prove to be enough against a Broncos' defense which believes it has the quarterback's number.

Broncos fan Eric LeGrand scores two Super Bowl tickets

Keith Sargeant
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK — Eric LeGrand was being interviewed at Radio Row in the Super Bowl XLVIII media headquarters Monday morning when the one goal he sought since his beloved Denver Broncos won the AFC championship came to fruition.

LeGrand is going to the Super Bowl after receiving two tickets for Sunday night's game at MetLife Stadium thanks to NFL.com senior analyst Gil Brandt.

"It means the world to me," LeGrand said. "As long as I get in (with tickets), I'll find a way to get into somebody's (luxury) box so I don't have to sit out in the 25-degree weather."

Not lost on LeGrand, who remains paralyzed 39 months after fracturing his vertebrae in a Rutgers football game against Army at MetLife Stadium, is that the Super Bowl is being played at the site where he last walked.

"To see the Broncos here now, in the stadium I got hurt in, in the Super Bowl," LeGrand said, "it's like a dream come true right now."

LeGrand has been rooting for Denver since the mid-1990s, initially idolizing former Broncos star running back Terrell Davis and remaining a passionate follower of the perennial AFC West power through John Elway's retirement, the brief Tim Tebow period and now Peyton Manning's championship run.

"I was a 6-year old kid and I said I was going to follow that team from here on out," said LeGrand, who wore Davis' No. 30 during his Pop Warner days and while starring at linebacker and running back at Colonia High School. "The last time they were in the Super Bowl was '98, so I stuck with them through the tough times. Now they're here, I'm giddy about it, and, of course, I'm going to stick with them."

LeGrand has even traveled to Denver to root on the Broncos, attending a playoff game in 2011 and celebrating in the locker room with Tebow and other players afterward. A burgeoning celebrity himself, LeGrand — who was a popular interview request while getting around Radio Row on Monday morning — is friendly with Manning and Broncos teammates such as wide receiver Demaryius Thomas, safety Duke Ihenacho, wide receiver Wes Welker and linebacker Danny Trevathan.

"A lot of them know I'm a big supporter of the team so they're all pretty cool with me," LeGrand said. "I was going to go out there this year, but I have my tradition

of sitting at home next to the heater with my feet kicked up and they were doing well so I wasn't going to mess with that. But I gotta go to this game."

LeGrand, who just this month completed his bachelor's degree requirements at Rutgers, intends to soak up the Super Bowl XLVIII atmosphere in New York before focusing on rehabilitation Wednesday and Thursday.

"Today I'm here promoting my foundation, Team LeGrand, but I still want to get into sports broadcasting, so the next step is to make a career for myself," LeGrand said. "Rehab is going great, I'm moving a lot more, things are slowly but surely progressing."

As for a prediction for Super Bowl XLVIII, LeGrand admittedly is biased.

"Broncos," he said with a smile, "34-24."

Super Bowl ticket demand down because 'teams are not sexy'

By Gary Mihoces
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK — At this time a year ago, there was speculation the Super Bowl in New York could be the priciest ticket ever. But brokers said Monday the market for the Seattle Seahawks-Denver Broncos matchup is soft, and tickets are available for much closer to face value than anticipated.

And don't blame it solely on the cold weather anticipated for the outdoor game.

Lance Patania, president/CEO of Prominent Tickets, a ticket brokerage in Glen Rock, N.J., said his firm was offering \$800 face value tickets for \$1,200. In other years, he's seen markets this early in the week in the \$2,300-\$2,500 range.

Patania said that, in relation to face value, he's never seen it "this cheap this early" in his 25 years in the business.

"A lot of our clients are simply saying they don't want to go. They don't want to sit upstairs for \$1,200, even if they were given to them at face value, they don't want to pay \$800," said Patania.

"That just sends shivers up my spine. That just shows there's not a lot of local people looking to go. ... Everybody said it's Wall Street, it's New York City, it's North Jersey, a lot of people, a lot of money, they're going to drive the market. It's been doing anything but that."

Patania said it goes beyond the cold.

"The issue with the weather is one thing, but the teams are not drawing," said Patania.

"If this game was in San Diego or Miami, it would still not be a good ticket because the teams are not sexy. ... You don't have these huge fan bases that you would have if Washington or Dallas or New York or someone else was in it."

Not that the NFL is concerned about the resale market.

It set prices for this game at \$800, \$1,000, \$1,200 and \$2,500 (club seats with indoor amenities). Another 1,000 tickets were available for \$500 each through a lottery. That's down from \$650 in the same lottery last year in New Orleans, and the number of lottery tickets was doubled from 500.

The NFL said MetLife Stadium, with a Super Bowl capacity of about 79,000, is sold out.

"We sell the tickets at face value and demand from fans and sponsors has been unprecedented," Brian McCarthy, NFL vice president of corporate communications, told USA TODAY Sports in an email.

"No, we are not concerned with secondary (resale) markets which will ebb and flow but will perhaps enable fans to buy tickets at even more reasonable prices. The concerns about the weather continue to dissipate and we've seen an influx of demand today."

In the parlance of the brokerage business, there are "dead-end prices," the lowest-priced tickets out there.

Tony Knopp, CEO and co-founder of Spotlight Ticket Management, a California-based online firm which helps corporations and smaller companies manage purchases of entertainment and sport tickets from brokers, said Monday he had been informed of Super Bowl tickets available for \$1,050.

"There were years in the mid 2000s where the get-in price vacillated between \$2,800 and \$4,000 right around this time," said Knopp.

Knopp said resale prices also dipped before this month's BCS national championship in Los Angeles.

"Let's juxtapose ... beautiful Los Angeles for a national championship game versus 32 degrees, wintry mix in New York," said Knopp.

"I think there are a lot of people (in the brokerage business) really afraid that we might see another BCS championship style market fall out."

These 5 pro-marijuana billboards are set to surround the Super Bowl

By Laken Litman
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

The freeways surrounding MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J. are about to be plastered with five billboards advocating the use of marijuana, and, in some cases, attacking football just miles from the game's biggest stage.

Washington and Colorado are the only two states to have legalized marijuana, so the Marijuana Policy Project, an organization based in Washington D.C., decided this year's Super Bowl between the Seattle Seahawks and Denver Broncos would be an opportune time to get their message out.

"Hopefully it's going to inspire people to talk to one another about marijuana and particularly its relative harms compared to alcohol and football," said Mason Tvert, the director of communications at MPP.

This isn't the first time MPP has tried to steal the NFL's stage. The group posted a billboard outside of Denver's Sports Authority Field at Mile High Stadium in September telling the league to "Stop Driving Players to Drink," and, as a football leaned against a foaming beer glass advised: "A safer choice is now legal here."

"I think a lot of people will be shocked at just how many people are getting in trouble for using a less harmful substance than alcohol," Tvert said. "When you're sitting in a full stadium and you think about the idea of everyone in there being arrested 10 times over, it really gets you thinking about just how many people that is."

Tvert is in New York City this week and says he is heading to NFL commissioner Roger Goodell's office Wednesday to drop off a petition calling on the NFL to stop punishing players for using marijuana. He said that, as of Monday afternoon, the petition has over 12,000 signatures.

Medical experts are torn when it comes to this drug. In a USA TODAY article from last week, Stuart Gitlow, Director of the Annenberg Physician Training Program in Addictive Disease at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York City, said there's no benefit.

"It's simply that people want the freedom to be stoned," he said. "That's all it is. And there's a great deal of risk."

Donald Abrams, chief of oncology at San Francisco General Hospital, argues from the other side.

"In my 37 years as a physician, the number of patients I've admitted to the hospital with complications from marijuana use is zero," he said. "The number I've admitted due to alcohol use is profound."

As far as using marijuana for medical reasons, last week Goodell didn't waver from his message about use in the NFL.

"I'm not a medical expert," he said. "We will obviously follow signs. We will follow medicine and if they determine this could be a proper usage in any context, we will consider that. Our medical experts are not saying that right now."

'Madden' sim predicts Broncos will win Super Bowl

By Brett Molina
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

If a video game simulation of Super Bowl XLVIII is correct, "The 12th Man" will have a disappointing Sunday.

Electronic Arts ran its annual simulation of the Super Bowl through football video game Madden NFL 25, and it has the Denver Broncos topping the Seattle Seahawks 31-28.

According to the simulation, the Seahawks jump out to an early lead off an interception by Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman before Broncos' QB Peyton Manning leads his team on two scoring drives to take a 21-10 advantage. The Seahawks force the game into overtime, but the Broncos claim victory on a Matt Prater field goal.

The simulation has Manning finishing as the game's Most Valuable Player, with 322 passing yards and 3 touchdowns.

Watch EA's recap of Super Bowl XLVIII below:

Before you dismiss EA's Madden NFL simulation, keep in mind this formula has resulted in an 8-2 record.

Knee injuries worry NFL players more than concussions

By Peter Barzilai and Erik Brady
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK — NFL players worry about head injuries and their potential long-term consequences but not nearly as much as they worry about injuries to their legs, particularly their knees, that can end careers.

USA TODAY Sports surveyed 293 players on 20 NFL teams and asked what body part they were most concerned about injuring in a game: 46% said knees or other parts of their legs, 24% said head and neck and 26% said none.

The poll of players on active rosters was conducted from mid-December to early January and has a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points. If requested, players were granted anonymity because they were concerned about fallout to their vote going public.

The results seem surprising given all of the emphasis the NFL and the culture at large have given to the life-altering dangers of concussions in recent years.

"Anytime you can avoid hits to the head it's great," Chicago Bears running back Michael Bush said, "but if you get hit in your knees, that's your career."

New York Jets defensive tackle Leger Douzable is another example of the here-and-now thinking of many players. He is more aware of head injuries but more fearful of a serious leg injury.

"For me, it's the knee," he said. "That's the one that gets me, not the head or anything. A head injury? Don't get me wrong, that's bad. No one wants a concussion. But, here and now, a knee injury can be career-ending."

The USA TODAY Sports survey also asked players whether NFL rule changes on hits to the head had made the game safer. Thirty-nine percent said they had, but a majority — 53% — said safety was about the same and 8% said the game was less safe.

"You can't make a vicious game safe at the end of the day," said Seattle Seahawks cornerback Walter Thurmond, whose team will meet the Denver Broncos on Sunday in the Super Bowl. "The nature of the game is violence, and it's been about that since its creation."

To many players, they are in a no-win situation — more rules to avoid hits to the head are causing more hits to the knees.

Several players pointed to the December play on which New England Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski took a knee-to-helmet hit when Cleveland Browns safety T.J. Ward came in low. Gronkowski tore his right anterior cruciate and medial collateral ligaments in the violent collision.

"You saw what happened to Gronkowski," Browns guard Shawn Lauvao said. "That's because of a rule change. The way it was before, he would have just got hit in the head. He would have been there for the next play. It's a Catch-22. I know they're trying to make it safer, but some rules changes just take away" from the game.

Do the rule changes take away from the quality of play? More than half (53%) of the players surveyed said they thought the quality of NFL games remained essentially the same after the rule changes while 18% said games were better and 29% said they were worse.

Baltimore Ravens defensive end Chris Canty said the game had improved. "It's the greatest game in the world, (and) viewership and the game's popularity would support that," he said.

New Orleans Saints safety Kenny Vaccaro said it was worse. "Fans come to see us bang, see us hit. Now it's almost like flag football. I think it has changed the integrity of the game," he said.

Green Bay Packers offensive tackle Bryan Bulaga said it was the same. "I still think the game is great. I really do," he said. "I think the game is being played physical. I don't think it's backed down at all. There's a lot of good collisions happening. You see it every Sunday, clean hits, good hits.

"So I don't think it's done anything to the game. I just think the NFL has taken steps to really hammer the player safety home. And I think all the guys appreciate that, and everybody wants to be looked after by the league."

Except some players, mostly defensive ones, think the league is better at looking after some players than others.

"It's all about protecting quarterbacks," Arizona Cardinals defensive tackle Darnell Dockett said. "It's kind of like, 'Hey, I'm not disposable, but you guys are.'"

"What about linemen diving at knees? What about chop blocks? It's like, 'Quarterbacks are the face of the league, and we're not disposable. But you linemen are. We can get more of you. We can only get one or two Tom Bradys.'"

As Washington Redskins cornerback DeAngelo Hall put it: "The game is safer for certain players: quarterbacks, receivers, I guess punters now. The rest of us still get the crap beat out of us."

Jeff Miller, NFL senior vice president of health and safety policy, said, "We take those comments very seriously." He said the NFL's competition committee would examine the data to see whether those concerns were well placed and whether changes needed to be made.

Short-term view

Kevin Guskiewicz is research director of the Center for the Study of Retired Athletes, among his many titles at the University of North Carolina, where he studies concussions and interviews hundreds of former pro and college players.

"These guys who are 50 and 60 years old tell me that when they were playing they were only concerned about next week, not 10 or 20 or 30 years down the road," he said. "They were always thinking about the next game."

That's why Guskiewicz says he is not at all surprised to hear today's players worry more about their knees than their heads. He thinks that's a reflection of age and ambition more than a disregard for concussions.

"Players know that knee injuries can be season-ending or even career-ending," he said. "We're talking about their livelihoods. I don't think they perceive concussions as season-ending or career-ending."

Guskiewicz, who is chairman of an NFL subcommittee on safety equipment and rule changes, says players are much more tuned in to the dangers of concussions today than they were even a few years ago.

"I'll bet if you asked that question about which body part 10 years ago, it would have been under 10% who said they worried about their heads," Guskiewicz said. "I think we are making progress, but it still speaks to being ready next week or next season and not being quite ready to think about what they'll be like at 45 or 55."

Aman Alexander, chief executive officer of Sunstone Analytics, which provides medical and performance analytics to professional sports teams, agrees with players who note knee injuries are far more damaging to their earning potential than concussions. "It's clear from analysis of NFL and NCAA injuries that players realize what injuries are likely to impact their ability to get drafted and perform," Alexander said. "Meniscal and cartilage procedures and ACL reconstructions are statistically the most damaging injuries, especially at running back and offensive line positions, while concussions — even multiple concussions — have no statistical impact on the odds of getting drafted or performance."

Rise in ACL injuries?

Cardinals receiver Larry Fitzgerald is among those who say tacklers aiming lower means more leg injuries.

"There's less head trauma issues this year, with the emphasis on helmet-to-helmet contact," he said. "But there's been a lot of catastrophic injuries to lower extremities, like Dustin Keller, Rob Gronkowski, Randall Cobb. Hurt is hurt."

According to the American College of Sports Medicine, NFL teams reported an average of 43 total ACL injuries a season from 2002 to '12. Sunstone Analytics research says there have been 65 ACL injuries in the 2013 season, though that includes injuries suffered in spring practices, training camp and the preseason.

The NFL's Miller said the league would study the data on injuries after the season. He cautioned against drawing conclusions not fully informed by the annual data.

"When we look at the number of injuries and the types of injuries and the breakdown as to when and where and how those injuries occur, that's going to inform the decision-making in terms of the health and safety measures that we take," he said. "So if it turns out that the concern that is expressed in your survey is well-founded as we look at the number at the end of the year, then that's something we're going to have to address."

Miller said the league would look into player concerns expressed in the survey.

"We share the concern about all player health and safety issues," he said. "Wherever the injuries occur, we need to look at those and move on and make the game safer where we can. The culture change at least around head injuries is going to take some time."

Patriots running back Shane Vereen says the game is safer but can never really be safe.

"I think what you have to keep in mind is that it's a physical game," he said. "You're going to get concussions regardless. You're going to get shoulder injuries regardless of how good your shoulder pads are. It's a physical game. We know coming in."

Still, he thinks the new rules are good for the game and for the players.

"I think it's safer as far as the concussions and the targeting of the head," Vereen said. "I think that's very important. Especially later down the line, where we're seeing examples of where that can go bad. I think they've done a good job as far as keeping players' head safe."

Saints guard Jahri Evans believes that players must look out for each other. "I don't want to go for somebody's knees and risk getting him hurt just because he's the guy across from me," he said. "I hope he feels the same way about me."

Evans said he understands why defensive backs go low "on a 280-pound tight end like Gronkowski because that's the best way (the DB) knows to get him down. But

as career professionals we've got to do a better job of looking out for our fellow pros. We need to do a better job of policing ourselves and protecting each other."

Saints fullback Jed Collins is among the players who take the long view and worry more about concussions than other injuries.

"A bum shoulder or a blown-out knee is one thing," he said, "but my brain is the thing that makes me who I am."

Ravens tight end Dallas Clark seconded that. "There's no known fix for the damage of concussions, the hits to the brain," he said. "That's a no-brainer."

Lil Wayne has a fun story to share about Peyton Manning

By Nina Mandell
USA TODAY Sports
January 27, 2014

Rapper Lil Wayne spoke to Sports Illustrated's Peter King for Monday's edition of his Monday Morning Quarterback column and shared a fun story that he heard from one of the guys who travels with him about the Manning family:

"I have a story about Peyton. A guy who has been on the road with us, he was like an uncle to us, he told us this story. When he was in jail, about to come home, he was put on one of those work-release things in New Orleans. Every morning, real early, he would clean the schoolyard of the (Isidore) Newman School (where the Manning kids attended). Because he was a prisoner, he would have to clean the schoolyard at 4 or 5 in the morning. There was not one morning, 4:30, 5 in the morning, he wouldn't see Archie, Peyton, Cooper, or Eli out on the field. He'd see Archie throwing passes to Cooper, or Peyton throwing routes to Cooper. I don't know if people know this, but it was Cooper who was the prodigy. He [the roadie] would tell us the story, you know, like it was destined."

The story goes with the oft-repeated tale that Cooper, the oldest of the Manning brothers, was the most talented of the three until an injury took him out of the game.

The rapper thinks the Broncos will win the big game and added of Peyton Manning: "I am glad I am able to live to see him, to see the kind of things he is doing."

Klee: On Super Bowl stage, Seahawks quarterback driven by faith

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK - On a fall Friday in Madison, Wis., Russell Wilson approached the man in charge of the hospital tour.

This was a simple request, straight to the point.

"Give me to the person in the worst condition."

The man looked at the Badgers' quarterback as though he were lost.

"That's who I want to see."

This is the opposing quarterback in Super Bowl XLVIII, Broncos Country.

Good luck rooting against him.

"He's unwavering. He doesn't flinch. I think he knows he's just guarded beyond what's normal life," Bret Bielema, who coached Wilson at Wisconsin, said in a phone conversation. "I think he knows he's protected by a higher power."

Wilson, the second-year quarterback of the Seahawks, and Montee Ball, the rookie running back of the Broncos, shared a huddle in one season at Wisconsin.

They share something deeper, though. It's the driving force in their lives, a belief that defines them more than passing yards, Super Bowl berths or touchdown runs.

"Both Russell and Montee are men of tremendous faith," Bielema said.

It's why Wilson made a point to find the sickest kid at the children's hospital. It's why he buys T-shirts for his teammates with the logo, "Audience of One."

It's what kept Ball from crumbling when he was assaulted on the Wisconsin campus, just weeks before his senior season. Ball was attacked by five men, beaten and hospitalized.

"It was one block from my house," Ball said.

"That moment changed my life. It changed my perspective," he added.

For Ball and Wilson, perspective is shaped by their Christian faith.

There are 5,000-plus credentialed media at this Super Bowl. As the Broncos team bus left an event Monday, fans snapped Twitpics of their football idols as they rolled by. A corporate suite for the big game at MetLife Stadium goes for \$500,000, according to TiqIQ. Jay-Z will rap about money and fame at a party hosted by DirecTV on Saturday.

This Super Bowl is not normal life.

"I was good the whole week," Broncos wide receiver Demaryius Thomas said Monday. "But once we landed, I was nervous."

For some of the players involved, leaning on their faith is a means to stay grounded.

"I was brought up a Christian," Thomas said. "I was raised around great people."

As prevalent as they are in the NFL locker room, the beliefs of Christian players often go underreported. It's odd, considering the prayer huddle after a Broncos practice Thursday included 22 players - almost half the active roster.

If it's that big of a deal to that many players, why aren't we writing about it?

"That doesn't sell newspapers and magazines," Broncos tight end Julius Thomas told me in training camp. "As athletes, the big stories are when we do something wrong."

After one of their final practices in Colorado before leaving for the East Coast, roughly two dozen Broncos formed a circle near midfield. Former player Brian Dawkins, one of the most vicious tacklers to play safety in the NFL, led the group in a rousing prayer.

"God saved me in 1990. I knew about Jesus Christ. But I did not have a relationship with him," Dawkins said afterward. "I made a decision at that time to welcome him into my heart. From that point on, that's when my journey began."

Dawkins now is an analyst with ESPN. As a high-profile figure in the sports world, but also a devoted Christian, Dawkins walked a fine line, he said.

"You don't push your beliefs on other people. But I'm going to tell you that I'm a man of God," Dawkins said. "I'm going to tell you that I'm blessed. I'm going to tell you that Jesus is my Lord and savior. If we're talking about football, and the conversation's not leading us there, I will not bring that up."

He paused and added, "But if we get to that conversation, I'm going to tell you that I'm a man of God. I try to say that in all of my press conversations at some point."

Asked for his favorite memory playing alongside Wilson at Wisconsin, Ball pointed to a Big Ten game against Indiana in 2011.

"The halfback pass, when I threw it to him," Ball said.

The play was different, a break from the norm.

Wilson's past six games appear, for the most part, quite pedestrian. In that stretch he hasn't thrown for more than 215 yards. For comparison's sake, Peyton Manning threw for at least 215 yards in 17 of 18 games. In Seattle's two playoff wins, Wilson completed 25 passes, total. Manning did that in the first half at Oakland.

But there's something different about Wilson. He breaks from the norm.

"I'm big into visualizing," Wilson said Sunday upon arriving for Super Bowl week.

"This moment right here is exactly what I visualized."

Wilson's best moments come on third, even fourth down. Case in point: Trailing the 49ers 17-13 in the fourth quarter of the NFC championship game, Wilson unloaded a deep pass that doubled as a prayer.

The target was Jermaine Kearse, a receiver who had one other catch in the game, one in the previous game and zero in the game before that.

On fourth and 7, Wilson hit Kearse for a 35-yard touchdown.

A play like that takes some kind of faith.

"There's a huge belief that he's at his strongest when you're at your weakest," Bielema said. "That's when Russell takes off."

New York: What's it cost to attend this Super Bowl, anyway?

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 27, 2014

Still considering a last-minute ticket to Super Bowl XLVIII?

Here's the best course of action:

Wait.

Wait another day, another five days if possible, and ticket prices will continue to plummet. When the Seahawks locked up their spot in Super Bowl XLVIII, the cheapest ticket cliff opened at a listed price of \$2,042, according to the ticket-trends Web site Razor Gator. Eight days later, the cheapest seat is going for \$1,298. That's a dip of roughly 35 percent.

While maneuvering between the Broncos' media event in Jersey City and the hotel in Manhattan, it struck me how much different this New York/New Jersey Super Bowl would be if the Giants or Jets were involved. I've seen more Giants/Jets gear roaming the streets than Broncos/Seahawks gear. True, fans are not yet starting to roll in. But if a local franchise was directly involved — and not simply allowing the Broncos and 'Hawks to use their practice facilities — I suspect ticket prices would break the bank.

Despite what colleague David Ramsey says — kidding, Mr. Ramsey — weather is an enormous factor in this Super Bowl. It isn't just one factor; it's the biggest factor. (More on the weather in Wednesday's Gazette, just for Mr. Ramsey's sake). It is frigid outside, the wind whipping down 7th Ave. in Times Square.

It's 11 degrees. If today were Super Bowl Sunday, we would be in the fourth quarter of the coldest Super Bowl in history. I don't mind. But it's true.

The wintry elements also are affecting ticket prices. As the reality of a cold-weather Super Bowl sets in, fewer people are looking to sit outside in sub-freezing temperatures, sending prices into a nose dive.

That's relative, of course. The average ticket price is still hovering around \$3,000, according to TiqIQ.

Gazette Broncos columnist Paul Klee is in New York for the Super Bowl

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 27, 2014

NOTE: Gazette sports columnist Paul Klee is in New York this week to cover all things Broncos and the Super Bowl. What are some sites Klee should visit when not covering Peyton Manning and the boys? Where are the good eats? Share your recommendations below

Here's Klee's blog from New York.

The Broncos are on a boat.

To begin this Super Bowl week, the AFC champions held their Monday press conference on a cruise ship docked in Jersey City. John Fox took questions in the main ballroom; Demaryius Thomas, Knowshon Moreno and Terrance Knighton were among the players who set up shop on the top deck.

Who says there's no new news coming out of Super Bowl week?

Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie turned that theory on its side. The Broncos cornerback said just a few minutes ago he's considering retiring if the Broncos beat the Seahawks in Super Bowl XLVIII Sunday.

No, really.

"This was a one-year deal," DRC said, sounding entirely convincing.

New York: Let's do a Super Bowl

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 27, 2014

The Broncos are on a boat.

To begin this Super Bowl week, the AFC champions held their Monday press conference on a cruise ship docked in Jersey City (above). John Fox took questions in the main ballroom; Demaryius Thomas, Knowshon Moreno and Terrance Knighton were among the players who set up shop on the top deck.

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No, really.

"This was a one-year deal," DRC said, sounding entirely convincing.

You could make the argument DRC has been arguably the most consistent player on the Broncos defense. He was their best defensive player in the AFC championship game against the Patriots, I'd say.

This isn't an old man with his body breaking down. He's 27. He was the 18th overall pick.... in the 2008 draft. This is a guy in his prime, the second-highest paid player on the Broncos' defense, behind only Champ Bailey. This is a guy about to get paid — either by the Broncos or another fortunate team.

And he's going to retire?

"It's not set in stone," he told us on the boat.

Throughout this season, his first in Denver, DRC always has struck me as a different kind of guy. He's quite reserved and often seems to keep to himself. His superstitions lead him to munch Subway before every game.

"Ham and cheese sandwich," he said. "If we win. If we lose, I've got to switch it up."

He's told teammates this season could be his last. DRC said "they think I'm joking."

For what it's worth, I didn't get the impression DRC was joking.

2013 Broncos: vs. San Diego

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 27, 2014

Next up: vs. Chargers, Week 15.

Sports-talk radio lit up like Aurora Borealis. Opinion pieces scooped dirt on Denver's Super Bowl hopes. The blueprint for beating the Broncos had been delivered.

This was the beginning of the end, for sure.

Truth is, a home loss to the Chargers was the best thing that happened to the Broncos. The '97-'98 Super Bowl champions combined for four losses in Decembers. This was that. I still contend San Diego's triumph did the Broncos a Super favor.

The date: Dec. 12.

The game: Chargers 27, Broncos 20.

The site: Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

The notable: The '12 Broncos won 11 straight games to close the regular season. What if they had lost a regular-season game in December? We're talking about back-to-back Super Bowl appearances.

2013 Broncos: at Houston

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 27, 2014

Next up: at Houston, Week 16.

Example 2,189 why the quarterback is everything in the NFL: Houston didn't pursue Peyton Manning in free agency. Instead, the Texans rolled with Matt Schaub.

The Texans have the No. 1 pick in the 2014 NFL draft.

The date: Dec. 22.

The game: Broncos 37, Texans 13.

The site: Reliant Stadium, Houston.

The notable: The Texans' practice facility — a Texas-sized bubble across the street from Reliant Stadium — is one model the Broncos researched before breaking ground on their own.

The photos: 1. Reliant Stadium from a club suite 2. The roof opened prior to kickoff.

2013 Broncos: vs. Tennessee

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 27, 2014

Next up: vs. Tennessee, Week 14.

Beat up like a boxer, the Broncos defense played without Rahim Moore, Champ Bailey, Kevin Vickerson and Derek Wolfe. Duke Ihenacho and Wesley Woodyard didn't finish the game. "It feels like we're just hanging on right now," defensive back Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie told me. Somehow, the Broncos defense has gotten stronger as more players dropped to the wayside due to injury.

"There's no question we're playing our best football over the last month of the season," John Fox said today here in New Jersey (above).

The date: Dec. 8.

The game: Broncos 51, Titans 28.

The site: Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

The notable: With the kickoff temperature at a frigid 18 degrees, Peyton Manning unloaded a career-high 59 passes, perhaps an attempt to shut down the theory he wilts in wintry elements.

2013 Broncos: at Kansas City

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 27, 2014

Next up: at Kansas City, Week 13.

Peyton Manning spotted Marcus Cooper. Then he picked on Marcus Cooper. And picked on Marcus Cooper some more. By the time it was over, Manning and the Broncos again exposed the Chiefs as a quality team, but not one that could overtake them for the AFC West title.

The date: Dec. 1.

The game: Broncos 35, Chiefs 28.

The site: Arrowhead Stadium, Kansas City.

The notable: This was the most intoxicated stadium this season. Sunshine, warmer-than-average weather, early tailgates and a hyped matchup added to an overzealous and dangerous atmosphere. One tailgate offered free shots to passers-by, no I.D. needed. And we wonder why a man, a father, was murdered in the parking lot?

The photos: Arrowhead Stadium, inside and out.

Wearing orange and crushing it: One man's wardrobe obsession

By Jesse Byrnes
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 27, 2014

(Editor's Note: Jesse Byrnes is a University of Colorado at Colorado Springs senior and Gazette intern. When he exposed his orange obsession on twitter after the Denver Broncos' AFC championship win, we asked him to share his wardrobe choice leading up to Super Bowl Sunday. Here, in Byrnes' words, is why he so often is found wearing orange.)

Monday's look: very casual

It's not even my favorite color, but somewhere along the way I came to own a closet of orange. Orange Polos, orange sweaters, orange workout gear, orange PJs – it's gotten a little out of hand.

And it's not just orange, either; similar shades — tans, browns, creams, rusts — have caught on too. It's like someone invited Bob Ross to dinner and he brought a tray with half a dozen types of OJ. Except this isn't fiction.

I'm a college kid, a writer person and a fashion guy. I like words, music, architecture and clothes. I really like clothes. Something of an afashionado, you could say.

I'm a Colorado native, so of course I'm a Broncos fan. Blue is my favorite color. And orange? Giddy up.

Maybe it's my heritage. I'm mostly Italian, but the Irish is apparent when I grow out my beard. I have to promise people I have a soul, despite my facial hair's gingery appearance.

It could be my complexion. They say I'm an autumn: I look good in oranges, tans, olive and fall colors palates — all manly, of course, and all pretty mellow too.

I'd be lying if I said one of my guilty pleasures is not browsing Pinterest for pictures of brown leather duffles, orange wool overcoats and paisley tangerine ties. I'm a sucker for orange ties. (Did I mention I own four orange flannels?)

After twentysomething years, orange has flooded my closet, burned my eyes and found a home in my heart. And like so many others leading to Feb. 2, I'll be doing my part to help us be #UnitedInOrange.

Mile High fashion: A colorful evolution of Broncos uniforms

By Stephanie Earls
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 27, 2014

Aside from serving as mutual dating pools, fashion runways and the gridiron have little in common - or so it might seem. Former Denver Broncos running back Terrell Davis put it like this:

"It was the uniforms. That's how we won those Super Bowls," said Davis, who led the team to back-to-back titles in 1997 and 1998. "In '95 and '96, those uniforms we had were hideous. But in '97, man, we were sleek."

Talk about a power suit.

"Obviously your uniform and your logo are a big deal," said Jim Saccomano, a longtime public relations agent and consultant for the Broncos. "At practice, you don't sit on your helmet. You don't sit on your logo. Just like you don't wipe your mouth with the flag. It's a little bit of the same thing - respect - maybe corny by comparison, but it's a big deal."

The evolution of Broncos uniforms is one of the more colorful, sartorial tales in the league, beginning with the team's founding in 1960. To save money, the general manager purchased (or acquired for free) used uniforms from a defunct minor league team in Arizona. The colors were seal brown and light gold, aka "mustard," and the uniforms featured the only sock in NFL history to boast vertical stripes reminiscent of a barber's pole.

"That first uniform was a thing to behold, and the team was so bad," said Saccomano. "I don't want to say people thought of them (the uniform) as an atrocity ... it was not the look you wanted. Not professional enough."

That uniform lasted two seasons, until the era of head coach Jack Faulkner, who revamped the team starting with its look. The change was celebrated with a ceremonial sock bonfire at the annual intrasquad scrimmage at Colorado School of Mines after training camp that year.

The new 1962 uniforms represented a "total remake" of the Broncos' look, Saccomano said. "They went to orange and blue, which at that time was a lot of orange and not much blue."

The Denver Post described the new shades as "dazzling orange, blue and white."

The 1962 uniform included a new logo on orange helmets, a caricature of a horse designed by Denver Post sportswriter and cartoonist Bob Bowie. In 1967, plain blue helmets were adopted for a season.

"The D with the horse on it began in 1968, and from '68 through '96 that stayed pretty much intact," Saccomano said.

Despite slight variations in the "tone of the orange" and the placement and number of stripes, the uniform remained relatively consistent through those years as well - "basically an orange jersey with white pants; one year, they had orange pants," Saccomano said.

In 1997, the Broncos changed their uniforms to a navy blue jersey with orange accents for home games, adopted the current logo design of a horse in profile, and went on to win back-to-back Super Bowls.

"The 'primarily blue' uniform was much more popular. The logo is much more established. If you look at the D with the horse on it, it's got skinny little legs. This is a stronger, better logo," Saccomano said.

Before the 2013 season, the team wore blue jerseys at home and white on the road with orange as the alternate color.

"Starting at the beginning of last year, Denver is back to orange at home, which is extraordinarily popular and well-received," Saccomano said. "It's the same uniform we've worn since 1997, but now blue is the alternate and orange is what we wear primarily."

The decision has been a popular one with fans and harkens to the team's formidable Orange Crush defense of the late 1970s.

"Now it's orange, orange, orange. Our fans love orange. I'd call that a big change, even though it doesn't involve a different uniform," Saccomano said.

When the Broncos take the field against the Seattle Seahawks on Sunday at MetLife Stadium, they'll be wearing the team's signature brilliant shade.

"The AFC is the home team this year, and we wear orange at home, which will be really cool. Our fans will love it," Saccomano said.

Top-five key NFL Draft moments: Denver Broncos

By Dane Brugler
CBSSports.com
January 27, 2014

It's no secret that the main ingredient for the Broncos run to Super XLVIII has been quarterback Peyton Manning, who was acquired two off-seasons ago via free agency. Even at the age of 37, the future Hall of Famer had a record-breaking season and commanded a Denver offense that led the NFL in total offense (457.3 yards per game), passing offense (340.2 passing yards per game) and set a new NFL single-season record for total points (606). Manning himself set new single-season NFL records for passing yards (5,477) and touchdowns (55).

Besides Manning, the AFC Champions are shaped by several other significant free agent and waiver acquisitions, including cornerback Champ Bailey, wide receiver Wes Welker, guard Louis Vasquez, defensive tackle Terrance Knighton, left tackle Chris Clark and pass rusher Shaun Phillips.

But the core DNA of Denver's roster has been mostly compiled via the NFL Draft. The current regime led by John Elway and company along with the front office minds that came before them have had their share of "misses" (Tim Tebow anyone?) but it's the "hits" that have the Broncos one win away from the third Super Bowl Championship in franchise history.

For those unfamiliar with the Broncos 2013 season, you would understandably expect impact players and former high draft picks like OT Ryan Clady (12th overall pick, 2008) and OLB Von Miller (2nd overall pick, 2011) to be central pieces of Denver's success. But due to injuries (Clady) and a combination of injuries and suspension (Miller), the Broncos were without both most of the season, making their impact on Denver's Super Bowl appearance minimal.

Below are five key NFL Draft moments for the AFC Champion Denver Broncos:

5. Second round offensive linemen

In the 2010 and 2011 NFL Drafts, the Broncos selected an offensive lineman in the second round both years. In 2010, Denver drafted Zane Beadles 45th overall out of Utah and plugged him in at guard and tackle where he's started 62 games the past four seasons, mostly at left guard. He went to his first Pro Bowl after the 2012 season and is due for a payday this off-season when he is set to his free agency. One year after drafting Beadles, the Broncos selected Miami's Orlando Franklin 46th overall in the second round of the 2011 NFL Draft. He became Denver's starter at right tackle from day one and started all but one game the past three seasons. Both

are key pieces and leaders for the unit assigned to protect Manning and open up holes in the run game, especially with Clady sidelined.

4. TE Julius Thomas

Entering the 2011 NFL Draft, the Broncos were coming off a 4-12 season and had recently hired a new executive vice president (Elway) and head coach (John Fox) so the draft that year marked a fresh start for the Broncos franchise. With the second overall pick, Denver hit a home run with pass rush dynamo Von Miller who would have an All-Pro rookie season, but it was Julius Thomas, a fourth round selection, that was most intriguing pick of Denver's class. Thomas starred for four seasons on the basketball court at Portland State before swapping his sneakers for cleats, playing one season of college football in 2010. The athletic tight end was viewed as extremely raw as a NFL prospect, but the Broncos saw the long-term value, sending a fifth and sixth round pick to Green Bay in order to trade up and draft Thomas 129th overall. Thomas had just one catch over his first two pro seasons as he battled injuries and developed in the NFL, but he emerged in 2013 as a more-than-capable starter at tight end and a dynamic cog to the Broncos' offense. Thomas finished the 2013 regular season with 65 catches for 788 yards and 12 touchdowns, earning a Pro Bowl nomination. With continued development, Thomas might end up No. 1 on this list in the not-so-distant future.

3. Running back trio

Since 2009, the Broncos have drafted three running backs in the top-75 picks: Knowshon Moreno (12th overall, 2009), Ronnie Hillman (67th overall, 2012) and Montee Ball (58th overall, 2013). And those three backs finished as the top-three rushers for this year's Denver squad, led by Moreno who set a career-best with 1,038 rushing yards, his first NFL season above the 1,000-yard mark. The Broncos started the season with a running back-by-committee approach, but Moreno quickly established himself as the feature back, despite many outsiders giving up on the former Georgia Bulldog. The Broncos surprised some when they drafted Ball out of Wisconsin last April in the second round, ahead of some other well-regarded running backs like Eddie Lacy. Ball, who led the team in yards per carry with a 4.7 average, had 559 yards in his rookie campaign and Hillman, who Denver traded up to draft out of San Diego State, finished third on the team in rushing with 218 yards.

2. Late round and undrafted defensive starters

The Broncos entered the season with several starters on the defensive depth chart who were former early round draft picks like Miller, Champ Bailey, Derek Wolfe, Robert Ayers and Rahim Moore. But it was the later round picks and undrafted players who proved to be the nucleus of the Broncos defense this season. A former sixth round pick, WLB Danny Trevathan (188th overall, 2012) out of Kentucky led the team in tackles (129) and also tied for the team-lead in interceptions (3) with former Kansas Jayhawk CB Chris Harris (undrafted, 2011). The four-leading tacklers for the Broncos were all late rounders or undrafted free agents: Trevathan,

MLB Wesley Woodyard (84), SS Duke Ihenacho (73) and Harris (65). Woodyard (undrafted, 2008) out of Kentucky and Ihenacho (undrafted, 2012) of San Jose State went without hearing their name called during draft weekend, but both fought their way onto the Broncos 53-man roster and earned their playing time. A former fifth rounder out of Tennessee, DE Malik Jackson (137th overall, 2012) has also played a pivotal role for the 2013 Denver Broncos due to injuries on the defensive line and led the team in quarterback hurries (15).

1. WR Duo: Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker

The 2010 NFL Draft will long be remembered for the Broncos as the year Josh McDaniels drafted Tim Tebow in the 1st round. But Denver and McDaniels also came away from that draft with a pair of wide receivers who have been an integral part of the Broncos record-breaking offense this season. The Broncos first draft pick that year, three spots ahead of Tebow, was Demaryius Thomas out of Georgia Tech, the first wideout drafted that year who Denver traded up to get. Thomas showed flashes of greatness over his first two seasons, but injuries kept him on the sidelines as he started just seven games over that span. However with Manning throwing him the ball the past two seasons, Thomas has blossomed into one of the top receivers in the league, recording back-to-back seasons of 90+ catches, 1,400+ receiving yards and 10+ touchdowns. Decker battled injuries in his collegiate career at Minnesota so he slipped in the draft and the Broncos snatched him up in the 3rd round, 87th overall. He missed most of his rookie season in 2010 before becoming a starter in 2011. But like Thomas, Decker really blossomed the past two seasons with Manning in command of the offense, posting back-to-back seasons of 85+ catches, 1,000+ receiving yards and 11+ touchdowns, finishing second on the team in receiving behind Thomas both years.

How Broncos got here: Losing McDaniels, drafts, landing Manning

By Joel Corry
CBSSports.com
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The Denver Broncos are making their seventh trip to the Super Bowl, which puts them only behind the Dallas Cowboys and Pittsburgh Steelers for the most Super Bowl appearances. Here's how these Broncos, in line to become the ninth franchise with at least three Super Bowl victories, were built.

Josh McDaniels' Impact

A late-season collapse in 2008, when the Broncos lost their final three games to finish 8-8 and miss the playoffs for the third straight year, prompted owner Pat Bowlen to fire head coach Mike Shanahan after 14 years. New England Patriots offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels became one of the youngest head coaches in NFL history as Shanahan's successor. Surprisingly, Bowlen gave McDaniels, then 32, complete control over football operations. He got off on the wrong foot by alienating quarterback Jay Cutler, who learned McDaniels had discussions with the Patriots to acquire Matt Cassel in a three-team trade that would have sent Cutler to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Upset by the rumor and his treatment by the organization, Cutler demanded a trade. The Broncos accommodated, sending him and a 2009 fifth-round pick to the Chicago Bears for Kyle Orton, a 2009 first-round pick (18th overall), a 2009 third-round pick and a 2010 first-round pick.

After a 6-0 start as head coach, it was downhill for McDaniels. The Broncos lost eight of their final 10 in 2009. He clashed with Pro Bowl wide receiver Brandon Marshall as his Bill Belichick imitation wore thin in the locker room. Marshall was dealt to the Miami Dolphins after the season for 2010 and '11 second-round draft choices. McDaniels was fired 12 games into the 2010 season after the Broncos started 3-9 record. He was 11-17 as Denver's head coach.

McDaniels' fingerprints are on Denver's current roster. His 2009 draft class produced starting running back Knowshon Moreno (12th overall pick) and defensive end Robert Ayers, who was taken 18th overall with one of the picks from the Cutler deal. The 2010 class, McDaniels' final draft, paid more dividends. Wide receivers Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker were taken in the first and third rounds. Zane Beadles was selected in the second round. He has started nearly every game of his career at left guard and earned a Pro Bowl spot last season. McDaniels also took a gamble by trading up to the 25th overall pick to select Tim Tebow.

McDaniels had his share of draft blunders. One in particular could come back to haunt the Broncos in Super Bowl XLVIII. He traded a 2010 first-round pick to the Seattle Seahawks for a 2009 second-round pick to select undersized cornerback Alphonso Smith. Seattle took All-Pro safety Earl Thomas (14th overall) with the pick

they got from Denver. Smith was such a disappointment as a rookie that he was traded to the Detroit Lions following the season for tight end Dan Gronkowski, a 2009 seventh-round pick.

The John Elway Factor

John Elway was hired in January 2011 as executive vice president of football operations after the McDaniels experiment failed. Elway's first order of business was finding a head coach. After setting his sights on luring Jim Harbaugh away from Stanford, Elway hired John Fox, who had a 78-74 record with the Carolina Panthers, including the franchise's only Super Bowl appearance.

Hiring Elway was viewed with some skepticism because of his lack of NFL front-office experience and considering the poor track record of Hall of Fame players running teams. Initially, Elway leaned on general manager Brian Xanders, who left the organization after the 2012 NFL Draft, and other members of the front office while he got up to speed. His experience as co-owner of the Arena Football League's Colorado Crush, where he was heavily involved in running the club's football and business operations, helped him become a quick study. He became the de facto general manager after Xanders' departure. Former agent Mike Sullivan, who ran Octagon's football division for more than a decade, was hired to manage the salary cap and negotiate player contracts after Elway's first year in charge.

Elway's first draft as head of the Broncos was viewed as a success. Defensive Rookie of the Year Von Miller was taken with the second overall pick. Free safety Rahim Moore and right tackle Orlando Franklin were taken in the second round. Tight end Julius Thomas, a former college basketball player with limited football experience, was selected in the fourth round.

Elway drew the ire of Broncos fans in his inaugural season with his refusal to declare Tebow the quarterback of the future during the height of Tebowmania. Even though Tebow led the Broncos to the AFC West title and an upset victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers in an AFC wild-card game, Elway thought Tebow lacked the skills to produce a championship.

The most important acquisition of Elway's tenure is Peyton Manning. He took a calculated risk in signing Manning to a five-year, \$96 million contract when there was uncertainty over whether Manning would return to form after multiple neck surgeries. Elway's ability to relate to Manning as a quarterback with success late in his career was instrumental in him choosing the Broncos over the San Francisco 49ers, who appeared to be a more Super Bowl-ready team.

The Peyton Manning Effect

Manning, arguably in the midst of the best two-year stretch of his 16-year career, instantly transformed the Broncos into Super Bowl contenders. Denver has secured home-field advantage in the AFC playoffs each season and has a league-leading 26 wins the past two seasons.

The Broncos went from a run-oriented team that heavily relied on the read option under Tebow to a top-five offense in Manning's first year. Thomas and Decker evolved into 1 of 3 NFL receiving tandems with both receivers gaining more than 1,000 yards. The four-time NFL MVP's presence also was a primary reason Wes Welker joined the Broncos after talks to remain with the Patriots stalled. Welker turned down more money from another team to sign a two-year, \$12 million contract to play for a contender.

The addition of Welker and the emergence of Thomas at tight end helped turn Denver into the most prolific offensive attack in NFL history. The Broncos set single-season NFL records for points scored (606) and net passing yards (5,444). Their 7,317 yards of total offense is the second-best single-season mark ever.

Roster building, player contracts and salary cap

The Broncos are in a win-now mode because of Manning's small championship window. Fourteen players on Denver's roster are age 30 or older. The Broncos also have their share of home-grown talent. Thirty-six of the 64 players (56.25 percent) under contract for this season were drafted or originally signed as undrafted free agents by the club.

Denver has bolstered its roster by being active in free agency. In addition to Manning, six more Super Bowl starters are free-agent acquisitions, including five (Welker, G Louis Vasquez, DT Terrance Knighton, DE/LB Shaun Phillips and CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie) from Denver's mini-spending spree in the offseason. Vasquez was the highest-priced acquisition. He signed a four-year, \$23.5 million contract (\$13M guaranteed).

The majority of their free-agent signings have been short-term deals containing moderate salaries where some contracts contain incentives. The Broncos were able to overcome the loss of defensive end Elvis Dumervil, released because of a paperwork snafu on his renegotiated contract that reduced his 2013 salary from \$12 million to \$8 million, by landing Phillips. He posted 10 sacks in the regular season after signing a one-year, \$1 million deal with an additional \$2 million in incentives based on sacks.

The Broncos do not make extensive use of minimum salary benefit contracts (the player receives his league minimum base salary and a maximum of \$65,000 as a signing bonus with these one-year deals. The player's base salary counts on the cap at the minimum salary for players with two years of service -- \$555,000 for this season -- instead of at his actual base salary). The Broncos only have two players with minimum salary benefit contracts this season.

The Broncos are able to take this approach and accumulate quality depth to overcome injuries because only three players (Manning, cornerback Champ Bailey and offensive tackle Ryan Clady) are among the highest-paid players at their positions with large 2013 cap numbers. Manning has the NFL's third-highest cap figure this season at \$17.5 million. Bailey's \$10.75 million cap number ranks fourth

among cornerbacks. Clady signed a five-year, \$52.5 million deal (with \$33 million in guarantees and an additional \$5 million in base salary escalators) in July as Denver's franchise player. The former All-Pro tackle's \$12.6 million cap number is the highest for offensive linemen this year.

Clady was lost for the season after two games with a Lisfranc foot injury. Chris Clark has filled in capably for him. He ranked in the top 10 for left tackles in Pro Football Focus' passing block efficiency metric. In addition to Clady, four defensive starters, including Miller, have suffered season-ending injuries.

Despite the tears, Moreno a major contributor to Broncos offense

By Josh Katzowitz
CBSSports.com
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- Those gargantuan tears emerged from the ducts around his eyes, leaving rivers of moisture trailing down his smooth face, and Knowshon Moreno immediately sparked an Internet uproar.

The big football player had shed tears during the national anthem before the Broncos game vs. the Chiefs, and they were massive. And sparked a massive discussion online.

What was the deal? Was the Broncos running back a softy? Was he too wrapped up in the moment? Was he scared to play? Did he weep because of Francis Scott Key's lyrical acumen?

No, no, no.

Instead, during the song, he ponders the journey he's taken to get to this point, a child raised by his teenage parents who was living in homeless shelters before settling with his grandmother at the age of 11. He thinks about that, about how grateful he is to be in this position, about what he experienced and what he learned from those experiences.

The tears appeared with the intensity of a man consumed with rage, but they were not the tears of negativity. They were tears of reflection and tears of wonderment.

"I think everyone has that given drive," Moreno said Monday. "For me, it's never been different. I'm always an emotional guy, I play with my emotions on my sleeve and just go out and try to play as hard as I can ... It's funny because that's just one moment [the media] ever caught. I don't know how many games I've played in, but it's never any different. You all just probably caught that one moment. I would never change."

The tears, he means. Or, as he puts it, the emotion. But Moreno needed to change in order to last on the Broncos squad and transform himself from a first-round draft pick well on his way to being labeled a bust to a 1,000-yard rusher who is a major component of a Denver offense that's one of the best in NFL history.

Two years ago, Moreno lost his starting job to Willis McGahee and then suffered a season-ending knee injury. A year ago, Moreno was inactive for eight-straight gamedays.

But this season, he rushed for 1,038 yards and 10 touchdowns while catching 60 passes for 548 yards and three more scores -- all are career highs.

What happened? Well, for one, Moreno took better care of the ball, cutting way back on his fumbles. And for reason No. 2, coach John Fox points to his maturity.

"With Knowshon, the thing that's really improved is his accountability and dependability," said Fox, who calls Moreno one of the team's most improved players. "It's not just toting the rock. You've got [pass] protections. We change a lot of things [at the line of scrimmage], and you have to be a sharp guy. He's been professional as far as his preparation. He's developed into one of the most dependable guys when it comes to assignment football.

"It's just maturity. These are young people -- young and rich and famous people. That's not a great combination for success. I've just seen a tremendous amount of growth. It 's why I do what I do, watching that growth and development."

His time on the scout team, though, couldn't have been easy. Especially when the outside world began proclaiming that he was a first-round bust.

"Even though I was inactive and this was happening, I still thought in my heart that I'm still part of this team and have to help this team out in some way," Moreno said. "Things happen throughout the game, and things happen throughout the season. You make mistakes and things happen. For me, I just want to get better. My role was not to be playing on Sundays. Wednesday was my Sunday, Thursday was my Sunday when I was out there on the scout team trying to make the defense better."

Now, this Super Bowl Sunday is the most important Sunday of his career. He's the team's No. 1 running back, and he's played well throughout the season. He knows he can't let his emotion get in the way of his pregame preparations.

"Listening to other guys who have been in this position before playing in the Super Bowl, it's a lot going on. They say you have to hold your emotions down. You're going to be fired up, but there is so much going on that sometimes you've got to calm down," Moreno said. "I think that will be my toughest battle, just being able to stay composed until the fires start burning down."

Either way, the TV cameras likely will be watching. And Moreno probably will cry.

Broncos CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie pondering retirement

By Josh Katzowitz
CBSsports.com
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie is nearing the end of his sixth year in the NFL, and at 27 years old, he's arguably in the prime of his football career. Plus, after two forgettable seasons with the Eagles, he's reestablished himself as one of the best cornerbacks in the league in his first year with the Broncos.

It might turn out to be his only season in Denver.

Rodgers-Cromartie said Monday that he's considering retiring after the Super Bowl if the Broncos beat the Seahawks. He said his goal was to play five years in the NFL. He's played six, and that might be enough for him.

"After the first contract [a five-year, \$15.1 million deal with the Cardinals in 2008], I got a one-year deal, and it's hard to get another [big-money] deal," Rodgers-Cromartie said. "Just from being around, I've seen a lot of guys get to the point I am right now, and it's hard. You have to start thinking about life after football."

Rodgers-Cromartie was expected to play an important role in Philadelphia's secondary three years ago after he was traded from Arizona to the Eagles in the Kevin Kolb deal. Rodgers-Cromartie was expected to combine with Nnamdi Asomugha and Asante Samuel to form what could have been the best defensive back tandem in the league.

But the results were disastrous, and he left Philadelphia after the 2012 season to sign a one-year deal worth \$5 million with the Broncos. He said Monday that the one-year deal was his decision, because he wasn't sure how much longer he wanted to keep playing and that he'd been pondering retirement for "quite a while."

Rodgers-Cromartie has been doing that more lately, saying he was thinking about going into a role as a high school guidance counselor. He said he wasn't sure if the Broncos front office would try to convince him to continue playing, but he also said that his retirement plans weren't "set in stone."

That's most likely especially true if the Seahawks triumph against Denver on Sunday.

Super Bowl XLVIII: Broncos, Seahawks get 35 percent of tickets

By John Breech
CBSSports.com
January 27, 2014

How many free tickets does Peyton Manning get to the Super Bowl? The same amount as every other player on the Broncos roster: Two. That's right, if you're playing in the Super Bowl, you only get two free tickets to the game.

If you're a Broncos or Seahawks player and you have more than two family members who want to attend Sunday's final game of the NFL season, you're not completely out of luck. According to the Denver Post, players can purchase up to 13 more tickets to the game, but they have to pay face value for them. That could cost a player anywhere from \$800 to \$1,500 per ticket. Thirteen tickets at \$1,500 a pop comes out to \$19,500.

If you're a player, it's not cheap to get your family and friends in to the Super Bowl. As Peyton's ticket broker this week, Eli Manning was probably spending some serious cheese.

The Broncos and Seahawks aren't the only two teams in the NFL that are given Super Bowl tickets. The league distributes tickets to all 32 teams.

Denver and Seattle are each allotted 17.5 percent of the tickets to the game -- or 35 percent total. This year, that amounts to almost 14,500 tickets for each team in the 82,566-seat MetLife Stadium. Those tickets will go to players, front office members and even some season-ticket holders, who will all pay face value.

As the host teams for this year's game, the Giants and Jets are each given a 3.1 percent allotment of the tickets to the Super Bowl. The other 28 teams in the league are each given 1.2 percent of the tickets to the game.

Most teams offer the tickets to players and other members of the organization, but some teams -- like the Jets -- offer the tickets to season-ticket holders. The Jets had a lottery earlier this month which gave some fans the chance to buy tickets at face value.

After Super Bowl tickets are distributed to the teams, that leaves 25.2 percent of the tickets for the league. Between the teams and the league, that's 100 percent of the tickets. That's why you can't find one at face value.

Undisputed: Manning vs. Sherman is greatest Super Bowl matchup ever

By Gregg Doyel
CBSsports.com
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK -- This being the Super Bowl, and not just any Super Bowl but the first Super Bowl held near the biggest city in ~~the world~~ America, overstatement isn't merely acceptable, but preferable. But this doesn't feel like an overstatement. This feels like a fact:

Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning vs. Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman is the most compelling individual matchup in Super Bowl history.

It's not about talent, though the talent of both is unmistakable. It's about the timing. Yes, it's about the rant Richard Sherman had after the NFC title game, but it's also about the season Peyton Manning had in the AFC. It's about the position each plays, and the question that won't be answered until Sunday night, sometime after kickoff:

Will Peyton Manning challenge Richard Sherman?

Fascinating, just fascinating. And this doesn't feel hyperbolic to wonder, seriously, if the Super Bowl has ever seen anything like this before. Go through the games one by one and find a more compelling matchup. Tell me. But you're going to have to tell me why.

To prove it you'll have to find a player not just on top of his game, but on top of the game, as Peyton Manning is this season. He is arguably the greatest quarterback of all time, though I'm not willing to add that hyperbolic, unprovable statement to the one at the center of this story. But Manning could be the greatest ever. He has more MVP trophies than anyone in NFL history, and that's the four he had entering this season. He's about to win his fifth Associated Press MVP, and should do so unanimously -- though one never knows -- and this has been his best season yet: most passing yards (5,477), most touchdown passes (55), most 400-yard games (four), most four-touchdown games (nine). And those aren't just Peyton Manning records, but NFL records.

So what we have is arguably the greatest quarterback of all time playing in the Super Bowl during his, or any quarterback's, best season ever.

Against Richard Sherman.

Sherman might or might not be the best cornerback in the NFL -- but he thinks he is, and the statistics back him up. He led the NFL in interceptions this season with

eight, two more than his closest challengers, and also had eight last season. His 16 picks in the past two years are three more than the next-best player (Tim Jennings, 13) and six more than the player in third (Patrick Peterson, 10).

Over the past three years Sherman has intercepted 20 passes, five more than his nearest competitor (Jennings, 15). In fact, Sherman has more interceptions in the past four years than anyone in the NFL, and Sherman has been in the league just three years. His 20 picks since 2010, when he was a senior at Stanford, are ahead of No. 2 Ed Reed (18) and No. 3 DeAngelo Hall (17).

Greatest cornerback in the game today, Richard Sherman? I take back what I said earlier, about how he might or might not be. There's no "might" about it, and there's damn sure no might not. He is. The interception numbers are clear, and those numbers don't take into account the fact that quarterbacks avoid him whenever possible -- like the way 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick famously avoided him for all but two attempts in the NFC title game -- avoiding him so much that Seahawks teammates Brandon Browner (six interceptions in 2011) and Earl Thomas (five in 2013) have finished among NFL leaders as well.

The NFL's leading quarterback against its leading cornerback isn't necessarily unique. The 2002 season's Super Bowl pit Oakland and league MVP Rich Gannon against NFL interception leader Brian Kelly of the Bucs. In the 1987 Super Bowl, league MVP John Elway led the Broncos against the Redskins and league interceptions leader Barry Wilburn. So this sort of Super Bowl matchup has happened before, an MVP quarterback against an NFL interceptions leader, but with a caveat:

Do you know who Brian Kelly is? The only one I know is coaching Notre Dame. Barry Wilburn apparently was great in 1987, but good enough to be remembered nearly three decades later? Apparently not.

We'll remember Richard Sherman, which brings me back to his rant last week. Again, this story is all about the timing. And the timing is incredible. On the one hand we have Peyton Manning having definitely the greatest season of possibly the greatest career in NFL quarterback history, and on the other we have Richard Sherman leading the league in interceptions and making the game-saving play in the NFC title game and then uncorking a postgame rant that was the most discussed story of the week, sports or otherwise. Sherman was trending on Twitter around the world after his 15-second interview with Erin Andrews. He's the most famous cornerback in the game, and the best, and possibly the most popular -- he has gained more than 400,000 Twitter followers (from 268,000 to 696,000 as of Monday morning) since that rant -- and reviled cornerback in the league.

And he's about to take on everybody's All-American, Peyton Manning.

That's another layer to this matchup, the whole good guy vs. bad guy thing, not that I buy into it on either side. They're both pretty good guys, from what I can tell, though neither is the good/bad cartoon some would like to see. Manning isn't the

most sweetest little thing on earth -- a female trainer at Tennessee accused him of sexual harassment and received a \$300,000 settlement from the school in 1997 -- and Sherman isn't everything wrong with professional sports today simply because he made the (poor) choice of celebrating one of his highest professional moments by taunting 49ers receiver Michael Crabtree at one of his lowest.

But both players are the best at what they do, and to do what they do -- Manning completing passes, Sherman intercepting them -- they will have to do it at the other guy's expense.

Most compelling individual Super Bowl matchup of all time? Find me a better one.

Snow could force Super Bowl teams to practice indoors

By Ryan Wilson
CBSsports.com
January 27, 2014

Like it or not, the weather will be a major storyline heading into Sunday. Six days out, the forecast is mostly clear with highs near 40 and lows dipping into the mid-20s. But both Super Bowl coaches concede that the practice fields could pose issues as the Broncos and Seahawks prepare for the biggest game of the season.

The Broncos are training at the Jets' facility in Florham Park, NJ, while the Seahawks are calling the Giants' complex in the Meadowlands home. With snow and freezing temperatures in the New York area in recent weeks, the teams could be forced to practice indoors.

Fox said Sunday that "I'd prefer [to practice on] grass. It saves our players' legs, but if need be we'll go indoors or on their synthetic surface."

Carroll echoed similar sentiments.

"I understand there's snow on the field and they're somewhat frozen, so we could likely be indoors for most of the week," he said. "As we always do, we'll figure that out on a day-to-day basis. We like to get out when we can. We'll have to see if it's available to us."

After Further Review: Three ways Seahawks could rattle Peyton

By Gregg Doyel

CBSsports.com

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The question that will be asked a lot in the coming days is one that I asked several coaches and players in recent weeks:

How do you slow down Peyton Manning and the Denver Broncos' passing game?

The numbers say you don't. Manning rolled up more passing yards than any other passer in league history this season and threw a record 55 touchdown passes. The spread-it-out, up-tempo offense dictates to defenses and puts a lot of pressure on coordinators to slow it down.

There have been moments when the offense seemed to struggle. Teams slowed the Broncos for spurts, but in typical Manning fashion he usually figured it out and got the offense back on track. Slowing that offense for an entire game is almost impossible, even for a great defense like the Seattle Seahawks in Super Bowl XLVIII.

The Patriots limited him to 150 yards passing in a regular-season victory by playing a ton of two-deep -- which Seattle doesn't utilize a lot -- but Denver ran it for over 250 yards. Manning threw for more than 300 yards in all but four games this season and threw for 400 in the Broncos' victory over the Patriots in the AFC Championship Game.

So what are the keys to trying slow him?

"Disguise, pressure, never show the same defense within the same series," one NFL defensive back said. "And if you are lucky enough to have a vet at safety or linebacker, it's key to audible off their audible. If they realize a blitz is coming and check away, being able as a defense to reset the blitz from the other side or change to a different blitz or coverage when they do it [is key]. And no big plays at all. If you do that, you will have a great chance of winning."

Yeah, that's all.

"You have to make them [the defenses] all look alike," one defensive coordinator said. "More 2-deep. No single high."

Guess what Seattle plays mostly in the secondary? Yep, single high with Earl Thomas in the deep middle. That could be a risky proposition against Manning, even for a defense as good as Seattle's.

In studying Manning's tapes over the years, especially those in the past couple of seasons, here are some of the things I've noticed which slow him down some:

- Pressure up the middle with your down players.
- Jumping from look to look right before the snap.
- Disguise in the secondary.
- Blitzing secondary players in the middle.

I will take a look at those here with some pictures and GIFS that show exactly how they can be disruptive to Manning. I use the word disruptive because he is a groove quarterback, a player who flourishes when he gets on streaks. But when it goes bad at times, his body language shows the frustration and he can sometimes have a hard time getting out of the rut. The head goes down, the frustration goes up.

That doesn't happen often. So when it does, defenses must take advantage.

Manning's brain is the best weapon in football. With two weeks to prepare for Seattle, it will be interesting to see what he comes up with in terms of a plan of attack.

Here's the best ways to fight back against him.

Pressure from down players inside

Here's a look at a play from the Jacksonville-Denver game in Week 5. It was on a first-and-10 play from the Denver 30.

The Broncos were in "12" or "Ace" personnel (one back, two tight ends, two receivers) and Jacksonville matched up with a Cover-2 look with their corners off. Manning ran Eric Decker from the inside slot on the right on a deep cross in the middle. If he had time, he had a chance for a big play. The problem, as you can see by the pictures below, was he didn't have the time

The reason Manning didn't have time is because defensive tackles Roy Miller and Sen'Derrick Marks beat the guards to get immediate inside push. Manning saw it right away and started to get off the spot. He couldn't sit and wait for Decker to cross the field, which he did to get open, and Manning bailed to his right. When he did, Manning saw Decker come back to him in scramble-drill mode and hit him with a 14-yard strike. That was a positive play on the stat sheet, but it's the type of pressure that seems to get the best of Manning. He is so good at feeling the outside pressure that it's tough to influence him in that manner unless the defensive end can win in a big way.

The Seahawks love to put speedy Michael Bennett inside in their pass-looks. Clinton McDonald, a defensive tackle, is also good as an inside rusher. They will be key against Manning this week.

Jumping looks before or right after snap

Manning usually knows what your defense is doing before the ball is snapped. His countless hours of film work pay off in a big way on Sundays. But there are times when teams can move a chess piece right before the snap to confuse him. It doesn't happen a lot, but it happens. Here's a look from a play from the 2012 Atlanta-Denver game when it did. He admitted to me last summer that he had some uncertainty in that game, his first road game back after missing the 2011 season.

The Broncos had a third-and-12 at their own 12-yard line. They lined up "21" or "regular" personnel (two tight ends, one back, two receivers) and one of those tight ends (Jacob Tamme) was in the slot on the right. The Falcons showed a Cover-3 look with safety William Moore lined up close to the line with the linebackers.

But at the snap, Moore (blue X) bailed. Manning thought he had Tamme open inside when corner Christopher Owens released him in zone coverage. The only problem was Manning didn't read Moore dropping out. Moore undercut the throw, picked it off and returned it 33 yards to set up the game's first touchdown.

Disguise, disguise, disguise

The Broncos' movement and multitude of formations make it tough to disguise coverage. They almost force a defense to declare. But it doesn't mean you can't do it.

Here's a look at a play from the Chargers-Broncos game in Week 14 at Denver which demonstrates how showing one thing and doing another can confuse Manning at times.

The Broncos had a first-and-10 at their own 33 in the fourth quarter. They were in their usual "11" or "posse" personnel (one back, one TE, three WR) with Demaryius Thomas lined up to the left outside of tight end Julius Thomas. Eric Decker and Andre Caldwell were to the right. The Chargers showed a two-deep look, but at the snap they rotated to a three-deep look with safety Jahleel Addae coming down.

The Chargers blitzed corner Marcus Gilchrist from the left side and dropped linebacker Donald Butler into the middle and outside linebacker Thomas Keiser into the short zone on the right. Safety Eric Weddle, who was lined up on the line, took the flat on the right. Manning took the snap and was forced to hold the football. When he came back to the left, he attempted to throw a ball to Demaryius Thomas, but Corey Liuget got a hand on it and it fell into Keiser's arms for a turnover. The disguise worked.

The Seahawks will jump into a bunch of different looks up front, coming from all angles, but their base coverage in the secondary is a Cover-3 look. They will have to change it up more than normal against Manning -- or face the consequences.

Use secondary blitzers like linebackers

Here's a look at a play from the first Denver-Kansas City game that shows how blitzing secondary players inside can affect Manning.

It was second-and-9 for the Broncos at the Kansas City 36. They were in "11" personnel with one receiver to the top and two to the bottom, with Wes Welker inside of Demaryius Thomas. The Chiefs matched up in man-press coverage with their corners and had two deep safeties, so man-under, two-deep. They also had starting strong safety Eric Berry lined up inside as a linebacker, so a dime package, or six defensive backs.

At the snap, the Chiefs brought Berry (yellow X) on a hard inside blitz between nose tackle Dontari Poe and defensive end Tyson Jackson. With center Manny Ramirez blocking down and right guard Luis Vasquez blocking out, it left a lane for Berry, who came hard at Manning and forced an errant throw to Welker, who was open.

That's the type of timing disruption you need against Manning. Make him move a little off the spot.

So there are a few things that teams have used to try and slow Manning. Beating up his receivers has worked at times. Washington did a nice job with press-man coverage for the first half of their game vs. Denver. Indianapolis played a lot of press-man when they beat the Broncos during the regular season. That invites big-play throws from Manning, who took more shots down the field in that game.

Seattle will play some of that tight man with a single safety, but the Broncos will counter in those situations with crossing and rub routes. They eventually beat Washington with a couple of those in their game.

The Seahawks can't simply play their Cover-3 looks on third down -- or Manning will kill them.

But I hope these ideas give you an indication of possible answers to the one question everybody is asking:

How do you slow that Manning guy down?

3 things you need to know: Rodgers-Cromartie would like to go out on top

By Mike Garafolo
FOX Sports
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J.

1. Early retirement plan? Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie has the early lead for the biggest surprise of Super Bowl week. The 27-year-old cornerback told reporters Monday he's pretty sure he's going to retire if Denver wins the Super Bowl. That's quite the statement, considering Rodgers-Cromartie is having a very good season and is headed toward unrestricted free agency.

The former Philadelphia Eagles and Arizona Cardinals corner said he'd like to mentor children and perhaps stay involved in football in some way. But he doesn't seem to have a burning desire to play much longer.

"I gave myself five years, I've been playing six. Everything is cool," Rodgers-Cromartie said. "If I feel like at the end of the day that's truly what I'm going to do, that's what I'm going to do. ... Coming from a small school, you know all the talk: 'Small-school guys aren't supposed to be in the NFL,' and stuff like that. 'You'll only be in this league two or three years.' So I gave myself five."

2. Quarantine (sort of) lifted: Kicker Matt Prater traveled with the team Sunday and has begun to shake off a virus that kept him out of practice all last week. In fact, coach John Fox sent Prater home so he wouldn't infect other players. Fox joked Sunday that the team kept Prater in a "bubble." The strategy worked. As of Monday, the team had no other illnesses to report.

The Broncos aren't quite in the clear just yet, and the last thing they want is for Prater to spread germs in the days leading up to the game. So Prater should expect the kind of treatment he gets when he's about to line up a game-winning kick, which is to say he's about to be shunned for a few days.

"It depends on how bad it is and what it is," cornerback Champ Bailey said with a laugh. "He's part of our family, so it's going to be hard not to be around him. But he knows he has to be careful and can't spread anything around here."

3. One-on-one: The Seahawks usually play their cornerbacks right and left instead of moving them around to create matchups. Would that change now, in the biggest game of them all? The Broncos are betting it won't.

"I honestly have no idea, but our coaches told us 98 percent of (Richard) Sherman's snaps have come on the (offensive) right side," wide receiver Demaryius Thomas told FOX Sports, "so I'm assuming that."

Thomas and Sherman are both 6-foot-3, so it'll be an interesting matchup of length, smarts and athletic ability when it happens.

"He's just so patient, he takes his time, he doesn't try to do anything too fast. The best corners are patient," Thomas said, adding of his approach: "So you've got to be patient."

Rodgers-Cromartie may retire if Broncos win Super Bowl

By Ross Jones
FOX Sports
January 27, 2014

Broncos cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie is set to cash in during free agency this offseason. That doesn't mean the 27-year-old cornerback isn't considering early retirement.

Rodgers-Cromartie, who was selected in the first round of the 2008 NFL Draft, reportedly told himself that he set a goal of playing five years in the league. Now that he's played six seasons, he has given thought to retiring if the Broncos win the Super Bowl on Sunday against the Seahawks.

In fact, Rodgers-Cromartie has gone as far as telling his teammates that he's pondering an early exit.

"They think I'm joking," Rodgers-Cromartie said via USA Today's Lindsay Jones.

The Broncos signed the 6-foot-2, 193-pound cornerback to a one-year, \$4 million deal last March. He could be one of the most appealing players at his position outside of the Patriots' Aqib Talib and the Titans' Alterraun Verner.

Garafolo: John Elway's preseason tirade set Broncos' course

By Mike Garafolo
FOX Sports
January 27, 2014

John Elway was steaming as he walked through the doors and into the team meeting. In Denver Broncos cornerback Tony Carter's estimation, Elway was "hotter than fish grease."

This was not the postseason or even the regular season. It was August, after a 40-10 loss to the Seattle Seahawks in a preseason game at CenturyLink Field. It was a game that meant nothing in the standings. But to Elway, on that day, it meant everything.

And so, as several Broncos players told FOX Sports last week, an agitated executive vice president of football operations gave a rare, honest, critical and emotional speech that day to make it clear a performance like that was well below the standards of an organization with its sights on playing into February.

"It was a preseason game, and you don't hold too much onto it. But regardless, even with practice, we have high standards, and that was the message that got across and that's been the rallying cry ever since," defensive end Robert Ayers said. "We're going to work every week, regardless of what it is. We're going to put our best out there, whether it be preseason, game, postseason, whatever. That's what he expects of us, and that's what we try to do."

It might have been a preseason game, but the Seahawks played so fast and physical, one might have thought it was the Super Bowl for them.

Early in the game, linebacker Bobby Wagner came right up the middle to hit Peyton Manning and drop him on his back. That moment, in which the franchise quarterback with the history of neck issues was slow to get up, surely rankled Elway. But there were plenty of other plays unbecoming of a team looking to sniff a title:

-- A touchdown pass from Russell Wilson to Jermaine Kearse, even though Wilson bobbled the snap

-- Tight end Sean McGrath running wide open up the middle of a confused Broncos defense for a 23-yard gain

-- A 107-yard kick return for a touchdown by Kearse to immediately answer the Broncos' first touchdown

-- A fumble by running back Ronnie Hillman as he attempted to leap over the goal line, thus turning a potential Denver touchdown into a Seattle score when Brandon Browner returned it 106 yards for a touchdown

Elway's message, according to the players, was that kind of play won't allow a team that last season dropped a playoff game to the Baltimore Ravens to advance further this year. The players said he challenged a "soft" defense to play better and let everyone in the room know they had the potential to do so much more.

"It was basically, 'That's not our football team,' " wide receiver Demaryius Thomas said, "and he made it clear we have to do better, even if it was preseason."

Elway was right about the players' potential, as the Broncos' presence in the Super Bowl for a second, much more meaningful matchup with the Seahawks attests.

"He doesn't talk very much, so when he does talk, everybody's listening and on board," Carter said. "We're here where we want to be, and we respect John Elway to the utmost. We want to go out and make him happy."

Guard Louis Vasquez, whom Elway signed as a free agent before this season, quickly learned the Hall of Fame quarterback isn't a figurehead.

"Just given his reputation, he demands a lot," Vasquez said. "That's all you really need."

Added receiver Wes Welker, another member of the Broncos' 2013 free-agent class: "I'm not surprised by (Elway's active role). He's kind of the catalyst of who we are and his idea of us as a team. He hand picks guys on what he wants and what he wants our team to be. He's gotten us this far and done a great job with it."

The players have pointed back to that fiery preseason talk from Elway as a turning point for this team's work ethic. Before that meeting, they agree many in the room probably thought subconsciously this team would waltz back into the playoffs. After the speech, they knew they had to work hard every day to get there.

"We knew it, too, but we kind of brushed it under the rug more, being that it was preseason. But he said, 'It's not acceptable. I don't care what it is,' " Ayers said. "And ever since then, whatever it is, we're trying to win and trying to dominate, and it's great our leader can do that."

Paris Lenon, from the XFL to the Super Bowl with the Denver Broncos

By Frank Schwab
Yahoo! Sports
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. – Yes, Broncos linebacker Paris Lenon actually did play in the XFL. No, he did not have a crazy "He Hate Me" type nickname.

"I have entirely too much pride for that," Lenon said.

Every player in the Super Bowl has a fascinating story of how he got there, but Lenon's tale might beat them all.

Since 2000, Lenon has spent at least some time with (deep breath) the Panthers, Packers, Seahawks, Packers again, Lions, Patriots, Rams, Cardinals and Broncos.

He also spent a season with the Amsterdam Admirals of NFL Europe and the Memphis Maniax of the XFL.

Do you remember the XFL? If you don't, I swear this is all true: It was a league that was founded by WWE head Vince McMahon, had player nicknames on the backs of jerseys and had relaxed rules and some interesting innovations. There wasn't a coin toss before the game but instead two players would race to the ball placed at midfield and whoever came up with it got the kickoff option, which led to some injuries before the games even started. The league's first season was 2001, and dismal TV ratings meant there wasn't a second season.

"It was different," Lenon said. "But I enjoyed my time there. I learned a lot."

It's not like Lenon had much choice. He was signed by Carolina in 2000, but cut less than two months later in early June, well before training camp. That usually means a player's career is dead. Lenon took a job in the United States Postal Service's automation department after that. He wasn't in a position to turn down the Memphis Maniax in a league run by a wrestling promoter.

"I had been released and heard about this new league," Lenon said of how he ended up in the XFL. "I had an opportunity to go to NFL Europe, and then I heard about this league in the U.S. and I preferred to stay home. I don't like flying far."

He finally stuck with the Packers after his XFL experience, playing four seasons in Green Bay. He really started to make a name for himself with the Lions from 2006-08, starting every game those three seasons and averaging well over 100 tackles per season. And for those who know your NFL history, you caught that Lenon was part of the 2008 Lions, the only 0-16 team ever.

He played a year with St. Louis after New England cut him before the 2009 season and then three years with Arizona. Lenon was 35, out of a job and on the verge of being done with football late last August when the Broncos had some linebacker issues and called him. Despite joining the Broncos on Aug. 20, a little more than two weeks before the season started, he stuck on the team.

With four games left in the regular season the Broncos tried shaking up the defense by putting Lenon in the starting lineup. He has started every game since and the Broncos are 5-1 and in Super Bowl XLVIII.

"Everybody has different paths and different experiences; we've just been pleased to have him," Broncos coach John Fox said. "He's been a productive player for us and a good teammate to the rest of the team."

Lenon had played in just one NFL playoff win before this season. That was during the 2003 season with Green Bay. He hadn't appeared in a playoff game at all since the end of the 2004 season.

Now he's on track to start in a Super Bowl. It would be tough for any player on either team to top Lenon's story of football survival.

"I'm very appreciative to be here," Lenon said. "Anytime you go through tough situations, it makes you a tougher person."

Demaryius Thomas' mother, grandmother will watch him play Super Bowl from prison

By Eric Edholm
Shutdown Corner/Yahoo! Sports
January 27, 2014

Denver Broncos wide receiver Demaryius Thomas won't be able to give out Super Bowl tickets to two of his biggest fans. Both his mother and grandmother are in prison, his mother in the midst of serving a 20-year sentence and his grandmother a life sentence for cocaine distribution. (You can read more about Thomas' story in this fascinating 2012 New York Post feature.)

But Thomas will hit the field in Super Bowl XLVIII Sunday night knowing that they will be watching him play in the biggest game of his life from their prison in Tallahassee, Fla.

"My momma, she just told me, 'I told you you would make it.' We haven't really talked about it much but I talked to my grandma and she said the same thing," Thomas said Monday, via Pro Football Talk.

"She got emotional and all, but they just said, 'You were going to make it.' They get to watch every game that comes on TV there and they've got the t-shirts. All of the ladies have the t-shirts and watch me, so that's special."

The two women were arrested on March 15, 1999 when their house was raided by police in Georgia. Thomas witnessed the event but has maintained a strong bond with them since, and he had a ritual at one point of talking to his mother before every game.

"They drive me more to know that they're there and they're watching me," Thomas said. "I try to go out there and play my best because they're going to talk about it to the people in the jailhouse."

Super Bowl guarantee? Denver Broncos' Mike Adams plans to walk home if they win

By Eric Edholm
Shutdown Corner/Yahoo! Sports
January 27, 2014

Athletes are known for saying some strange and silly things, and the bigger the stakes, the more likely the chances that insane things come out of their mouths.

We believe that the Denver Broncos' Mike Adams is neither insane nor silly, but his stated desire to walk home after Sunday's Super Bowl sure sounds it on paper. After all, East Rutherford, N.J. to Denver is almost 1,800 miles on traditional roads, and at about 2,000 steps per mile, well, that's a lot of sore feet.

Except Adams wouldn't be going back to Denver. And the walking wouldn't be his penance if the Broncos lost. No, he plans to walk home if they win.

"If we win the Super Bowl, I'm going to keep my helmet and pads on and I'm walking home," Adams told the Denver Post's Mark Kiszla.

See, Adams grew up in nearby Paterson, N.J. — 7.2 miles via hoof — and he thinks that the journey could be some kind of spiritual pilgrimage knowing that most people who grew up there, at least in the part of town Adams was from, are just lucky to get out.

"It can be almost like a cancer," said Adams of his hometown. "And I say that because the negativity in that place can be like a snowball rolling downhill."

As for the sight of Adams strolling down the side of a highway in the witching hour Sunday night, yes, he freely admits it could be a bit odd. And besides, would he really make it the distance after playing in what could be 60 of the toughest minutes of football in his life?

"After I get to the IHOP on Route 3, I'll start hitchhiking," Adams said, laughing. "But they'd probably think I'm just some crazy person."

Super Bowl XLVIII: Will Peyton Manning Match Eli?

By Jonathan Wagner
Yahoo! Sports
January 27, 2014

COMMENTARY | When it comes to the participants in Super Bowl XLVIII and one of the two New York teams playing host to football's biggest game, Peyton Manning might think twice about taking any guidance from his younger brother, Eli Manning.

After all, it was Peyton's Denver Broncos who crushed Eli's New York Giants, 41-23, at MetLife Stadium, back in Week 2. Although Eli passed for more yards (362-307) than Peyton, he completed two fewer passes (30-28) in six more attempts (49-43), and had one touchdown and four interceptions while his big brother tossed a pair of touchdowns and avoided a turnover.

That game was 13 weeks before Denver's Super Bowl opponent, the Seattle Seahawks, visited the same building and likewise, manhandled the Giants, 23-0, as Eli threw a career-high five interceptions.

Based on those two results, it's understandable if Peyton says, "Thanks, but no thanks" to any of Eli's words of wisdom -- unless Eli's assistance consists of something along the lines of: "See what I did in those two games at MetLfie, Peyton? Well, don't do that!"

Nevertheless, Eli will still try to help Peyton with some brotherly advice about dealing with the notorious Meadowlands wind before the Broncos and Seahawks make a return trip to the Giants' home field, with each trying to secure the NFL's biggest prize on February 2.

Little Brother Helping Big Brother

Whatever help Eli can offer Peyton, it will wisely be for his brother's ears only.

"I might have a few things for him," Eli said. "But I don't want to reveal that, because I don't want to give it to [Seattle quarterback] Russell Wilson. So any tips I may have wind-wise, I would tell him in private."

One thing going for Peyton is that the havoc the MetLife Stadium wind can inflict on NFL passing games isn't quite to the level of Eli's old home of Giants Stadium, which rested just steps away, until its final game on January 3, 2010 (featuring the Giants' current co-tenants, the New York Jets).

"The old stadium definitely had a specific end zone and corner that you wouldn't want to throw into if it was going to be a windy night," Eli said. "If it is one of those

windy days, then there is a little bit of local knowledge that you can give. But it's definitely not as bad as the old stadium."

So perhaps Eli's experience can be a valuable asset with that, but if snow, rain, or sleet should descend upon the new Meadowlands stadium for the game (and there's a decent chance of that happening), Peyton might be on his own.

An Ironic Super Bowl Twist for the Manning Boys

Bad weather, though, will only make the game even more interesting than it already is, as Peyton tries to accomplish on Eli's home field, what Eli did on Peyton's, in Indianapolis, while winning his second Super Bowl Most Valuable Player Award, in Super Bowl XLVI.

"It's kind of ironic that Eli played in the Super Bowl when it was in Indianapolis, and now we get to flip that, so it's funny how that works out," Peyton said on CBS-TV, moments after Denver beat the New England Patriots in the AFC title game on January 19.

Funny indeed, since that couldn't have happened until only two years ago, and all of a sudden it will, in the small space of just three seasons. There had never been a Super Bowl in Indianapolis before then, and the same for East Rutherford, New Jersey until this year.

Throw in how unlikely it is that a pair of brothers not only play quarterback in the NFL, but that each are good enough to be Super Bowl MVPs, and it makes for an interesting subplot that within just two years and three Super Bowls, one brother can possibly pay another back for winning a Super Bowl on the other's field.

A Denver Win Puts Peyton Back on Top in the Manning Household

If that happens, Eli will lose the few things he still has over Peyton. Thus far, Peyton can claim a better overall career, but Eli has an all-important 2-1 edge in Super Bowl wins and Super Bowl MVPs, as well as that NFL title he won in the house that Peyton built, in Indianapolis.

But with a single win against the Seahawks, Peyton can even his sibling score with Eli on at least two of those accounts at once, and in a third way, if he were to also win his second Super Bowl MVP.

At nearly 38 years of age, after overcoming recent neck surgeries, Super Bowl XLVIII might be the last chance that Peyton has of tying Eli in Super Bowl wins and MVPs. And it's practically a certainty that he'd never get another chance to win on Eli's home field.

Of course, Eli will be rooting hard for Peyton and Denver to beat Seattle, just as he did for Peyton to get to this point. But as nice as Eli is as a person and a brother,

there might just be that small part of him which also wouldn't mind holding on to his bragging rights if the Seahawks win.

Richard Sherman says Broncos' Demaryius Thomas is a top-five NFL receiver

By Anwar S. Richardson
Shutdown Corner/Yahoo! Sports
January 27, 2014

Everyone knows Seattle Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman does not like San Francisco 49ers receiver Michael Crabtree.

Sherman recently expressed his disdain for Crabtree during an interview heard around the world. He labeled Crabtree as a mediocre receiver. His method of delivery was criticized and analyzed for several days after the NFC championship game.

When it comes to Denver's Demaryius Thomas, Sherman has nothing but respect for the receiver he will line up against during Super Bowl XLVIII.

"I definitely think he's in the top five," Sherman said. "He's put together a heck of a year and done everything in his power to put himself in that conversation. He's made the big catches. He's made a lot of runs after the catch and turned small plays into huge plays. I think that he's a great receiver, and he's a great competitor. It's going to be a fun matchup between both of us, because we're both intense competitors and good friends."

Thomas led Denver's high-powered offense with 92 receptions, 1,430 yards and 14 touchdowns during the regular season. Denver set a single-season record with 606 points, while quarterback Peyton Manning set single-season records for touchdowns (55) and passing yards (5,477). We know Sherman does not fear anyone on the football field, but it appears he does respect Denver.

Sherman was asked about his recent outburst after the NFC championship game, something that will likely occur throughout Super Bowl week, and the cornerback said he is still growing as a person.

"You're constantly figuring out how the world works, how you can affect the world and how your words affect kids," Sherman said. "I really want to affect kids and influence and inspire kids to really reach their full potential and live their life goals and go out there and make the world a better place, so if I can do that on this stage, it's a great blessing."

Super Bowl XLVIII: 3 Underplayed Factors that Don't Favor the Denver Broncos

By Ken Pomponio
Yahoo! Sports
January 27, 2014

COMMENTARY | We've all heard about -- literally and figuratively -- the defensive noise the Seattle Seahawks' Legion of Boom will bring on Super Sunday.

Meanwhile, most everyone realizes there's a better-than-average chance that Ma Nature will bring something chilly and damp to the festivities.

And it's been well established that Seattle running back Marshawn Lynch is a Skittles and opposing-D-chomping Beast.

But now that Super Bowl XLVIII week is officially upon us, what are some of the more overlooked and underplayed hurdles standing between the Denver Broncos and a third Lombardi Trophy?

Glad you asked . . .

Percy Harvin is the wildest (and most potent) of wild cards

When Harvin takes the field on Feb. 2, it will only be for his third game in a Seattle uniform.

Due to preseason hip surgery, the fifth-year wideout missed all but what one regular-season game. He did return and play in the divisional-round win over the New Orleans Saints, but a concussion cut that appearance short and he wound up sitting out the NFC Championship Game.

So what does a presumably-healthy Harvin bring to the Seattle offense and special teams? With only six total touches -- four receptions, one rushing attempt and one kickoff return -- since 2012, the Seahawks are hard-pressed to really know themselves right now.

So the Orange and Blue are no doubt spending some time reviewing some Harvin tape from his four seasons with the Minnesota Vikings.

And what they'll see is a versatile and explosive player who accumulated the fourth-most all-purpose yards -- 7,168 receiving, rushing and kick returns -- in the league from 2009-12. During that same span, Harvin also led all wide receivers

with 683 rushing yards and four TDs on 107 attempts while also reeling in the 11th-most receptions (280) among all NFL players.

Now that's a true wild card who could very well wind up being a trump card.

Broncos' kick coverage teams must be ready, not rusty

The elevation of East Rutherford, N.J. is listed at 3 feet above sea level.

For the record, that's a full 5,277 feet lower than the Mile High City.

Now, too much air isn't going to be a much of a problem for the Broncos - except possibly on the distance of Matt Prater's kickoffs.

During the regular season, Prater easily topped the league with 81 touchbacks. At home in the thin air, Prater had 49 touchbacks in 59 kickoffs (a league-leading 83.05 percent); on the road, those figures slipped to 32 in 56 kickoffs or 57.14 percent.

And when opponents did get to return a kickoff against the Orange and Blue, they averaged a league-best -- or, from the Broncos' perspective, league-worst -- 29.3 yards per runback.

Couple that with the fact that Seahawks boast three capable return men in Harvin (an NFL-leading 27.92 yards per return from 2009-12 among players who returned 100 or more kickoffs during that span), Doug Baldwin (a key 69-yard return in the NFC title game) and Jermaine Kearse (a 107-yard TD preseason return vs. the Broncos) and you have a potential field-position boon - or even better - for the Seattle offense.

Are these Seahawks possibly underrated?

Seattle opened as a 1-point Super Bowl favorite, but money quickly poured in on the Broncos, who now are 2-point favorites.

Why the switch?

Seattle's glaring lack of Super Bowl experience -- coaches as well as players -- is one factor. The fact that the game is a neutral-site game -- a full continent away from raucous CenturyLink Field -- and takes the league's best homefield advantage out of the Super equation is another.

Then there are the quarterbacks: Young, inexperienced second-year Russell Wilson going up against Peyton Manning, who on Saturday will officially garner his record fifth NFL MVP award.

But -- loquacious cornerback Richard Sherman aside for a moment here -- is Seattle being overlooked?

Possibly so considering the Seahawks are the champions of the tougher overall conference and the league's unquestioned top division with the four NFC West teams going a combined 42-22 this season -- an NFL division best since 2002 realignment -- with an impressive plus-359 point differential.

Also consider that Seattle, like Denver, was 6-2 away from home this season with two victories over double-digit win teams (Carolina and Arizona) and a 23-0 Dec. 15 shutout win over the host Giants and Peyton's brother Eli at the Super site.

Throw in the health factor - the Seahawks have seen most of their key injured players (Harvin, OT Russell Okung and LB K.J. Wright) return to action, unlike the Broncos (LB Von Miller, OT Ryan Clady, CB Chris Harris) - and you might start wondering if these Seahawks are getting the short shrift here.

Broncos beware.

Comeback trail leads Moreno home for Super Bowl

By Jeff Reynolds

The SportsXchange/ Yahoo! Sports

January 27, 2014

Denver Broncos running back Knowshon Moreno came too far to accept such labels. He concedes those words could have defined his life.

Moreno, 26, is in the final year of his rookie contract, a five-year, \$17 million deal he signed as the 12th overall pick in the 2009 draft. He also is in his first season as a full-time starter in a career detoured by injury.

In 2011, the Broncos all but wrote off Moreno, signing veteran Willis McGahee for the featured back role Moreno failed to assume. Moreno spent half of the season -- eight games -- on the practice squad, then ended his season with a torn anterior cruciate ligament.

In 2012, the Broncos drafted running back Ronnie Hillman in the third round. Last April, running back Montee Ball was Denver's second-round pick.

Sure, Moreno noticed, but he chose not to get the message.

"I have great family members," Moreno said. "(No one) has ever given up. My family is not a quitter. We know how to make do with anything we're given."

Regarded by some in the region as the best high school running back ever to come out of New Jersey, Moreno was sharpened by the irons of a childhood that dotted many shelters and zigzagged the most difficult neighborhoods in New York City. His mother was 16 and father 17 when Moreno was born. Moreno eventually was taken into his grandmother's custody and found greatness at Middletown (N.J.) High School South before achieving similar success as a scholarship running back at the University of Georgia.

"Just having my family around, everyone always pushing for each other and keeping good people around me, at the end of the day, that's what really got me to where I am," Moreno said.

The survivalist mentality of Moreno's grandmother, Mildred McQueen, and his high school coach, Steve Antonucci, were instilled in the multi-sport star.

He admits he came to the NFL with some growing up to do.

In addition to two major knee injuries and multiple attempts by management to slide him down the depth chart in favor of fresh acquisitions, Moreno put a DUI arrest behind him. That incident occurred almost exactly two years ago (Feb. 1, 2012) on Interstate 25 in Colorado. Moreno was stopped going 70 mph in a 45 mph construction zone. The personalized license plate on his Bentley: SAUCED.

Moreno moved on, entering 2013 training camp as an afterthought to the many observers who expected Ball or Hillman to grab the No. 1 back role. But while outsiders doubters Moreno's reliability, record-setting quarterback Peyton Manning said the fifth-year running back was well down the road to proving the contrary.

"During the (2012) season, he was doing scout team, which is definitely a humbling moment for any football player that has been a starter and a first-round pick," Manning said. "Then this past offseason again, probably (he was) unsure on a roster position. I sure have appreciated all he's done. Just in the two seasons we've been together, he's been through an incredible journey as well."

It was no coincidence that Moreno's emergence coincided with Manning's arrival. Moreno said Manning showed him every day what it meant to be a professional. Better ball security -- Moreno fumbled seven times in his first two seasons with the Broncos, but he was responsible for none of Denver's 16 fumbles lost in 2013 -- didn't hurt, either.

Now as the third-longest-tenured player on offense and with the entire front office and coaching staff that brought him to the Rocky Mountains long gone, Moreno fulfilled his potential at the most pivotal time -- with free agency in the foreground.

With McGahee gone and Hillman and Ball both unproven as pass blockers, Moreno topped the depth chart in September, rushed for 1,038 yards and 10 touchdowns and caught 60 passes for 548 yards and three touchdowns.

"The thing with Knowshon, the thing he's really improved, is his accountability and dependability," Broncos coach John Fox said. "I think that it goes with being a running back, not just toting the rock. It's not just running the football.

"You have protections. We change a lot of things, and we do a lot of things. We don't just call a play and go to the line and run it. You've got to be a sharp guy, so he is very smart.

"He's been a professional as far as his preparation goes, and he has become one of the more dependable guys as far as assignment detail and those types of things. You see that in his stats. You see it with his pass-receiving yardage in combination with the rushing yardage, which is doing all and everything about your job. He's done a tremendous job, and he is maybe one of our most improved players."

Moreno is not lauded in the same tenor as Manning, wide receiver Demaryius Thomas and tight end Julius Thomas, but Moreno isn't after fame.

His drive all season was to return to his old stomping grounds in New Jersey, all for the chance to play in the "big game." It will be a fitting finale for Moreno, whose biggest moment brings the opportunity to prove with conviction he can only be considered a winner.

"It's very special. It made me into the person that I am today," Moreno said of reaching the Super Bowl in his hometown. "Just learning from my experiences, going in and out of doing what I was doing, shelters and things like that, that's part

of life. Everyone goes through different things. It's how you battle back from that and see the positive in all the negative. I think I did a good job of that."

Moreno doesn't know what to expect Sunday night, other than alligator tears and more excitement than he can contain.

"It will be through the roof," Moreno said. "Listening to other guys who have been in this position before playing in the Super Bowl, it's a lot going on. They say you have to hold your emotions down, you're going to be fired up, but there is so much going on that sometimes you've got to calm down. I think that will be my toughest battle, just being able to stay composed until the fires start burning down."

Crying for the national anthem, as he did earlier this season, might invite all sorts of labels. Moreno came too far to notice.

Debating Manning's legacy: Peyton's place secured

By Howard Balzer,
The SportsXchange/ Yahoo! Sports
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK -- The word legacy is tossed around in sports as if it is some easily defined concept. We will hear it a lot this week, just as we did in the run-up to the AFC Championship Game, when those fixated on only championships insisted that Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning needed to win that game to cement his legacy.

Of course, now that Manning's Broncos moved on to play the Seattle Seahawks in the Super Bowl, HE must win this game for his legacy to be top-notch. As if one individual in the ultimate team game in sports can win or lose on his own.

The standard for quarterbacks is simply wrong. How many times have we heard the lament that "quarterbacks get too much of the credit when their teams win and too much blame when their team loses? It's not fair, but that's the way it is."

Well, who says "that's the way it is?" Especially when it shouldn't be. Quarterbacks sure help a team win, perhaps arguably more than any other player. But they can't do it alone, especially when football is the only one of our four major team sports where the same players don't play offense and defense.

Former Detroit Lions running back Barry Sanders never sniffed a championship, but that didn't prevent him from being considered one of the best ever.

As for Manning, you've heard all the critics. That he is just 11-11 in playoff games. That he has one Super Bowl title on his resume, and that he didn't have one of his better days that Sunday against the Bears.

Actually, that might have been one of his best games. In a steady rain in Miami, he orchestrated the offense like the maestro he still is to this day. Manning got the offense into the best plays possible against Chicago's defense, as running backs Dominic Rhodes (21-113) and Joseph Addai (19-77) combined for 190 rushing yards and Addai added 10 receptions.

Has he had some downers? Sure. Many have in the post-season when the competition is the best the league has to offer. Yes, the Patriots with Tom Brady at quarterback are 18-8 in the playoffs. But, they are also 9-8 since their last Super Bowl win 10 years ago. In five playoff games since then, Brady had passer ratings of 66.4 or less. Manning's overall passer rating in the post-season is better than that of Brady (90.1 to 87.5), and Manning has 10 playoff games with a rating of 90 or better and five better than 100, including the 118.4 he posted against New England on Jan. 19.

It is argued that our collective memories are driven by what is accomplished in championship games on "the biggest stage." That would simply be selective amnesia. Are Dan Marino or Dan Fouts not remembered for being two of the better passes in history? They are in the Hall of Fame, as is Jim Kelly, who came up short in four Super Bowls.

Is John Elway in our memory because of his helicopter run in the Super Bowl, but not for his 12-for-22 performance for 123 yards that day against the Green Bay Packers with a passer rating of 51.9? Elway also had passer ratings of 36.8 and 19.4 in Super Bowls.

Elway's Broncos won it all that first time thanks to running back Terrell Davis, who rushed for 157 yards and three touchdowns. But the offense stalled in the second quarter when Davis was out of the game experiencing migraines and three possessions netted 13 yards on eight plays. He rushed for 93 yards in the second half as Denver took control.

The reality is that Manning will be a first-ballot Hall of Famer if he never wins another game in the NFL. And while he certainly is driven to win, it's unlikely he will lose any sleep 15 years from now if some analysts sitting in a TV studio or writers hitting their computer keys don't believe he is the best ever. Those are merely opinions.

Former NFL coach Bum Phillips, who passed away during the 2013 regular season, said it best when he was asked whether running back Earl Campbell was the best running back he'd ever seen. Phillips paused, and in his signature drawl, said, "I don't know, but he's among 'em."

A legacy is an all-encompassing snapshot of how a player performed, what he brought to the game and how he will be remembered. That memory extends well beyond championships.

Peyton Manning's legacy is unquestioned and is marked by an unrelenting work ethic, love for the game and setting an example for teammates to prepare for the game the way he does.

If his team falls short, as it might on a cold night in New Jersey Feb. 2, so be it.

It can't be argued that, in a discussion of the best quarterbacks this game has ever seen, Manning "is among 'em."

Howard Balzer is an award-winning writer and broadcaster who has covered the National Football League for more than three decades and is a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame Selection Committee. He is a national columnist for The Sports Xchange and co-host on SiriusXM NFL Radio.

Now It Gets Real

By Peter King
MMQB/SI.com
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. — Well now, a Jersey City dateline, six days before the Super Bowl. There's something I never thought I'd see. Or type. A Super Bowl in New Jersey. But the hype machine for Super Bowl XLVIII alighted in the Garden State Sunday night, so let's go there, to the tamest interview station of them all.

Richard Sherman's. Of course.

To all in the media hoping Richard Sherman does their job this week by spouting even a Triple-A version of the Erin Andrews diatribe, and to any of you hoping for another round of fun social debate on thuggery and race and sportsmanship, I bring you these gems from Sherman's riser Sunday night at the Jersey City Westin, a week before Seattle-Denver just up the street in East Rutherford:

"We have a team full of competitors who want to go against the best team, the best offense. We have a tremendous amount of respect for them."

"It's all going to come down to who plays the best football."

"It really comes down to the execution."

"It's going to be a battle of wills."

All right! Who went and stole Richard Sherman?!

"Oh man, three hundred [people]? For 45 minutes? Okay. I've got something. Looking forward to it." —Richard Sherman, anticipating Media Day

What we heard Sunday night is probably what we'll hear Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday when Sherman meets more of the press. Lots more. Last night, I'd estimate about 75 reporters and camera people were around him, as you can see above. He was in a good mood, happy to be there and happy to be the Stanford Richard Sherman, not the Fifteen-Seconds-After-The-Game Richard Sherman. The one thing I can tell you about Sherman, from having gotten to know him a little bit in our conversations—me as editor in chief of The MMQB, he as a regular columnist—is he's an optimistic person. A realist, but an optimist too. Someone asked him about being referred to as a thug last night, and instead of rolling his eyes and flashing anger, he said: "I think it did have some effect on opening up the channels of communication and conversation and dialogue. I think I had some impact on it, and I want to have a positive impact. I want people to understand that everybody should be judged by their character and who they are as a person and not by the color of their skin. That's something we've worked to get past as a

nation, as a country and we're continuing to work on it. It's healthy. Everything that happened, all the people who sent the messages, who tweeted what they tweeted, it ends up turning around to be a positive because it opens back up the discussion and people begin to get more educated. Anytime you get more knowledge, you're more powerful as a person." I've heard him talk like that several times, when the cameras aren't around. I think as a person, that's who he is.

In This Corner

Want to read all of Richard Sherman's musings for The MMQB throughout the year? Read his defense of his postgame interview, his opinion on the top five quarterbacks and much more in his archive.

But this week, I expect him to be the filtered Richard Sherman. Maybe with a message Tuesday, Media Day, in Newark, for the national TV audience, but nothing too incendiary.

"What'd you think?" I asked him after he finished his 20-minute session Sunday night.

"That was fun," he said. "Enjoyed it."

"That's going to be the lightest one," I said. "Wait 'til you see Tuesday. Three hundred people, maybe. Bigger setting. For a lot longer."

"Oh man," he said. "Three hundred? For 45 minutes? Okay. I've got something. Looking forward to it."

* * *

* * *

Some logistics ...

The Broncos and Seahawks are staying 1.3 miles apart, just up from the Hudson River. Outside the Denver hotel is the better view: the icy Hudson, with the new World Trade Center glistening to the east. A beautiful sight.

But Denver has the more arduous practice road. They'll have a 31-mile escorted trek to the Jets' practice facility in the rolling hills of Florham Park, and will make the trip for the first time today for a light 2:55 p.m. practice. The Seahawks will practice for 75 minutes in the shadow of MetLife Stadium, at the Giants' Quest Diagnostics Training Center across the parking lot from the site of the Super Bowl. Seattle is about eight miles away from the Meadowlands. Both teams will likely be practicing at the two teams' indoor facilities for much of the week, seeing as the

highs for the three big practice days—Wednesday, Thursday and Friday—are forecast to be 24, 29 and 38 degrees, respectively.

Denver coach John Fox did the smart thing, figuring he'll have his team on buses for 70 to 90 minutes a day today, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday: He's going to encourage his players to do homework on the trips. All players have team-issued tablets with scouting tape, and he'll tell them that because so many of them haven't played the Seahawks in a game that counts (Denver and Seattle have met once in the regular season in the last seven years, and not since 1983 in a playoff game; more on that below), they should use the time on the commutes to and from Florham Park wisely. In addition, Fox and FOX will get together Wednesday afternoon on the bus. He'll do his weekly TV production meeting with the TV team of Joe Buck, Troy Aikman and the network's production staff while driving back from the Jets' facility after practice. Smart and efficient.

Returning to the scene of the not-so-prime.

Pete Carroll will coach the Super Bowl in a stadium in the same Jersey parking lot as the one where he got his first head-coaching shot. In fact, this month is the 20-year anniversary of Pete Carroll getting his first NFL head-coaching job.

This month is also the 19-year anniversary of Carroll getting fired from his first NFL head-coaching job.

That's right. Carroll Chudzinskied the Jets' job.

Carroll succeeded Bruce Coslet as Jets coach on Jan. 7, 1994, and had the team at 6-5 in November, with the 7-4 and slumping Dolphins coming to town for a late-November game. A win, and New York would tie Miami for the lead of the AFC East. And the Jets were up 24-6 late in the third quarter of the game. That was a strange mix of a Jets team. (That is not the first time, nor the last, for that.) Boomer Esiason and Art Monk teamed that day for five aerial connections for 108 yards. Esiason to Monk! Bet you didn't know they ever played on the same team.

But this is the game that will hurt even the thickest-skinned of Jets followers until the day they die. Marino threw a couple of touchdown passes to Mark Ingram (the dad) to get Miami close, and, in the final two minutes, Marino drove Miami 84 yards to the winning touchdown. But not just any winning touchdown. With the clock running and the ball at the Jets' 8 with 32 seconds left, Marino hustled to the line. The man who called the plays into Marino's helmet that season was backup Bernie Kosar, and he immediately got the idea to use something Miami had practiced but not used in a game: the fake spike play. So Kosar suggested it, and Marino loved it.

"Clock! Clock!" Marino yelled at the line, and he gave Ingram a stare, the kind of stare Ingram recognized as, Be ready, because I'm coming to you, and sure enough, the Jets relaxed, and Marino threw a line drive to Ingram for the game-winning eight-yard touchdown.

"He was brilliant. He was the Chip Kelly of his time." —Boomer Esiason on Pete Carroll's tenure as Jets coach

Sunday night, Carroll recognized the importance of that moment. "It could have been entirely different had we just hung on and won that game," Carroll said. "When you look back on it, that's what you would point to, because we lost four games after that as well." That's right: The Jets finished on a five-game losing streak. In the last week of the season, Carroll called Esiason into his office and told him, "Boomer, we're gonna make some major changes around here, and you're gonna love them."

But after the last loss, owner Leon Hess, sure his 6-10 team had more talent, fired Carroll and hired Rich Kotite, who'd just been fired as Eagles head coach. That really worked out. The Jets went 4-28 under Kotite.

"To this day I have no idea why Mr. Hess fired Pete after one season," Esiason said. "He was brilliant. He was the Chip Kelly of his time. I wish he'd have stayed our coach."

Two things about that Miami game. Ingram caught four touchdown passes from Marino in the second half. Ingram's now in jail until 2019 on money-laundering and fraud charges. And there was the matter of Esiason's trip home to Long Island after the game.

"I'm in traffic at the Lincoln Tunnel [the route from East Rutherford to Long Island, via Manhattan] and next to me there was an accident, and I'm thinking, Should I get out of the car and help? So I do, and the woman in this car is slumped over the wheel, with a cigarette in her hand. I rap on the window. 'Lady! You okay!' She opens her eyes. She says, 'Boomer? BOOMER? Man, you guys suck! How'd you lose that game!' "

* * *

This is a very significant storyline this week.

I just don't know exactly how to quantify it.

Peyton Manning has never faced any of the eight Seattle defensive backs in the regular season or playoffs. He has faced the Seahawks twice in the preseason, but not when it's counted since Oct. 4, 2009, a span of 68 games, including postseason. And, obviously, they have never faced him in a real game either.

Comparing the Seattle secondary in that 2009 game—when Manning riddled the Seahawks for 353 yards in a 34-17 Indy win—and now:

Seattle, Oct. 4, 2009		Seattle, this week
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Kelly Jennings, Ken Lucas	Starting corners	Richard Sherman, Byron Maxwell
Deon Grant, Jordan Babineaux	Starting safeties	Earl Thomas, Kam Chancellor
Travis Fisher, Josh Wilson	Backup corners	Jeremy Lane, Walter Thurmond, DeShawn Shead
Lawyer Milloy, C.J. Wallace	Backup safeties	Chris Maragos

Now the question: Who gets the edge—Manning or the Seattle secondary—because of the lack of exposure these two sides have had to each other?

At first blush I'd say Manning, because, well, as Richard Sherman said a few days ago, "You can't get in Peyton Manning's head. If you get in his head, you'll get lost." Manning, and his new coordinator-in-crime, Adam Gase, are very good at figuring out things to show a defense that they've never seen before. Last week against New England, Virgil Green, a tight end who'd never carried the ball in 47 previous NFL games, lined up as a lone back in the backfield in a three-wide, two-tight-end set—and Manning handed it to him. Gain of six. The second touchdown pass of the game, a three-yard flip to Demaryius Thomas, was invented Friday night during a post-practice flurry of emails and voice memos (I wrote about it last Monday). The point about these plays: New England coach Bill Belichick has faced Manning 15 times since 2001, and he'd never seen either of those two plays before. Imagine if you're Seattle defensive coordinator Dan Quinn and his secondary. You can study every snap Manning has taken this season. You can look at Denver's 1,297 plays in 18 games, and you can analyze Manning's 738 pass attempts. But do you know you'll be seeing what you've seen regularly this year? Andre Caldwell was thrown 19 balls in a late-season three-game stretch; Jacob Tamme got 13 Manning targets in an earlier three-game run. Manning, when he needs to, involves the rest of the roster, not just his big four.

But Seattle has an edge here in that Manning hasn't been able to replicate the Seahawks' talent, size and physicality in practice. Other than Sherman staying at left corner—that's an absolute given—we won't know for sure until the game starts how Seattle plans to defend the wideouts. You can be sure tight end Julius Thomas will get the intimidating brunt of 6-3, 232-pound strong safety Kam Chancellor's attention. The closing speed of free safety Earl Thomas is misleading.

We've seen Manning use different players at different times, and without regard to making sure everyone in the offense is treated fairly. That's why it wouldn't surprise me to see a guy like Caldwell, Tamme or Montee Ball take a prime role in the Super Bowl. Manning is not going to force the ball to Demaryius Thomas if he's blanketed by Sherman up the right side.

For once, the beaten-up story angle of the week (just watch)—Peyton Manning against the best secondary in football—could turn out to be the overwhelming story of the Super Bowl.

And now, from Clevelandia ...

The Browns coaching hire. It's a tangled web in Cleveland—and I say that with much respect for Mike Pettine, hired as the eighth head coach in the reconstituted Browns' 15-year history. Pettine did a fabulous job with the Bills in his one year as coordinator (Buffalo sacks in 2012: 36; in 2013: 57) and should breathe life into a team that underperformed on defense this season. But you get the feeling at the end of the coaching search that Pettine was the ultimate compromise candidate. In the final days before the hire, Cleveland rekindled its pursuit of Josh McDaniels, and went after him hard. I have heard McDaniels was the apple of owner Jimmy Haslam's eye from the time a four-man team of Browns officials met with McDaniels in New England for seven-and-a-half hours on Wild Card Saturday, and that GM Mike Lombardi had at least two conversations with McDaniels about re-entering the coaching derby in the days after New England's loss to Denver in the AFC title game.

I have also heard, after Bill Belichick pushed hard for his friend Greg Schiano to get in the Cleveland race, that some in the Browns' hierarchy were revved up by Schiano's interview with the club early last week. But the Browns have the same old problem they've had since the weekend that the late owner of the team, Al Lerner, put his stamp of approval on Tim Couch as the first pick of the expansion Browns in 1999: They don't have a long-term quarterback of the future (unless Brian Hoyer, 28, is far better than he's shown in his four-team, four-start NFL career), and they don't have anyone to coach one. That's the biggest problem with the Browns now. There's no consensus as to who will be the offensive coordinator, and certainly no consensus as to whom the team will draft in May for the new coordinator to coach. And what if the Browns, who love Johnny Manziel, are trumped in their effort to draft Manziel by another team—assuming Johnny Football is the top quarterback on the board, which is too early to say now. The Browns have gone six straight seasons with at least 11 losses, and they are far from out of the woods.

On Adam Gase. The Denver offensive coordinator did the smart thing, as did his former boss in Denver, McDaniels. The coaches of Peyton Manning (Gase) and Tom Brady (McDaniels) both withdrew from the search in Cleveland and will be back piloting their explosive offenses with legendary quarterbacks in 2014 rather than coaching the Browns. Gase is 35 and has a bright future. "I really like Gase," Manning told me last week. "I like playing for guys that are smarter than me and work as hard as me." The Browns never got a great handle on Gase, and he certainly wouldn't have heard good things about the organization from his father-in-law, Joe Vitt, an NFL lifer on the New Orleans staff, or from Denver director of pro personnel Tom Heckert, the former Browns GM who left the team last year with bitter feelings. Gase is better riding out Manning's last two years (my guess) with him and then seeing if a team with a brighter future wants him.

Speaking of McDaniels ... Which no one in Denver likes to do. People in Denver figure McDaniels "ran off" Jay Cutler, which he didn't do, and then drafted Tim Tebow and got fired in the midst of a crash-and-burn 4-12 season. So the venom spews. But let's be fair here. Look around the Broncos roster, which McDaniels had control of in 2009 and 2010. From the 2009 draft: Knowshon Moreno (1,586 yards from scrimmage and 13 touchdowns this year), defensive end Robert Ayers (sack of Tom Brady in the AFC title game) and special-teams captain David Bruton are here. From the 2010 draft: the two leading receivers—Demaryius Thomas (92 catches, 14 touchdowns) and Eric Decker (87 catches, 11 TDs)—are here, plus starting guard Zane Beadles. Tim Tebow's not here, of course. And the Tebow thing colors everything about McDaniels' legacy. It should be considered, to be sure. But let me ask you this question: If Thomas and Decker hadn't been on the roster when Peyton Manning was considering what team to choose 22 months ago, are you really that sure Manning would have signed with the Broncos? He has said time and again that when he compared teams, he liked the young receivers that Denver had. Who would have been in their place, and would they have passed Manning's muster? Or would he have looked at Larry Fitzgerald and the Manning-friendly offense of Ken Whisenhunt in Arizona a little more fondly? Point is, McDaniels shouldn't be a Denver pariah in this Super Bowl week. He should be thanked.

Gil Brandt on Manziel. A few league people raised their eyebrows when the godfather of the draft, Gil Brandt, put 6-0 Texas A&M quarterback Johnny Manziel No. 1 on his first draft board. I asked Brandt why he did it. "I do have a tremendous belief in him," Brandt said. "You are going to get 110% out of this guy every day of his life, every play of his life. If you don't have a quarterback, and you want one, I believe this guy has a great chance to be good for a long time. This guy had an inferior team. And he beat Alabama, he beat Oklahoma. He's down 29 to Duke in the last game of his college career, and he's on the sidelines saying, 'There is no way we are going to lose.' This guy's a better version of Fran Tarkenton." About Manziel's love of the parties, Brandt said, "He's had a chance to do some things, at age 18, 19, 20 and 21, because of the financial backing of his grandfather, but the more I've looked into him, I just don't believe it's going to hold him back from being really good. The one thing coach [Tom] Landry told me a long time ago is you look for the good, not for the bad."

* * *

A Lil Q&A with Lil Wayne, of all things.

Well, I never thought I'd be interviewing a rapper for The MMQB. But one of our writers, Robert Klemko, knew how passionate a football fan Lil Wayne is, and Klemko met his publicist, and one thing led to another, and Tuesday night the publicist said to me: "I'm patching you through to Wayne." The mega-Packers fan is opinionated about a lot of things in football—his Pack, Richard Sherman, Peyton Manning, why he loves football above all other games, and his own football history: "I was a fullback when I played. I tell people that, and they don't believe me. I loved to be like Christian Okoye, the Nigerian Nightmare." The greatest hits from a chat with 31-year-old New Orleans native Dwayne Michael Carter Jr.:

How he became a Packers fan

"They won the Super Bowl in my hometown, and I was hooked. I am not missing a Packers game. Never. I don't care what kind of world I am in, where I am. When the Packers are playing, I'm watching. This year was tough. When A-Rod [Aaron Rodgers] went down, I was in a lot of pain."

Why he loves football

"It's such a natural thing ... I don't know, really. I love it more than anything. The physicality of it, I think. On Sundays, I just sit there, and everybody knows—no phone calls. It's understood by the people around me—when the games are on, no calls for him."

Richard Sherman

"To me, the Richard Sherman thing ... I think he does it, I don't want to say for attention, I don't believe it's for attention, but I believe there is a technique to what he is doing. It all of a sudden doesn't seem so natural. It seems like it used to be Richard Sherman loves to trash talk, but now, it's kind of a technique. Not natural. I've seen people go back at him, and when they tell him something back or he gets his face busted, there's no more barking. That tells me, I'm really not like this, I'm really not aggressive. I think it's Richard Sherman mouthing off ... I know the media likes to say he's backing it up with his play. Well, Richard Sherman comes from the same place I come from, the street, and he's doing a lot of talking where he really can't back it up. I think he's a shutdown player. But a great player? No. Great? I don't think he's a great player. Now if he plays great against Peyton, that will be huge. If he performs tremendously, that will [change things]."

Peyton Manning

"He is special. He is one of a kind. I am glad I am able to live to see him, to see the kind of things he is doing."

The Manning men: Father Archie and sons Cooper, Peyton and Eli

"I have a story about Peyton. A guy who has been on the road with us, he was like an uncle to us, he told us this story. When he was in jail, about to come home, he was put on one of those work-release things in New Orleans. Every morning, real early, he would clean the schoolyard of the [Isidore] Newman School [where the Manning kids attended]. Because he was a prisoner, he would have to clean the schoolyard at 4 or 5 in the morning. There was not one morning, 4:30, 5 in the morning, he wouldn't see Archie, Peyton, Cooper, or Eli out on the field. He'd see Archie throwing passes to Cooper, or Peyton throwing routes to Cooper. I don't know if people know this, but it was Cooper who was the prodigy. He [the roadie] would tell us the story, you know, like it was destined."

Super Bowl XLVIII

"Honestly, I don't want to use the word 'surprised,' but it is unexpected to see Seattle in the Super Bowl. I expected Peyton. He's been there before. And I love Russell Wilson. But they are not playing in Seattle. I just can't see Peyton losing."

* * *

Well, this isn't so much of a shock, but it is stark.

Former Jets GM Mike Tannenbaum, now doing some coach-representation and TV/radio work, figured this out this week:

Of the 11 coaches hired in 2009, one remains in his job. That's Rex Ryan of the Jets, and that was no slam dunk as December wore on.

Of the 11 general managers/personnel czars in place on the teams with new coaches in 2009, one remains in his job. That's Detroit GM Martin Mayhew, and that was no slam dunk as December wore on.

The moral of the story? "It's a really, really hard job," Tannenbaum said. "The sad thing is, those numbers are probably not out of whack with other periods of time either."

The teams that named permanent coaches in 2009, and the personnel men with them:

Team	Coach	GM/Personnel chief
Cleveland	Eric Mangini	George Kokinis
Denver	Josh McDaniels	Brian Xanders
Detroit	Jim Schwartz	Martin Mayhew
Indianapolis	Jim Caldwell	Bill Polian
Kansas City	Todd Haley	Scott Pioli
New York Jets	Rex Ryan	Mike Tannenbaum
Oakland	Tom Cable	Al Davis
St. Louis	Steve Spagnuolo	Billy Devaney

San Francisco	Mike Singletary	Scot McCloughan
Seattle	Jim Mora	Tim Ruskell
Tampa Bay	Raheem Morris	Mark Dominik

Including playoffs, Mayhew's Lions are 29-52 in the five seasons since 2009.

Ryan's Jets are 46-40 since 2009.

So it's not like Mayhew has the job security of Ron Wolf and Ryan the security of Vince Lombardi.

I'm not that surprised, I guess, that 20 of the 22 lead football men on those 11 teams are gone. I guess I'm surprised that not a single one of the 22 men holding those jobs, after five seasons, has a rock-solid grip on it.

Quotes of the Week

I

"It's historically as hard as it gets. They've broken every major record. Peyton's been extraordinary. We're up against it. It's an extraordinary challenge. But they have to play us too."

—Seattle coach Pete Carroll Sunday night, on how tough a task the Seahawks face in the Super Bowl, playing the highest-scoring team in NFL history.

II

"In talking to Ray Lewis and in talking to John Elway, they couldn't play anymore. That was all they had to give. They truly left it all out there. I truly have been kind of a one-year-at-a-time basis. So I really have no plans beyond this game, had no plans coming into this season beyond this year. I think that's the healthy way to approach kind of your career at this stage. I still enjoy playing football. I feel a little better than I thought I would at this point coming off that surgery. I still enjoy the preparation part of it, the work part of it. Everybody enjoys the games, everybody's going to be excited to play in a Super Bowl, but I think when you still enjoy the preparation and the work part of it, I think you probably still ought to be doing that. I think as soon as I stop enjoying it, if I can't produce, if I can't help the team, that's when I'll stop playing. If that's next year, maybe it is. But I certainly want to continue to keep playing."

—Denver quarterback Peyton Manning, upon arrival in New Jersey Sunday evening.

For a few minutes, that should put to rest the Peyton-might-retire-after-this-game stuff.

III

"I'm just glad I ordered the pot roast, not the shrimp alfredo."

—Denver defensive tackle Terrance "Pot Roast" Knighton, who told me on The MMQB Podcast With Peter King this week that his nickname came from former Jacksonville teammate Clint Ingram's deriding him for his meal selection on a plane trip his rookie year—Knighton chose the pot roast over the shrimp alfredo—and, as Knighton said, "It just stuck. There was a time there I met a lady and she didn't even know my name. She just knew 'Pot Roast.' But that's cool."

IV

"A lot of the writers think I'm boring. So I'm going to go all Richard Sherman on you."

—Boston Red Sox GM Ben Cherington, to Pete Abraham of The Boston Globe.

Stat of the Week

AFC North Coach Stability Update:

The Browns named the eighth coach in the 15 years since they were reborn on Thursday. And good luck to Mike Pettine. He's a very good defensive coach who cut his teeth professionally under Rex Ryan, and he'll be the kind of leader the Browns wanted in a head coach. But there's been great hope before in Cleveland. Seven times.

Here's how, since 1999, the AFC North teams have fared with coaches, and winning:

	Coaches since '99	Wins since '99	Avg. games per coach	Playoff appearances
Pittsburgh	2	161	120.0	8
Baltimore	2	156	120.0	10
Cincinnati	3	106	80.0	5
Cleveland	7*	77	34.3	1

* Mike Pettine is the eighth coach of the Browns.

Factoids of the Week That May Interest Only Me

I

Last 10 meetings between Tom Brady and Peyton Manning:

	Wins	Points scored by team
Brady	5	260
Manning	5	260

II

Senior Bowl South quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo is from Eastern Illinois, 1,191 miles north of Miami, where North quarterback Stephen Morris played, and 572 miles north of Clemson, S.C., where North quarterback Tajh Boyd played.

Mr. Starwood Preferred Member Travel Note of the Week

I have never covered a Super Bowl in the town where I lived, so even though I think it's a bad idea to have the Super Bowl in an outdoor freezer, I am pleased to be home this week. To get my credential for the week's media responsibilities, I left my apartment on the east side of Manhattan Sunday about 2:30 p.m., and walked nine blocks to the Sheraton Times Square, which is the media hotel for the Super Bowl. I picked up my press credential, then boarded a bus at 3:30 for the Broncos' team hotel in Jersey City, across the Hudson River. After those interviews, we got back on the bus and rode five minutes to the Seahawks' hotel, also in Jersey City.

What will be odd about this Super Bowl: The media events with the teams, and the team hotels, and the practice sites, and the Super Bowl, will be in New Jersey. Everything else—the parties, the major-domo press conferences, the media center—will be in Manhattan. Ever travel through the Jersey state capital, Trenton? There's a big bridge there, with the words TRENTON MAKES, THE WORLD TAKES. It's a jab, I've always thought, at the big wide world that looks at New Jersey as a flyover state, or a drive-by state. I lived in New Jersey with my family for 24 years. I love the state. Not every inch of it, but I loved living there, and I'm grateful to have had wonderful homes and neighbors and lives in Montclair (mostly) and Bloomfield. So I'm a little sensitive about the New York-ification of everything major league that goes on in New Jersey. Like this Super Bowl. The teams are in Jersey. The practices are in Jersey. The players and coaches meet the press in Jersey. The game's in Jersey.

But it's the New York Super Bowl.

I'll be drinking in Hoboken Tuesday night, thank you.

Tweets of the Week

I

"Richard Sherman seems to be on his best behavior during his first Super Bowl media exposure. Unfortunately."

—@MichaelJLev, of the Orange County Register, tweeting from the Richard Sherman news conference Sunday night.

II

“FYI: Three alums of the O-16 Lions will play in the Super Bowl 5 years later — DEN G Manny Ramirez, LB Paris Lenon and SEA DE Cliff Avril.”

—@RobertKlemko, of The MMQB.

III

“Mount Washington State Forest, Massachusetts.”

https://twitter.com/EARTH_PICTURES/status/426883951337439232/photo/1

—@Earth_Pictures, on Friday.

Click on that. Wow.

IV

“Reminder to new Dolphins GM Dennis Hickey: ‘unknown’ Pete Rozelle was named Commish on 23rd ballot in 1960...that worked out pretty well.”

—@NFLonTheHill, longtime NFL PR man and senior advisor to the commissioner Joe Browne, after two (at least) executives turned down the Dolphins’ GM job, which went to Bucs director of player personnel Dennis Hickey.

Ten Things I Think I Think

1. I think the best thing I read all weekend about the Super Bowl in New York was a history lesson of Vince Lombardi’s New York roots, by Tom Rock of Newsday. Three tidbits: 1. Lombardi’s high school, St. Francis Prep of Brooklyn, is the only one in America to have a Super Bowl-winning coach and World Series-winning manager (Joe Torre) as alums. 2. Lombardi’s last game before he took the Packers’ head-coaching job in 1959 was as a Giants’ offensive assistant in the famous Baltimore win over the Giants in the ‘58 overtime championship game. 3. This from Rock: “Lombardi accepted a head coaching job with the Packers, but with the understanding that if Giants coach Jim Lee Howell were to leave, he would be able to return. When Howell left after the 1960 season, Lombardi was prepared to take over the Giants. Wellington Mara called the Packers to set it up. But the Packers reneged on the deal. During the 1961 season, the Giants visited Green Bay and Lombardi ran into Frank Gifford and other Giants players in town the night before the game. ‘He started crying,’ said Ernie Palladino, author of the book Lombardi and Landry. ‘Dammit,’ Lombardi said through his tears, ‘I should be the one coaching you guys.’ ” Great stuff from Rock, and from Palladino. Great idea for a story in this week, when the trophy bearing his name will be on display in his hometown.

2. I think the oddest thing I've sensed about this Super Bowl from the public and some in the media is that Russell Wilson, in the eyes of many, is overrated. I think that's absurd, and not just because he's got a 3-1 postseason record and will be playing in the Super Bowl in his second season. It's because of his presence, his ability to make those around him better, his drive to be great. Because his weapons compared to many contending teams (including the one he'll play Sunday) are not nearly as good. For all those who say he's just along for the ride, consider these two stat lines from his first two NFL seasons:

2012: 64.1% accuracy, 26 TDs, 10 interceptions, 100.0 rating, 12-6 record.

2013: 63.1% accuracy, 26 TDs, 9 interceptions, 101.2 rating, 15-3 record.

And, he's totaled 1,028 yards rushing, and five rushing touchdowns, in two years. If that's overrated, give me 52 other overrated guys on my roster. Every day.

3. I think new Tampa Bay GM Jason Licht (pronounced "Light") had an interesting take the other day when asked who would have the final say on the draft—him or coach Lovie Smith. (It's widely thought around the league that the buck will stop with Smith on all football decisions.) Said Licht: "There will be no arguments on draft day. Going in to the draft—arguments are healthy. I've had arguments with every coach that I've worked for, and every GM. Some of them would be happy to tell you about them, I'm sure. We'll have arguments on players. I'm going to plead my case. I told Lovie, during the interview process, that if he doesn't like a player, I'm going to be in his office 20 times trying to prove why my player, that I like, is the guy that we need, and I'm sure he'll do the same thing. If we don't come to an agreement, the answer is easy, it lies in itself—we won't take that player." I'll be interested to follow that down the line.

4. I think, even though we at The MMOB contributed to, as the New York Daily News blared across its back page Tuesday, "SHERMANIA," neither Richard Sherman nor anyone should be surprised at the outcry over his post-game explosion last week. It's America. It's the sports media. It's 56 million people watching something they've never seen before (at least in my memory): a star athlete raging at the camera in response to a couple of simple questions, with sportsmanship and race and the two-week Super Bowl media explosion involved. A recipe for a media firestorm, as we've seen.

5. I think if the Senior Bowl unearthed one gem this week, it's Pittsburgh defensive tackle Aaron Donald, who prompted comparisons to Geno Atkins. In 2013, he had 11 sacks and 28 tackles for loss in Pitt's first ACC season, and he was the Atlantic Coast Conference defensive player of the year.

6. I think I loved this story from Len Pasquarelli of National Football Post on the rise of the tall cornerback. You see the trend in Seattle: Richard Sherman (6-3) and Byron Maxwell (6-1) make plays with their reach as much as with their legs.

7. I think San Francisco offensive coordinator Greg Roman, unfortunately, may turn out to be the offensive version of Mike Zimmer, who had to wait far too long for his

chance to be a head coach. Cleveland not interviewing Roman ... absolutely amazing.

8. I think I am shocked to say this, and I only saw the fourth quarter ... but from the time I turned on the Pro Bowl till the end of the game, I saw players trying. Novel concept. The defensive lines were possessed, at least for the last quarter.

9. I think I will make this promise to you, as Super Bowl Week dawns: I promise I will not hit you over the head with weather reporting/complaining. It'll get a mention now and again, but not a daily pounding.

10. I think these are my non-football thoughts of the week:

a. Spend some more, Yankees. Pay Stephen Drew \$14 million a year. Come to think of it, pay J.D. Drew \$17 million.

b. Just adds to the fun. And all of America saying, "This is why we love football. Football's fair."

c. I don't blame the Yankees one bit, by the way. All they're doing is playing by the rules.

d. Bieber. Lohan. How do you tell them apart?

e. Great job by the NHL on the Stadium Series. The L.A. game Saturday night had some great pageantry (Vin Scully, the USC band, beach volleyball)

f. All who attended Kings-Ducks: You lucky dogs.

g. Same to you at Yankee Stadium. What a visual on TV.

h. If there's ever a category for best old player in sports history, 42-year-old Jaromir Jagr—who had one of the prettiest assists you'll ever seen Sunday against the Rangers at Yankee Stadium—will be in the finals. He leads an NHL playoff contender in scoring more than halfway through the season. A treat to watch.

i. How do the Asbury Jukes wear all Rangers stuff?

j. Coffeenerdness: Super Bowl Week Visitors Coffee Guide Dept.: I have found the most consistent drink-making Starbucks in Manhattan, and believe me, I have tried all 9,000 of them. It's the one on East 51st, between Park and Madison. Bunch of kids in there. They care.

k. Beer nerdness: Had the good fortune to meet Jim Koch, the Sam Adams brewer, on the SI Now show the other day in New York. We talked craft beer, and he handed me one of his new ones. "Cold Snap." A wheat beer, he said, with spices like coriander and orange peel. And I'm thinking, "Hmmm. Allagash White." So I

popped it open Friday night. A tad darker than Allagash, but the same nose and similar taste. Loved it. Coriander rocks, and I don't even know what it is.

Talk Back

Have a question or comment for Peter? Email him at talkback@themmqb.com and it might be included in Tuesday's mailbag.

l. Matt Garza to the Brew Crew. I like it. Good signing. If healthy, he should win 15.

m. Good luck to Dan Marino and Brian Hyland, former partners at HBO's Inside the NFL, as they team up with moviemakers to produce a motion picture about the life and times of Marine war hero and Purple Heart recipient Brian Stokes. After serving overseas, Stokes returned to play the game he loved—college football—at Division I-AA national champion Appalachian State. I've met Stokes, and I know Marino and Hyland, and I think this can be a heck of a movie. Really looking forward to it.

The Adieu Haiku

Sad thing re Pro Bowl:
End of Tony Gonzalez.
At least in football.

Last X-Man Standing

By Robert Klemko
MMQB/SI.com
January 27, 2014

How do you play 13 years of pro football in three leagues, bouncing among a dozen cities and two countries, with a family to feed, and maintain your sanity? You forget. A lot. You hold on to concepts, but not plays. You recall faces, but the names and places become difficult. There's only so much emotional capital you can invest.

Here's what Broncos middle linebacker Paris Lenon, the last XFL player remaining in the NFL, remembers about Vince McMahon's ill-fated, off-the-wall football league: "There was no coin toss in the XFL. I think they put the ball on the 40-yard line. They had a player from each team race to the ball from the goal line. Whoever recovered the ball won the toss. At first everybody thought, We'll just put the fastest guy on the team out there. Then somebody got blown up. Somebody figured out that if you put a bigger guy in there, he would get there late, but he would take it from the little guy. He'd crush him," says Lenon, who was undrafted out of Richmond in 2000 and failed to make the Panthers roster after being signed by Carolina that year. "Somebody separated their shoulder ... before the kickoff. You'd never see anything like that in the NFL."

Lenon wouldn't see much more of it in the XFL. His 2001 season with the Memphis Maniax (yes, with an x) was shortened, and that would be pro wrestling's first and last attempt at pro football. After the league folded that spring, Lenon—who spent several months as a late-night mail sorter for the postal service in his hometown Lynchburg, Va., while waiting for his NFL break—got a shot with the Packers, was cut, then had a two-week look in Seattle, and again was released. Toward the end of the 2001 NFL season he was picked up again by Green Bay and stuck on the practice squad. The Packers sent him to the Amsterdam Admirals of NFL Europe in the spring of '02 for a little more seasoning, and that summer he won a full-time roster spot with the Pack. Thus began a career that would take him on a tour of the NFL's landlocked locales: Green Bay 2002-05, Detroit 2006-08, St. Louis 2009, Arizona 2010-12, Denver 2013.

What he doesn't remember, his former coaches can fill in.

Here's Ed Donatell, who was the Packers' defensive coordinator from 2000 to 2003: "I love Paris. We cut him and then we ended up bringing him back. There was a discussion: Is it this guy or this guy or another guy? Small-college guy, undersized, didn't know the game. You look up and he's played 13 years."

Phil Snow, Lions defensive assistant, 2005-09: "Paris is a true bro. He plays the game the way it's supposed to be played. He became a free agent out of Green Bay, and I kind of found him. He's not real flashy, so you're thinking, is this guy

any good? And then you see the knowledge of the game and how well he kept himself in condition; that made him a good player.”

Paul Ferraro, Rams linebackers coach, 2009-11: “One of my favorite players I’ve ever coached, and I only had him for one year. I couldn’t believe when I watched the Lions’ tape that this guy wasn’t with anybody. My biggest disappointment is that we didn’t keep him. The way he studied the game—I had to be on my toes.”

Matt Raich, Cardinals linebackers coach, 2009-2012: “We had a big void when Carlos Dansby left. We signed Paris, and it ended up being one of the greatest signs we had. He was the smartest linebacker I’ve ever coached. All the younger players called him Uncle Paris. He’s just a blue-collar football player. In his second season the team voted him captain.”

Thirteen years, countless coaches, teammates and apartments, and a trail of undying respect. As Lenon reflects on a career that brought him from the Maniax to the AFC champion Broncos, for whom he’s suddenly a key piece in a Super Bowl run, he recalls two transformative experiences in Green Bay.

“One of the coolest things for me was when I first got to Green Bay on the practice squad, they used to have barbers that came in on Fridays,” says Lenon, now bald a decade later. “I used to have cool haircuts, but I don’t have that anymore. I didn’t have any cash on me, but Gilbert Brown said ‘I got you, don’t worry about it.’ This was Gilbert Brown—he could have big-timed me, but he’s not that kind of dude. That stood out for me. I said, you know what, I want to be like him; treat everyone with respect.”

If Brown taught him to be a teammate, linebackers coach Bo Pelini, now Nebraska’s head coach, taught him to be a player.

“I was having a tough time figuring out the playbook, so I met with Bo every night,” Lenon says. “Bo made me learn all three positions in the 4-3. I started taking notes on all three positions. Then it just got to the point where I was able to know what everyone was doing. It helped me start a habit that helped me understand defenses.”

He would need it. In 2006 he became a free agent, moving on to the sunny pastures of Detroit at age 28. He’d been to the playoffs with Green Bay, and missed them more than once, but he’d never been through disappointment like he did in Detroit. At the time the Maniax might have seemed preferable to the 0-16 Lions of 2008, arguably the worst team in the history of the league.

Snow: “What ends up happening when you lose all those games is nobody wants to play anymore. We had 19 guys on IR, and really a lot of those guys could be playing but they don’t want to. The linebacker group I had played every game. Paris was one of the major reasons for that. He went about his business every week. He kept that group together.”

From the middle of 2007 through the end of 2009, when he spent a season with the 1-15 Rams, Lenon went through a personal stretch of 2 wins and 38 losses.

"It's difficult to not have success," Lenon says now. "A lot of people look at a team that's not winning and feel like we're not putting in the time and the effort and preparation, which isn't the case. To have that cloud over you is difficult."

But that wasn't even the hardest point of his career. As Lenon floated around the league, from Detroit to St. Louis and then to Arizona, his family came with him. Heather, his wife since 2006, settled their three children in the Phoenix area during his three seasons with the Cardinals. And when he moved onto Denver this year, they stayed behind.

"That's what hurts," he says, "That I don't get to see them every day. But we didn't want to uproot them again."

Lenon replaced starting middle linebacker Wesley Woodyard in Week 14 and will remain there for his first Super Bowl. There will be ample reminders of his meandering career on hand at the New Meadowlands. Two members of those 0-16 Lions are Super Bowl starters five years later: Denver center Manny Ramirez and Seattle defensive end Cliff Avril. His coach with the Maniax, Kippy Brown, is the Seahawks' wide receivers coach. His family will rejoin him after seven months apart. You might think seeing all those old faces would make a man think about his future; about retirement. But Paris can't. If he could, he wouldn't be here.

"I haven't even thought about what comes after that game," Lenon says. "I'm not a planner. I'm just unable to do it. As I always say, I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."

What You Don't Know About the Men Playing in Super Bowl XLVIII

By Emily Kaplan
MMQB/SI.com
January 27, 2014

If Terrance Knighton had his way, the behemoth better known as Pot Roast would be running slant routes for Tom Brady instead of trying to sack him. If you ever see Virgil Green at a restaurant, tell the waitress it's his birthday: You will be in for a treat. And if you only associate Golden Tate with the \$7,875 fine he received earlier this season for taunting the Rams on a breakaway touchdown, well, there's more to the wideout than one unfortunate highlight.

"He's one of the most compassionate people I know," says one man who knows Tate like few others do.

In the oversaturated media frenzy that is Super Bowl week, the fact that players are people from diverse backgrounds often gets overlooked. To learn more about the Broncos and Seahawks beyond the manufactured storylines, The MMQB called the players' high school or college coaches and asked them to share one thing that fans might not know about their former pupils.

The answers will surprise and, in some instances, amuse you.

Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning's offensive coordinator at the University of Tennessee, David Cutcliffe:

"Peyton is the meanest practical joker I have ever been around. I mean, this is how it was with him: His first year at Tennessee, Peyton locked his competitor for the job, Brandon Stewart, out of the building for our first meeting. The meeting was about to start, and Brandon was nowhere to be found. This was pre-cell-phone days, of course. And I went looking for him, and there he was, outside the building, bloody knuckled from rapping on the door so hard trying to get someone to open up for him. We go in the meeting room, and there's Peyton, with this sheepish grin on his face."

Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson's high school coach at Collegiate (VA), Charles McFall:

"Everyone always knew he was going to be a star. I saw it when he was in sixth grade. His older brother played for me, and Russ was a ball boy during one of our games. It must've been one of the rare times Russell wasn't paying attention, because the refs were yelling for the ball. 'Throw us the ball, kid. Throw us the ball.' Then all of the sudden little Russell launches it across the field and everyone is just

like, Wow, did you see that? Even the refs. Wow. At that point I thought I might retire soon. Let's say I decided to stick it out a few more years."

Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton's high school coach at Milford Academy (NY), Bill Chaplick:

"When Terrance came to [Milton, a postgraduate school], he was about 285-290 pounds. He told us he was a wide receiver. Some of these kids are delusional when they come out of high school. Terrance Knighton? Wide receiver? We said Terrance, 'That's great, but with your skill-set, you're a defensive tackle,' He played right alongside [former Eagles tackle] Antonio Dixon and they were awesome. But there wasn't a day that went by that Terrance didn't try to get over there as an offensive skill player. Once he got the wide receiver thing out of his system, he started begging to play tight end."

Broncos tackle Ryan Clady's high school coach at Eisenhower (CA), Mike Clark:

"When Ryan was an NFL rookie, one of his high school teammates was murdered. It was awful, a terribly tragedy. Ryan picked up all the funeral expenses: \$10,000. Keep in mind that was his first year making money professionally, and that [his former teammate] wasn't even his best friend in high school. But his teammate needed something, and Ryan was there for him."

Seahawks cornerback Byron Maxwell's high school coach at Fort Dorchester (SC), Steve LaPrad:

"His junior year he was invited to one of those Nike Combines, a really big deal back then. Threw him in the car and we drove four and a half hours to Jacksonville. We get there, I'm sitting in the stands watching the QBs and wide receivers, just gauging the talent and all the sudden I see Byron standing next to me. 'What are you doing?' I asked. He goes, 'I don't know if I want to get in there, there's a lot of good guys.' I said, 'Byron, we just drove four and a half hours, get your butt over there and show them what you can do.' He tears it up, totally dominates. Byron's from one of the roughest sections in North Charleston, but he's a quiet, humble guy who never wants the attention. Funny, I think his roommate right now is Richard Sherman."

Seahawks wideout Golden Tate's high school coach at Pope John Paul II (TN), Jeff Brothers:

"The spring of Golden's senior year, we had a terrible stretch of tornadoes. There was one bad one, a really scary tornado. The first person to call my house to find out if my wife and [2-year-old] daughter were OK? Golden Tate. He's one of the most compassionate people I know."

Seahawks defensive end Cliff Avril's high school coach at Clay (FL), Jim Reape:

"Cliff's first love was basketball. He didn't want to play football. The coaches all had to convince him to come out for the team his sophomore year, and he didn't really play that year either; spent most of the time learning the rules. Another thing: he's humble. When he got married last spring, he invited four or five teachers from the school to his wedding, even though he has been gone for years."

Broncos tight end Virgil Green's high school basketball coach at Tulare (CA), Mark Hatton:

"We were scouting a basketball game on the road and took the guys to a really nice steakhouse. Told the waitress it was Virgil's birthday, even though it wasn't. They put a cowboy hat on him, gave him a candle-lit cupcake and all of the sudden Virgil starts singing louder than everyone else around him. I think he forgot it wasn't actually his birthday. He lit up the room. Virgil's probably one of the most fun, energetic kids I've ever had. Oh, and get him to dance. He danced all the time: practices, road trips, you name it. He's one heck of a dancer."

Seahawks guard James Carpenter's high school coach at Hephzibah (GA), John Bowden:

"He was so quiet. You wouldn't know who he was except that he was the biggest guy in the hallway. In his two seasons, I don't know if he said even 40 words at practice or games." [Darlan Dulin, who coached Carpenter at Coffeyville Community College (KS) had the same report]: "James was so quiet, and so humble. We always told him he had the potential to play on Sundays. And every time his answer was the same. 'Oh coach, I don't know about that.' "

Broncos defensive tackle Sylvester Williams' coach at Coffeyville Community College (KS), Darlan Dulin:

"We didn't want Sylvester. We told him not to show up. We were recruiting his cousin, who told us to check Sylvester out. Sylvester had dropped out of high school, was out of football for a year and was working for a sawmill factory. I didn't think it would work. We didn't have a scholarship for him, and I told him not to come. But the both of them showed up, first day of camp. Sylvester was 370 pounds. We kept him for spring ball, mostly because he ran well for his size, but I told him not to come back in the fall unless he was 330. Sure enough, he came back 328. I don't know how he lost that weight, but the rest is history."

Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey's high school coach at Charlton County (GA), Rich McWhorter:

"Champ played quarterback and free safety for us. But when he was a senior, his younger brother, Boss, was a sophomore and a very talented quarterback. So midway through Champ's senior year, we put Boss at QB and Champ at running back. In his first experience at running back, Champ had a 400-yard rushing game, and then a couple 300-yarders. Man, he made us coaches look good. And I would

be remiss not to mention this: He didn't need football to go to college. An honor student for us, in the gifted program, from seventh through 12th grade."

Seahawks defensive tackle Brandon Mebane's high school coach at Crenshaw High (CA), Robert Garrett:

"Most high school kids hang out with their friends or go out during lunch. Not Brandon. He'd be in the weight room, a lot of the times all by himself. In fact, he'd always be in the weight room. If you ever needed to find him, that's where he'd be. Despite his play on the field, Brandon was a gentle giant. One of the most humble, quietest defensive tackles you'll come across."

Seahawks wideout Jermaine Kearse's high school coach at Lakes (WA), Dan Miller:

"Jermaine graduated six years ago, but he still comes up to visit about once a month. His mom lives in the area, and there's a bunch of teachers here that he still knows. In fact, he goes over to one of his favorite teacher's house for dinner quite a bit. Ms. Robin Harrell, who teaches home economics."

Broncos guard Louis Vasquez's high school coach at Corsicana (TX), Dave Henigan:

"I've never seen a kid sign a scholarship then continue to work as hard as Louis did the end of his senior year. When you're in high school, at least in Texas, the second semester you're kind of pushed out of athletics. But Louis would come up to the weight room every single day. At that point, you're on your own. That's why he started his freshman year at Texas Tech and that's why he's been able to sustain the success he's had in the NFL for an extended period."

How Broncos built their Super Bowl team

By Chris Burke

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The Denver Broncos' glory years of John Elway and Mike Shanahan (and before that, John Elway and Dan Reeves) drifted away quietly after Elway's retirement. Denver made the playoffs just once in the four seasons after that occurred, with Brian Griese as the No. 1 quarterback, and then endured a stretch of five straight years at .500 or worse (2007-11).

It's easy then to sit and point at Peyton Manning as the lone reason for the franchise's improvement from also-ran to Super Bowl favorite. In a lot of ways, such an assessment may be true.

As is often the case in the NFL, though, there is more than meets the eye. The current Denver team has surrounded Manning with a roster's worth of talent mostly added through cost-friendly deals in free agency or found in the draft.

Here's how it all came together:

Quarterbacks

Peyton Manning (free agency), Brock Osweiler (2012 second-round pick)

Obviously, the acquisition of Manning prior to the 2012 season was a game-changer for the franchise. The Broncos had made the playoffs — and won a wild-card round game — with one Tim Tebow at the helm, but the opportunity to add Manning was too juicy to pass up. The Broncos signed Manning and traded Tebow in March, then drafted Osweiler in April as Manning's backup.

The gameplan shifted dramatically after the Tebow-to-Manning move. Denver had the 31st-ranked passing attack during that 2011 AFC West title season, with Eric Decker's 44 catches and Demaryius Thomas' 32 leading the way. With Manning in the fold, the Broncos improved to the league's No. 5-ranked passing offense in 2012 (Thomas and Decker combined for 179 catches) and then set records in that regard this season.

Manning has won 26 regular-season games over 2012-13, which is the most ever for a Broncos quarterback over his first two seasons starting for the team. (John Elway had 22.)

Running backs

Knowshon Moreno (2009 first-round pick), Montee Ball (2013 second-round pick), Ronnie Hillman (2012 third-round pick)

The Broncos are running lean and mean at RB, at least financially. They've used three draft picks in the past five years (including one each of the past two Aprils) on this position. The result: A deep and dangerous grouping, all making \$1.7 million or less this season. Moreno's contract expires after this year wraps, so they'll have a decision to make there, but Ball's presence may have decided that fate already.

Willis McGahee was the lead dog when Moreno arrived in 2009. The Broncos then led the league in rushing during that Tebow-led 2011 season. Now, they're a middle-of-the-road outfit — ranking 16th in yards rushing last season and 15th in 2013. But when combined with the lethal passing attack, that's more than enough to keep defenses off-balance.

Wide receivers and tight ends

WRs Demaryius Thomas (2010 first-round pick), Eric Decker (2010 third-round pick), Wes Welker (free agency), Andre Caldwell (free agency); TEs Julius Thomas (2011 fourth-round pick), Joel Dreessen (free agency), Jacob Tamme (free agency)

Manning's signing was the headliner in 2012. Welker's addition moved the needle this past summer.

His addition plus the rapid development of matchup-nightmare Thomas helped propel the Broncos offense to sights previously unseen in NFL annals. Welker caught 73 passes and scored 10 touchdowns in just 13 games working out of the slot; Thomas scored 12 times with 65 receptions. This could be Decker's last run with the team: he'll be a free agent after the 2013 season concludes.

The plethora of weapons available to Manning proved far too much for most defenses to handle this season. Only once (in a 34-31 overtime loss to New England) was Manning held under 200 yards passing. Counting the postseason, he topped 300 yards 13 times and rolled past 400 on four occasions, including in the conference championship win over New England.

Offensive line

Chris Clark (claimed off waivers), Zane Beadles (2012 second-round pick), Manny Ramirez (free agency), Louis Vasquez (free agency), Orlando Franklin (2011 second-round pick)

The splashy moves to land Welker and Manning have been critical, but some of the finest work done by the Broncos' front office — ex-GM Brian Xanders, VP John Elway and head coach John Fox — has come here. If Beadles and Franklin are considered values, then Clark, who was plucked off waivers from Minnesota four years ago, might constitute a downright steal. Snatching Vasquez from San Diego this past free-agent cycle helped solidify the interior of the line, while Ramirez has performed far more consistently than anyone would have predicted.

Manning's relative inability to escape the pocket keeps the pressure on this group up front. It responded by allowing all of 20 sacks, the lowest total in the league this season. The O-line was particularly impressive in playoff wins over San Diego and New England, keeping Manning clean and opening holes for the run game.

Defensive line

Malik Jackson (2012 fifth-round pick), Sylvester Williams (2013 first-round pick), Terrance Knighton (free agency), Shaun Phillips (free agency), Robert Ayers (2009 first-round pick)

A lot has been made of the Seahawks' ability to snatch up bargains like Cliff Avril and Michael Bennett from free agency to help their front seven. Denver deserves a tip of the cap, too, in that regard. Knighton, who has been an absolute godsend of late, came to the Broncos on a two-year, \$4.5 million deal in the offseason; Phillips, the de facto fill-in for a suspended and then injured Von Miller, is working on a \$1 million contract with no signing bonus.

Denver has mixed and matched through much of the year — a challenge brought on in great measure by Miller's constant absence. Derek Wolfe and Kevin Vickerson also have landed on injured reserve along the way in 2013, and Williams' contributions have been somewhat light.

This unit has been underappreciated all season, only to steal the spotlight in shutting down the Chargers' run game in the playoffs. Denver actually finished No. 7 in rush defense this year (down from No. 3), with a respectable 41 sacks. There's no telling where the Broncos would be without Knighton and Phillips.

Linebackers

Nate Irving (2011 third-round pick), Wesley Woodyard (free agency), Danny Trevathan (2012 sixth-round pick), Paris Lenon (free agency)

The Broncos float between standard 4-3 and adjusted 3-4 looks, so Phillips and Miller both could fall under this category. There is not a big name among the remaining linebackers — Woodyard may be closest; his base salary of \$3 million for 2013 actually is the team's third-largest behind Manning and Champ Bailey. Arguably the team's steadiest linebacker not named Von Miller this season, Trevathan was selected with a sixth-round pick gained in the Tim Tebow trade.

This is a solid but unspectacular group. Trevathan led the way statistically with two sacks, three interceptions and 129 tackles. Woodyard has seen the most action in concert with Trevathan, though Miller's absence has forced guys like Irving and Lenon to take on more responsibility.

Secondary

CBs Champ Bailey (trade), Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie (free agency), Tony Carter (free agency), Kayvon Webster (2013 third-round pick), Quentin Jammer (free agency); Safeties Duke Ihenacho (free agency), Mike Adams (free agency), David Bruton (2009 fourth-round pick), Michael Huff (free agency)

If there is a weak link for the Broncos, it probably lies here, especially after the loss of Chris Harris to a season-ending knee injury. This also is the spot on the field (aside from quarterback) where the Broncos have had to do the most work outside the draft to find starters. Only Webster was selected in the past four drafts, though Ihenacho was a 2012 undrafted free agent.

Denver ranked No. 3 in passing yards allowed in 2012. That number skyrocketed up to 27 this season, in part because Manning's offense hung so many points on the board, forcing the opposition to take to the air. Rodgers-Cromartie is the shutdown guy — he drew Julian Edelman last week. But the oft-injured Bailey also pitched in a stellar showing versus the Patriots.

The safeties have been a mixed bag, though Ihenacho was one of the team's most pleasant surprises. Rahim Moore (who's expected to miss the Super Bowl) played nearly 700 snaps during the regular season at a higher level than his reputation showed following his late-game miscue against Jacoby Jones in last season's playoffs.

John Fox, Michael Robinson took paths of courage to the Super Bowl

By Doug Farrar
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. — There's been a lot of talk already about the unusual journey Denver Broncos head coach John Fox had to take to the Super Bowl, and for good reason. Fox had known since 1997 that he had a defective bicuspid aortic valve in his heart, but had managed it through his time as the New York Giants' defensive coordinator from 1997 through 2001, as the Carolina Panthers' head coach from 2002 through 2010, and as the Broncos' head coach from 2011 to November of last year. During the Broncos' bye week, Fox was on a Charlotte, N.C. golf course when he started to feel short of breath. And at that point, the doctors who told him that he would have to get a procedure done let him know that now, it was not an option he could weigh.

Fox returned to work in early December, four weeks after he underwent an aortic valve replacement. Interim head coach Jack Del Rio kept things humming, and the Broncos finished with a 13-3 record and the top seed in the AFC. Two playoff wins later, Fox finds himself in his first Super Bowl since he took Carolina to the NFL's biggest game a decade ago, where his Panthers lost to the New England Patriots in Super Bowl XXXVIII.

Now, everything has a greater meaning to Fox — not just the fact that his team is here, but that he's here with them, and stronger than he's been in quite a while.

"First and foremost, I am appreciative of this, regardless of any health scares or any of the things I've been through — this is a very hard place to get to," he said from the podium during Denver's Monday media scrum. "I've been blessed to do it three times, once as an assistant [with the Giants in Super Bowl XXXV in Jan., 2001] and twice as a head coach. Going back, like any health scare, whether it was your parents or somebody in your family, in this case it was myself, it was a setback. It was a little bit scary for a minute. I really don't think about it much now.

"The first four days, I thought about it a little bit because it was like getting hit by a truck. I got better every day just like any player who has been through an injury. I never thought I wouldn't be back once I was going through the process. Fortunately, I had my family and good medical people, and here I am. I really haven't thought about it much, to be honest with you, here recently."

Moreover, Fox's health has actually improved since the procedure was done.

"You know, it's really remarkable, and I just have to say this. I am 180 percent better than I was eight months ago. I had a valve that was the size of a pinhead,

and now it's the size of a 50-cent piece. What you do is that you learn to deal with stuff in life. I attribute it to, of course, some of our hours some of the time. I might have been a little tired, getting old. This is a cause of age. Really, it's been a blessing. I'm way better than I was physically the last 10 years of my life. So, it's really been kind of an upgrade, and I feel tremendous."

There's a slightly lesser-known story of another individual who thought he might not return to football, much less the Super Bowl, who is here nonetheless, and whose emotions overcame him in the moment. Seattle Seahawks fullback Michael Robinson's tears following his team's 23-17 win over the San Francisco 49ers came from a deeper place than you might expect. Robinson wasn't just reflecting on an NFL path that took him through the 49ers' organization as an underutilized role player from 2006 through 2009 before Pete Carroll made him a Pro Bowl fullback — he was also thinking about the struggles he had with potential liver and kidney failure that started on Aug. 17 — the morning of Seattle's preseason game against the Broncos.

"That morning, I woke up and knew it was different," Robinson said in October. "Kind of felt chills, like I was getting the flu. I had mentioned it to the doctors early in the day that I may be coming in this week getting fluids. It just went south from there."

Robinson spent the next two weeks at the University of Washington Medical Center, and his weight plummeted from 240 pounds to 215. Doctors needed time to figure out what was wrong, but as things went from bad to worse, they were able to manage Robinson's symptoms and start to turn things around.

"I was dehydrated before the game and you can't take those [medication] and be dehydrated, and I think I probably got sick at the same time," Robinson said then. "[The doctors] just said it was the perfect storm. I thought I was just getting the flu, and I come to find out that my liver, my kidneys almost failed. It was pretty bad."

It was really bad when the Seahawks released Robinson on Aug. 30, with the knowledge that he would most likely be asked back when he was healthy. That happened on Oct. 23, after Robinson recovered and made trips to the Tennessee Titans and New York Giants in which he realized that Seattle was now his home. Thus, to go through all that and be able to make a real impact on the way to his first Super Bowl — Robinson's emotion was as understandable as it was palatable.

"Yeah, I wondered," Robinson said Monday afternoon, when asked if he doubted at times whether he would ever recover from this. "I went to the hospital three separate times. Two times they sent me home and just told me to keep getting fluids. I went two weeks without eating, so I lost a lot of weight. They hadn't seen anything like this. Then, once we brought the liver specialist in and the kidney specialist in, they've seen these types of reactions before and they were all over it."

One might wonder whether Robinson harbored ill feelings for the team that cut him when he was sick, but as he said in October, he's a realist — he had no illusions about the NFL after the way the 49ers treated him, and it was just about getting back home.

"I wrestle with it, but it was easy when I looked at my relationship with the guys on the team. That's why you play this game, and I feel like a big reason why we're here is that every man in that locker room thinks the same way. We all play because of the guy next to you. You all perform because the guy next to you is counting on you. Peer accountability, the biggest thing is accountability, so that's what we try to do."

So, there were tears of joy and relief and just a wave of emotion when he was able to completely turn things around.

"I've gotten a lot of questions about me crying and all that type of stuff, but it was just I had a long year being cut, being sick, not really realizing the extent of the sickness. I didn't know that my kidneys were failing and my liver was failing. I had no idea. I just thought I was getting a bug. But again, hindsight is 20/20 and I'm glad I'm here now. I've got my weight back, got my strength back, and it was an opportunity to come back here and I'm glad it opened up."

Carroll, who visited Robinson at the hospital at the same time he was mulling over the decision to release one of the team's most respected veterans, was happy to talk about this particular happy ending.

"Mike is a very emotional player and he gives everything he's got, so this instance in particular... when Mike was really sick at the start of the year and was unable to perform, he lost his opportunity. Probably there were moments when Michael thought he might not ever get another chance. So when we did come back to him and we were able to get it together, it was very meaningful for Michael. He is a big factor on our team, because we don't have that many older guys and he really stands for the old guard. He's been a big factor on special teams as well. You can see the emotion come out of Michael.

He's the guy that never thought, 'maybe I'll never get this chance again.' Then he comes back to play and he gets to play in the Super Bowl. I totally get it and respect it."

The Super Bowl is massively important for everybody involved every year. But for one coach and one player, there are extra spikes in that emotion this time.

How Seahawks pursued Peyton Manning ... and Russell Wilson almost went to Broncos

By Doug Farrar
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. – The rumblings started soon after Indianapolis Colts owner Jim Irsay announced Peyton Manning's release in a tearful press conference on March 7, 2012. Several NFL teams were ready to compete for Manning's services, and Seattle was one of them. The Seahawks had finished their second year under head coach Pete Carroll with Tarvaris Jackson as their primary quarterback, and it was their second 7-9 season. It was clear that while Jackson had done his best, Seattle would need more at the position if it wanted to compete at a Super Bowl level. Thus, as Manning met with representatives of the Denver Broncos, San Francisco 49ers, Washington Redskins, Tennessee Titans and Arizona Cardinals to decide his future, Carroll came up with a plan to try to crowbar the process.

From Peter King's April 2, 2012, article on that process:

One more surprise: Manning got a call informing him that Seahawks coach Pete Carroll had flown, unannounced, with Seattle G.M. John Schneider to the airport in Englewood. Carroll would do whatever Manning wanted — talk for a while in Denver or on the plane to Arizona, his next visit, or fly him to Seattle for a lengthier discussion.

Peyton Manning does not like surprises. He said no thanks. Carroll flew home.

"Yeah, we tried to hook up with him and we couldn't make it come together," Carroll said after the fact. "We tried to fit in to their schedule that looked like it had some space in it, but there wasn't enough. So we made an effort. It's kind of just classic for us – 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. We had already spoken before that and we just couldn't quite get together on it."

In a scene right out of a bad airport adventure movie, Carroll had tried to apply his "Always Compete" philosophy to his quarterback situation. It didn't work; Manning felt most comfortable with the Broncos, especially because the Broncos had a top-level executive in John Elway who could tell Manning precisely how it was to come back from a rough time in his mid-30s to rebound and return to the biggest games possible.

That has now happened for Manning. He'll be playing in Super Bowl XLVIII against those very same Seahawks in part because of what Carroll and Schneider did next.

There was a nearly unprecedented haul of potentially great quarterback talent in the 2012 draft, so Seattle's brain trust went back to that idea. Schneider expressed admiration for Ryan Tannehill's quarterbacking acumen, but the Texas A&M star went to the Dolphins with the eighth overall pick, and Seattle was picking 15th after trading down from 12th with the Philadelphia Eagles. With Andrew Luck, Robert Griffin III and Tannehill already off the board, Carroll and Schneider again refocused, surprising just about everyone by selecting West Virginia defensive end Bruce Irvin with the 15th pick. And then Utah State linebacker Bobby Wagner with the 47th overall pick in the second round.

And then, with the 75th overall pick in the third round, Carroll trusted Schneider when the GM said he had a feeling about Wisconsin quarterback Russell Wilson. The Seahawks also signed former Green Bay Packers backup Matt Flynn to a three-year contract, but it was patently obvious from Wilson's first rookie minicamp practice that he had the determination, intelligence and physical tools to take the job. He did just that, and Carroll announced to Wilson that he would be the team's starter before Wilson's first regular-season game against the Arizona Cardinals on Sept. 9. The Seahawks lost that game when Wilson couldn't connect with his receivers in a late goal-line stand, but there haven't been many losses since then. The Seahawks went 11-5 in 2012, falling to the Atlanta Falcons in the divisional round, and followed that up with a 13-3 mark and their upcoming Super Bowl appearance.

Wilson has thrown 52 touchdown passes in his first two regular seasons — 26 in each season — which is certainly impressive. However, there has to be a part of Carroll that wonders what it would have been like had Manning come to the Emerald City and thrown anywhere near the 55 touchdowns he managed for the Broncos in 2013 alone.

"No, I haven't thought too much about that since we moved on," Carroll said from Seahawks headquarters on Friday. "It's kind of interesting that we're playing against him at this point. We wound up with Russell, and they wound up with Peyton. So, it's pretty cool."

One thing's for sure — in retrospect, Seattle would have taken Wilson anyway, which opens up one of many alternate histories.

"Knowing what I know now, we would have taken him a little higher," Carroll said with a laugh.

And in the end, Manning's journey to Denver worked out for both teams. The Broncos got the finishing touch on a team that was almost there, and the Seahawks continued their process of roster construction that has allowed them to field the second-youngest Super Bowl team of all time.

"Often," Schneider recently said when he was asked if he still thinks what his team would have looked like with Manning at the helm. "I just think that we would have continued to do things the way we do it all the time. I know that we wouldn't have

been able to afford several players, but we would have competed in other areas to compensate for it in where we were deficient in our roster. It's a daily process."

By the way, it wasn't out of the question that Wilson could be wearing Broncos colors right now — he was very much on head coach John Fox's radar, well before the 2012 draft, when Fox was the head coach of the Carolina Panthers.

"Well, Russell and I go back even further than that," Fox said Sunday during his introductory Super Bowl press conference. "I spent time in that part of the country when he was a quarterback at North Carolina State with Tom O'Brien and his staff. So I actually got to meet him even when he was still in college at N.C. State, even before he transferred to Wisconsin. He's a tremendous young man. What he's accomplished in a very short time in our league doesn't surprise me at all — just his makeup, his leadership ability and just the kind of competitor he is."

As for Manning and Wilson, the primary characters in this story have known each other since Wilson attended the Manning Passing Academy as a high school sophomore. He was one of about a dozen youngsters in Manning's group, just trying to get in that orbit. Later, the two met again — right around the time everything fell in place for both of their current teams.

And this happened in Denver ... when Wilson was Fox's guest in Dove Valley.

"I met Russell Wilson, believe it or not, when I was visiting the Broncos," Manning remembered Sunday. "Let me think about this ... I believe it was after I signed with the Broncos, so let's call it March or April [2012]. They were having players come in for visits before the draft. I was actually in the film room watching some tape, and someone brought Russell in. He was in town for a visit. I had a chance to shake his hand. It was an exciting time in his life, getting ready for the draft. So, I wished him luck and told him I enjoyed watching his college career. I had a chance to shake his hand after the two preseason games we played the last two years."

There will be one more chance for the two quarterbacks to shake hands after this Sunday's Super Bowl and perhaps to wonder what might have been ... in all sorts of permutations.

Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie says he may retire if Broncos win Super Bowl XLVIII

By Chris Burke
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JERSEY CITY — The jury is still out on whether or not Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie was serious when he said Monday that he may retire if Denver wins it all. It is far more clear that he was not joking about how miserable he was in Philadelphia — and how much better his NFL career is for landing with the Broncos.

The 27-year-old Rodgers-Cromartie, who is on the verge of hitting free agency off an impressive season, told reporters aboard (yes, aboard) the Cornucopia Majesty cruise ship that he has discussed his future with his Broncos teammates.

Though he declared “nothing is set in stone,” Rodgers-Cromartie added that his career already has lasted longer than he initially hoped: “I set a goal of five years. I’ve played six.”

Rodgers-Cromartie spent two of those seasons (2011 and ‘12) in Philadelphia after being traded by the Cardinals for QB Kevin Kolb. The move was supposed to combine Rodgers-Cromartie with Asante Samuel and Nnamdi Asomugha in one of the league’s most feared secondaries.

Instead, the unit bombed. Last season, the Eagles allowed more passing touchdowns than any other NFL defense.

“Philadelphia was a bad, bad time,” Rodgers-Cromartie said.

Off the heels of that disappointment, Rodgers-Cromartie signed a relatively cheap deal with Denver prior to the 2013 season — technically, a two-year contract, though the 2014 season voids if Rodgers-Cromartie remains on the roster as of next Friday. He could be in line for a massive deal in the coming weeks, given his play this season. That is, of course, if he wants to suit up again in 2014.

He was not the member of the Broncos secondary that most considered on retirement watch entering this week. That honor belonged to Champ Bailey, who at 35 will be making his first Super Bowl appearance. But Bailey said Sunday that he has yet to contemplate walking away from the game.

“I’m not really thinking about retiring if I win,” Bailey said. “All I’m thinking about is winning and doing what I’ve got to do to win the game. ... After the game, we’ll talk about that.”

Rodgers-Cromartie did not maintain the same moratorium, leaving everyone to wonder if this might be the last time the former first-round pick takes the field.

Super Bowl XLVIII shaping up to be a Wisconsin Badger Bowl

By Don Banks
SI.com
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NEW YORK CITY -- Nowhere is the fervor for Super Bowl XLVIII whipped any higher, of course, than in the football-mad states of Colorado and Washington, where the Broncos have gone 15 years since taking part in their most recent Super Bowl parade and the Seahawks have never had reason to plan one in the franchise's 38-season history.

But if there were a third state that could rightfully claim this glamor game, it wouldn't be New York or New Jersey, the event's ultra-competitive co-hosts who are practically elbowing each other out of the way for attention this week. Somewhat fittingly, the NFL's first outdoor cold-weather Super Bowl is feeling a bit like a home game for the frost-covered football fans in Wisconsin, particularly those who bleed that familiar Badger red.

The Wisconsin contingent on the NFC champion Seahawks goes an impressive four deep and is led by none other than quarterback Russell Wilson, the former record-setting Badgers captain who spent one Rose Bowl-tripping season in Madison in 2011 as a high-profile transfer. But Denver has its headline Badger connection, too, with second-round running back Montee Ball making the game as a rookie, after earning All-America honors and posting 100-yard rushing games in three consecutive Rose Bowls for Wisconsin.

A pair of Seattle reserves, safety Chris Maragos and linebacker O'Brien Schofield, are also ex-Badgers, as is successful Seahawks offensive coordinator Darrell Bevell, who quarterbacked Wisconsin to the 1993 Big Ten title and the school's first Rose Bowl victory, rewriting UW's passing record book during his tenure in Madison.

"I think Super Bowl Sunday will have special meaning in Madison this year," said former Badgers head coach and current UW athletic director Barry Alvarez, reached late last week. "Our people are great football fans. They love their Badgers and they love the Packers and they love football. So when you have guys that you can root for, and you have some connection there, I think it makes the game that much more unique and special.

"We've never had more Badgers in a Super Bowl. When you can sit and watch the game and you're watching some guys who are special to you and who have done so much for the program, and they're all such good kids, it really adds so much to the game for me."

Having lived in Madison from late 2008 through early '12, about five minutes from Camp Randall Stadium, I can attest to the level of local pride that exists for the Badgers and their recent run of producing NFL-ready players. And I well remember the buzz that was created when Wilson arrived in the summer of 2011, having graduated from North Carolina State in three years, with a year of remaining eligibility. There was some uncertainty about how quickly he could acclimate to his new surroundings in Wisconsin, but just as he did in Seattle as a rookie in 2012, Wilson blended in seamlessly.

"He comes in in the summer, and we start camp, and that's when your rookies have to dance for everyone in the locker room," Alvarez recalled. "And they were treating him like a rookie, because no one knew him. So he's out there dancing with the freshman, doing whatever else the rookies had to do. And he was doing it as a 22-year-old graduated senior. Three weeks later, he's voted one of our captains."

Wilson and Ball bonded quickly as backfield mates, and they remain close friends today, with Ball leaning on Wilson at times last spring in the all-important pre-draft preparation phase. But as teammates for the last time, they sat side by side at the podium after Wisconsin's bitter 45-38 loss to Oregon in the 2012 Rose Bowl, with Wilson almost eerily predicting this week's championship opportunity. That game ended with the Badgers on the Ducks' 25-yard line, and Wilson unable to spike the ball in time for one last shot at a game-tying touchdown.

"I'm just so blessed to have been with these guys, with Montee and the rest of the team," Wilson said that day. "Every single day I've cherished, and every single moment is truly special. To lose the way we did is only going to make me stronger in the future and help me figure out something else down the road. Maybe win the Super Bowl. You never know."

Well now. Indeed, you never know. But there were those who seemed to understand that Wilson's brief time in Madison would lead to greater things. I remember talking to a couple NFL scouts about Wilson in the spring of 2012, and mostly what I heard was that he had fourth- or fifth-round draft potential, and might max out as a career backup QB. But there were others who understood he had a skillset that fit the cliché about the sum of the parts adding up to greater than the whole.

Some draft-related nuggets gleaned from Alvarez include:

-- He had to talk even Bevell into not getting too hung up on Wilson's lack of prototypical NFL height. "I can remember Darrell saying, 'Coach, no one that short [5-foot-10-ish] has ever made it as a quarterback.' I said, well this guy's special. His intangibles are off the charts. I told Darrell at the time, 'He'll make you a better coach.'" Seattle wound up selecting Wilson in the third round, 75th overall. And now he's the first quarterback of the celebrated Class of 2012 to reach the Super Bowl, winning 27 of his first 36 NFL starts in the process, more than any second-year quarterback ever.

-- Then-Bears offensive coordinator Mike Tice was an early devotee of Wilson's and tried to lobby Chicago's draft decision-makers to take him, even as a Wildcat quarterback option behind Jay Cutler. "Mike believed in him and said he was trying to build a case for him in Chicago," Alvarez said. "He was saying he was trying to give him more value on our draft board, saying he could play Wildcat quarterback for you, or be a wing back."

-- Alvarez said he "told anybody that would listen that they'd be foolish if they [didn't] take him and take him high in the draft. I felt so strongly about him because I watched him that whole year and he did everything right. If you remember, when he transferred here, the media said, 'Well this doesn't show confidence in your current quarterbacks. You could lose your quarterbacks, and he could create a problem.' I said, 'Are you kidding me? This is like hitting the lottery. Getting somebody of that caliber in your program is unbelievable.'"

In 2011, Wilson and Ball were nearly unstoppable for Wisconsin. Wilson broke the NCAA record for passer efficiency rating (191.78) and set the Badgers single-season passing yard mark (3,175) as well. Ball, as a junior, led the nation in rushing yards (1,923), tied Barry Sanders' single-season collegiate record with 39 touchdowns and was a Heisman finalist. As a senior in 2012, Ball broke the NCAA Division I-FBS mark for most career touchdowns with 83.

Ball's rookie season in Denver started with him struggling with fumbling problems - including a Week 2 fumble in a win over the Giants at MetLife Stadium, site of Sunday's Super Bowl -- but he has progressed steadily since and had strong showings in relief of starter Knowshon Moreno during the Denver playoff drive.

"I'm on [the college football playoff] selection committee with Archie Manning, and the last two times I've seen him, he said Peyton [Manning] has really praised Montee and how he's come on and improved this season," Alvarez said. "He did have the ball security issues early on, but I think now they have real confidence in him. It's a perfect spot for him, being in Denver. He's got a great guy in front of him in Moreno, but with Montee there, they can always have a fresh back in the game."

The Badgers will have more than a fresh back in this week's game. They've got Ball, one of the two starting quarterbacks, an offensive coordinator and a couple of key Seahawks reserves to root for. It's an embarrassment of riches for Wisconsin, in what shapes up to be something of a Super Badger Bowl.

"I have to admit, it doesn't hurt with all the kids you're recruiting," Alvarez said. "Anybody who has dreams of going on to college football and then playing in the NFL, just watch the Super Bowl. It's like free advertising for us."

For Wisconsin, on this Super Bowl Sunday, it's product placement of the very best kind.

Peyton Manning's Broncos offense has historical competition

By Elliot Harrison
NFL.com
January 27, 2014

The object of pro football is simple: Score more points than your opponent.

Well, if it's that cut and dried, then the 2013 Denver Broncos certainly have their bases covered. After all, they set an NFL record for points scored in a single season (606). But does that make them the greatest ever?

Sure, they passed up teams of recent vintage -- like the "Greatest Show on Turf" St. Louis Rams of 1999 or the 16-0 New England Patriots of 2007 -- in that category. But what about other criteria, like yards, first downs or, perhaps most importantly, points per game?

The top offense I've seen came courtesy of Dan Marino and the 1984 Miami Dolphins. That season, Marino threw 48 touchdown passes despite working in an era that made it pretty tough to accomplish something like that, and the Dolphins seemed to be a mismatch for almost every defense they played. That said, as with any historical comparison, you have to eschew personal opinion and begin with raw data. And if you're talking about how to rate offenses, you should probably begin with how the league rates offenses: according to yards per game.

So let's start there:

» Most Yards per Game, Single Season

- 1) 2011 New Orleans Saints: 467.1
- 2) 2013 Denver Broncos: 457.3
- 3) 1951 Los Angeles Rams: 450.8
- 4) 1982 San Diego Chargers: 449.8
- 5) 1961 Houston Oilers: 449.1
- 6) 1950 Los Angeles Rams: 443.3

As you can see, the Broncos bested everyone but the Saints of a few seasons ago. There is, however, a key difference between those two teams: New Orleans played 11 games indoors in 2011, whereas Denver played just one inside in 2013. Playing indoors certainly favors the offense -- and scoring altogether -- as quarterbacks don't have to deal with wet footballs and kickers have no slippery tracks.

By the way, note that the 1950 and '51 Rams are on this list despite playing in a defensively dominant era -- which makes them elite competition for the 2013 Broncos, as is further illustrated by the following category:

» Most Points per Game, Single Season

- 1) 1950 Los Angeles Rams: 38.8
- 2) 2013 Denver Broncos: 37.9
- 3) 2007 New England Patriots: 36.8
- 4) 1961 Houston Oilers: 36.6
- 5) 1941 Chicago Bears: 36.0
- 6) 2011 Green Bay Packers: 35.0

What those Rams teams accomplished was no fluke. They had not one but two Hall of Fame quarterbacks in Bob Waterfield and Norm Van Brocklin, two Hall of Fame receivers in Tom Fears and Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsch, and a running back in Glenn Davis who, in 1950, gained an average of nearly 8 yards per touch and compiled 1,000 yards from scrimmage in just 12 games. He also threw two touchdown passes.

In the 63 years since the Rams set the points-per-game record, the 2013 Broncos have been one of the few teams to come close to matching their impressive ability to fill up an NFL scoreboard. Of course, Denver surely would like to avoid following the same trajectory as that Los Angeles club, which lost the 1950 NFL Championship Game on a last-minute field goal.

But scoring isn't the end all, be all ...

» Most First Downs, Single Season

- 1) 2012 New England Patriots: 444
- 2) 2013 Denver Broncos: 435
- 3) 2011 New Orleans Saints: 416
- 4) 2011 New England Patriots: 399
- 5) 2004 Kansas City Chiefs: 398
- 6) 2007 New England Patriots: 393

Only one other team in history kept the chains moving more efficiently than Peyton Manning and Co. did this season. While not as sexy as gobbling up fantasy points, racking up first downs often equates to getting into a rhythm, giving your own defense a blow and shutting up crowds on the road -- and all of that usually translates to victories. While the Patriots of last season bested the Broncos of this season, New England wasn't nearly as effective at scoring touchdowns in the red zone as Denver, which posted an astounding 76.1 percent success rate -- a stat that has a lot to do with our next category:

» Most Individual Touchdowns Passes, Single Season

- 1) Peyton Manning, Broncos, 2013: 55
- 2) Tom Brady, Patriots, 2007: 50
- 3) Peyton Manning, Colts, 2004: 49
- 4) Dan Marino, Dolphins, 1984: 48
- 5) Drew Brees, Saints, 2011: 46
- 6) Aaron Rodgers, Packers, 2011: 45

The presence of Brady behind Manning explains why the Patriots -- including the undefeated group from 2007 -- make several appearances on the lists in this piece. But there's something that truly distinguishes Manning from Brady and all the other stellar quarterbacks of this year and yesteryear: how well Manning played as he got deeper in the opponent's territory. Manning tossed 45 touchdown passes and zero picks inside his opponents' 30-yard line, compiling a passer rating of 123.0 -- the highest figure since 1991, when that stat was first kept.

Think about that: The closer Manning and the offense got to the other team's goal line, the better they got. That's the hallmark of an effective offensive unit.

As for a shining beacon of an effective offensive unit ...

» Most 50-point Games, Single Season

1950 Los Angeles Rams: 3
1950 New York Giants: 3
1966 Dallas Cowboys: 3
1969 Minnesota Vikings: 3
2013 Denver Broncos: 3
14 teams tied with 2

Denver became the first team in 44 years to post 50-plus points on three separate occasions, doing it against the Eagles, Cowboys and Titans -- and that, as much as anything, could underline this offense's case for the title of greatest ever. Posting a 50-burger thrice in one campaign is like taking an already solid U2 album and highlighting it with "Where the Streets Have No Name," "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" and "With or Without You" (of course, that actually happened).

If we're looking at a clash of the historic offensive titans, we must note that no other modern team has pulled off such frequent outbursts. Consider it a milestone of unstoppable in an era when defensive adjustments and situational substitutions are supposed to limit such occurrences. And how about the fact that Denver -- which also dropped 49 on Baltimore -- tapped the brakes in several blowouts this year?

No matter what, no offense can be considered transcendent if it doesn't finish first in the major categories -- and the Broncos clearly accomplished that in 2013 ...

» Stats in Which the Broncos Led the NFL This Season

Points per game: 37.9
Yards per game: 457.3
Plays of 10-plus yards: 275
Passing yards per game: 340.3
Times sacked: 20
First downs per game: 27.2
Red-zone TD percentage: 76.1

Perhaps the most impressive number is the 20 sacks allowed -- as Manning and

backup quarterback Brock Osweiler combined to drop back more than 700 times. Sure, much of that reflects the decision-making ability and quick release of Manning, but that's also some serious offensive-line play, babe.

Whether looking at the production of that unit, that quarterback or the five Broncos -- Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker, Julius Thomas, Wes Welker and Knowshon Moreno -- who scored 10 or more touchdowns this season (no team in NFL history has ever had more than three players do that), it becomes quite difficult to not think of this group as the best offense in recent memory. Denver outscored every team in modern history and outgained all but one, all while playing mostly outdoors in an AFC West that featured not one but three playoff teams.

As far as Denver being the greatest of all time, though, the thought here would be notsofast. While many are quick to pooh-pooh the vintage teams of the past -- whether it's because they competed when there were just 12 teams in the league, because the athletes playing then weren't as impressive as those playing now, or because people irreverently equate black-and-white footage to irrelevant lineage -- those early Rams offenses sure are tough to ignore. Considering all the rules currently in place that are geared to favor the offense -- receivers could practically be pelted by a battle-axe in 1950 -- the fact that Van Brocklin and Waterfield led a squad that posted 38.8 points per game is unreal. One wonders how much those guys called "Omaha" at the line or pushed pizza on the side.

What we can stop wondering about is which offense is the premier attack of the Super Bowl era -- because the numbers surely speak for themselves.

How the Denver Broncos were built

By Gregg Rosenthal
NFL.com
January 27, 2014

Super Bowl XLVIII is a matchup of stark contrasts, right down to how the teams were constructed. The Denver Broncos and Seattle Seahawks aren't just opposites in strengths and strategy, but also organizational philosophies.

The Broncos are a team built to win in Peyton Manning's championship window. Denver had the least amount of drafted players on their 53-man roster of any team that made it to Championship Sunday, and the oldest average age, according to USA Today.

The Broncos have more than double the amount of unrestricted free agents on their roster in comparison to Seattle. While John Elway has done a nice job drafting since he arrived in 2011, his greatest work has come in free agency.

Everyone knows that Elway was instrumental in recruiting Manning to Denver. That move alone more than validated the Broncos' decision to hand the keys to the organization back to Elway, but he's made a series of brilliant veteran acquisitions since then.

Defensive tackle Terrance Knighton, linebacker Shaun Phillips and cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie were all signed this offseason and have proven to be incredible bargains. The Broncos' defense could not have survived without them. With stars like Manning and left tackle Ryan Clady taking up so much of the available salary cap space, Elway needed to find value players to fill out the roster.

Offensive guard Louis Vasquez was the team's biggest ticket free-agent item, and he made first-team All-Pro. Wes Welker has proven to be well worth his modest two-year contract.

This isn't a team that can only "build through the draft." They don't have the time. Elway's success largely has been built on identifying weak spots on the roster and aggressively trying to fill those holes.

Let's take a look at the entire roster:

Here are a takeaways from the chart above:

» The Josh McDaniels era is a punchline in Denver, but Elway owes him a debt of gratitude for his 2010 acquisitions. Demaryius Thomas, Zane Beadles and Eric Decker are three home-run draft picks in the first three rounds. (Tim Tebow, taken after Thomas, was a checked-swing single.) Chris Clark, signed off waivers in '10,

has proven to be an incredible backup at left tackle and quietly has kept Manning upright all season.

Even McDaniels' infamous '09 draft doesn't look quite as terrible in retrospect. Knowshon Moreno, Robert Ayers and punter Britton Colquitt all have been key contributors.

» With all that said, Elway's 2011 draft class is even better. Von Miller and Rahim Moore both are on injured reserve, but Elway drafted four starters and signed two more as undrafted free agents.

» Many of Elway's best picks came in the mid-to-late rounds: Julius Thomas, Malik Jackson and Danny Trevathan. Give John Fox's staff credit for developing their players.

» The Broncos needed their 2013 free-agent crop to pan out because they were counting on them to be productive starters, and the team hasn't received much production from their rookies.

» Only five players remain from the Mike Shanahan era, including Clady, who is on injured reserve. The Clinton Portis-for-Champ Bailey trade in '04 paid dividends for an entire decade.

» The Broncos have a lot of key unrestricted free agents this season, so Elway will have to continue to make tough decisions on who to keep. The Broncos have 14 players over 30 years old, and they simply aren't going to be a young roster.

The Broncos don't need to be that young; Elway has shown that they can win with a great mix of drafting, developing and signing undervalued assets.

Most Valuable Player: Peyton Manning stands out above the rest

NFL.com
January 27, 2014

The night before Super Bowl XLVIII, the NFL will salute its best players and plays from the 2013 season with "NFL Honors," a star-studded football and entertainment event hosted by Alec Baldwin at Radio City Music Hall in New York. Here's all the coverage information:

- » Friday, Jan. 31 at 7 p.m. ET on NFL Network: NFL Honors Preview Special
- » Saturday, Feb. 1 at 7 p.m. ET on NFL Network: NFL Honors Red Carpet Special
- » Saturday, Feb. 1 at 8 p.m. ET on FOX: 3rd Annual NFL Honors

One of the awards that will be presented on Saturday night is that for 2013's Most Valuable Player. Who gets your vote for NFL MVP?

Judy Battista NFL.com

Peyton Manning's transcendent season just can't be touched

I tried to think outside the box here. For about six seconds. Come on: Peyton Manning is obviously the MVP, and I can't seriously think of anybody else in the conversation.

Manning had the best season any quarterback has ever had, and incredibly, I think he might even be underappreciated right now. It's remarkable enough to set the touchdown and yardage records. To do it at 37 is crazy. To do it at 37, on his second team, after undergoing four surgeries for an injury that might have ended his career, is transcendent.

Adam Schein NFL.com

As an AP voter, I cast my ballot for the obvious choice

You can't overthink this. And, as one of the 50 voters for The Associated Press' NFL awards, I didn't. There is only one choice, and it is Peyton Manning. He carried the Broncos, masking areas of deficiency. Peyton put together the single greatest season ever at the quarterback position.

Steve Wyche NFL.com

LeSean McCoy was spectacular, but this is Peyton Manning's award

I don't think there is any way around it: Peyton Manning is the no-brainer pick here. He was nothing short of spectacular, all season long. Plus, you can tell his teammates don't want to make mistakes because they know if they don't, he'll lead them to wins.

Shady McCoy should get some consideration here: 1,607 rushing yards, 539 receiving yards, 11 total touchdowns. That is sick production, but still way short of Manning.

Charley Casserly NFL Network

Peyton's staggering numbers -- and Denver's overall success -- make this an easy decision

I know there are a number of terrific candidates, but you don't want to outthink yourself on this one. When a QB piles up 55 touchdown passes and 5,477 yards while headlining the highest-scoring offense in league history and leading the team to an NFL-best 13 wins, how could he not be the season's most valuable player? Peyton Manning is my choice.

Adam Rank NFL.com

Don't overlook the amazing job Tom Brady did with an underwhelming surrounding cast

Peyton Manning is the winner here, but Tom Brady at least deserves your consideration. Given that Brady lost the majority of his targets from 2012 to 2013, it's nearly a football miracle the Patriots had a winning record, much less earned the No. 2 seed in the AFC. While Manning had Demaryius Thomas, Eric Decker, Wes Welker and Julius Thomas, Brady threw to a motley crew of undersized and/or undrafted players.

If you swap Manning and Brady, the Broncos still finish 13-3. I'm not sure the Patriots would be a .500 team without Brady. Heck, I would vote for Brady straight up for MVP.

Elliot Harrison NFL.com

Manning covered up Denver's flaws throughout the season

It has to be Peyton Manning. Whether or not it's the boring answer, it is the correct answer.

Manning has posted what is arguably his best statistical season to date, setting numerous records in the process. Yet, going a step beyond that, what is perhaps most impressive about Manning's season is the fact that he was never the reason the Broncos lost and almost always the reason they won. Think about it: Denver's defense struggled with injuries and allowed far too many big plays this season

(particularly in the passing game).

Manning was the great elixir, and despite his being in Denver just two years, it's tough to imagine where the organization would be without him.

Jason Smith NFL.com

Nick Foles turned the Eagles' season around, sparking a division title

We always like to say, "Take so-and-so away from the team and where would they be?" And usually, we have to just project. But with Nick Foles, we know.

When Michael Vick was the quarterback, Philadelphia struggled to a 1-3 record out of the gate. Foles comes to the rescue and throws 27 touchdowns with just two interceptions, leading Philadelphia to the NFC East title. Two picks. That's Aaron-Rodgers-in-his-best-season type of production. In 10 of the final 12 games, Foles' passer rating was over 100. (The two sub-100 games? 1) When he suffered a concussion against the Cowboys, and 2) when he played in a foot of snow against the Lions.)

Peyton Manning will get all the love, but Foles is really special.

Ian Rapoport NFL Network

Greatest offensive season ever? Yeah, probably worthy of some hardware

The greatest offensive season the game has ever seen earns Peyton Manning the MVP award. But it's not just the eye-popping numbers for Manning. It's that he was so valuable to the other parts of the team.

Star left tackle Ryan Clady missed almost the entire season, yet Manning's quick release and smarts allowed him to be sacked just 18 times. And his prowess helped make up for a defense that suffered numerous losses, playing without Von Miller and Champ Bailey for much of the season.

Pro Bowlers pulling for Peyton Manning in Super Bowl XLVIII

By Aditi Kinkhabwala
NFL.com
January 27, 2014

OAHU, Hawaii -- Tony Gonzalez visibly bristled at the suggestion Peyton Manning's place in history is affected by how many Lombardi Trophies he has.

Gonzalez, the tight end who is retiring after 17 ring-less seasons with the Kansas City Chiefs and Atlanta Falcons, protested the notion that Manning needs another Super Bowl ring, saying, "He has one. I want one!"

And then, standing on his last practice field at the Pro Bowl last week, Gonzalez said he still wants Manning to win Super Bowl XLVIII this Sunday. Desperately.

"I'm really pulling for him," Gonzalez said. "He's the best that played this game and I'm a huge fan of his."

Turns out, he's not the only one.

Pro Bowl week in Hawaii is relaxed. It's rejuvenating. It's a reward. And it's also not where any of these players wanted to finish up the season. So some said they didn't care about the Seahawks-Broncos showdown at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey. Some said they liked the matchup the Seahawks and their ferocious defense offered. But the majority unabashedly said they're hoping and rooting for Manning, the Broncos' elder-statesman quarterback.

Luke Kuechly, the Carolina Panthers linebacker, said, "I would love to see Peyton win another." New York Jets center Nick Mangold said, "I think it would be good for Peyton to get another." And Cam Newton minced no words in calling Manning a role model, saying, "He's still the person I look up to. He does it the right way."

There's a comeback story here, which started when Manning was cut by the Indianapolis Colts team he helped build and underwent the neck surgeries that seemingly rendered his Hall of Fame arm impotent. Every athlete wants to believe in a second life and forever, Mangold said, and yet there's also an almost-uniform esteem, because of the way Manning prepares (Gonzalez said it is, bar none, the best process he's ever seen), because of how Manning competes, because of those twin comebacks and because, Gonzalez said, the way players view Manning provides a window into how they view their own careers.

Alex Smith was once the San Francisco 49ers' starting quarterback, racking up wins -- and then he was jettisoned for Colin Kaepernick after suffering a concussion. He's

ferretting out success again with the Chiefs, and when he talked about his pick for this Super Bowl, he of course started with the 37-year-old Manning.

"Look at what he's gone through -- from the neck stuff to the Colts letting him go to finding a new home and even having a season like this at his age," Smith said. "You can't help but want it for him."

Darrelle Revis laughed over the "run-ins" he's had with Manning, when Revis was a Jet and Manning a Colt, and then said, "I respect him as a person and I respect him as a player. Peyton's been playing awesome." And so the Tampa Bay corner's pick is Denver, but not just because of No. 18; Revis said he's rooting for another older player, Broncos corner Champ Bailey, who's getting his first shot at Super Bowl glory in Year 15 of his career.

San Diego Chargers safety Eric Weddle said the easy answer is to say he'll pull for his fellow AFC West team. But there's more to it, he said, because of Manning: "I have the utmost respect for him. He's gracious in defeat, he's gracious when he wins and he shows how to respect your opponent, always."

Also drawing on a sense of divisional kinship, the Arizona Cardinals' Larry Fitzgerald said he has to pull for the NFC West's Seahawks. But even still, "You root for Peyton because he's an unbelievable guy," Fitzgerald said.

Fitzgerald struggled to say how much championships matter, arguing, "Dan Marino's career wasn't any worse than John Elway's." But then he said, "This game is about winning," and he talked about how the Miami Heat's LeBron James was regarded before winning his two titles compared to how he's regarded now. Newton, without a playoff win yet himself, similarly didn't want to say that championships define quarterbacks. But still, he said, "We all want to be labeled for something. Obviously you have to win to be considered the greatest of all time."

Overhearing that, Cardinals cornerback Patrick Peterson disagreed. And then Peterson said, as much as it pains him, he thinks Seattle will win: "It's going to be cold and the defense always finds a way to prevail."

"It's the No. 1 offense versus the No. 1 defense. Who's going to break first?" Panthers running back Mike Tolbert asked, actually looking for an opinion. After a little debate and after he argued both sides, Tolbert said, "It's hard to stop Peyton Manning if he's on. You have to get pressure on him, but ooh, he can get the ball out."

Cleveland Browns cornerback Joe Haden talked about the same, and offered advice to his counterparts on the Seahawks. Their best coverage option, he said, is a lot of press-man (read: tight). "The only way you're going to slow Peyton Manning down is to disrupt his wide receivers," Haden said. Then he smiled and said, "I really want to see a good game, and this really would be the best game."

Dez Bryant, whose Cowboys lost to Manning's Broncos in a 99-point shootout, said, "It's hard to go against Peyton." Meanwhile, Philadelphia Eagles running back LeSean McCoy said he wouldn't bet against the Seahawks' power runner, Marshawn Lynch.

"I want the Seahawks to win," McCoy said. "I'm a big fan of the 'Beast.' He runs so hard, and I like that."

Baltimore's Terrell Suggs thinks the way Seattle runs is especially important in the frigid temperatures expected in New Jersey come Sunday. According to the Ravens linebacker, a veteran of both cold-weather and Super Bowl success, "If it's cold, you need to run the ball. And Seattle can run the ball. So I'm going with the Seahawks."

Antonio Brown, who plays in the same cold in Pittsburgh, scoffed at the temperature talk: "It's the Super Bowl. I don't think weather conditions matter."

Jamaal Charles is with Brown there, saying all this chatter about Manning being lesser in unfavorable elements sure didn't matter when he came to play in chilly Kansas City. Frankly, Charles said if he does have a rooting interest, it's to hope Manning wins and then retires.

"He's making it hard on me to get my ring," Charles said. "If Peyton wins, maybe he'll stop standing in my way."

DRC talks retirement: What we learned Monday

By Gregg Rosenthal
NFL.com
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK -- Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie is threatening to join the list of NFL players who surprisingly walked away from the game in their prime. The six-year veteran sounds serious about wanting to retire.

The Denver Broncos' best cornerback is no Barry Sanders or Jim Brown, but he could join a list of players that includes Robert Smith, Jake Plummer, Tarik Glenn and Aaron Schobel -- solid players who lost their passion for the game.

My first thought after hearing DRC's comments: there's some news during Super Bowl week! The next thought: his agent is going to be furious. Rodgers-Cromartie was one of Broncos executive John Elway's great free-agent bargains this offseason and was set to strike it rich on the open market. He's always been a uniquely talented cornerback, but his desire to be great was loudly questioned in Philadelphia.

It's hard to imagine Rodgers-Cromartie actually going through with his retirement if the Broncos win. It's rare to see players pass up guaranteed millions, and he would make plenty as one of the top cornerbacks available.

Rodgers-Cromartie's statement could cost him money no matter what he decides, as he might struggle to get a multiyear deal. But let's be honest: teams are always willing to pay for talent.

Here's what else we learned Monday in New York and New Jersey:

1. Seattle Seahawks defensive end Michael Bennett is going to be a popular man at Media Day. He threatens to be the breakout star of this week on and off the field. (Other than Max Unger's beard.)

Bennett on whether the defensive line is overlooked: "I don't know if we're overlooked. They know us pretty well at Wells Fargo."

Bennett on the Super Bowl scene: "It's just like being in the Willy Wonka Chocolate Factory. All I see is cameras, lights and chocolates. ... and I see some chocolate ladies."

2. Denver Broncos wide receiver Demaryius Thomas is a fun guy to listen to, but he's not going to trash talk. He called it "pointless" and added that "boasting makes you tired."

Thomas gave safety Earl Thomas and cornerback Richard Sherman their due Monday, calling Earl Thomas the best safety in the league. His respect for teammate Peyton Manning borders on fear.

"I've been nervous around him since I met him. And I'm still nervous. I don't want to mess up," Thomas said.

3. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell's reaction to the latest Pro Bowl indicates that the game is not going away for a long time.

4. Marc Sessler did a good job talking with the Seahawks about whether they could survive a shootout at the Super Bowl. And so I'm going to link to it twice in one paragraph.

5. Marshawn Lynch told NFL Media columnist Michael Silver that he hasn't decided whether he's going to show up to Media Day. That would be a potential six-figure decision to skip the festivities. To quote another famous writer, Silver did the damn thang with this column. No one else gets this kind of access.

6. The deep freeze is about to hit New York and New Jersey, but things should improve by Sunday.

7. Basically every cold weather city has a shot at a Super Bowl if this week goes well, except for Green Bay.

8. Knowshon Moreno isn't sure what he did to bring on LeSean McCoy's scorn.

9. In other stories I would appreciate you reading: Dan Hanzus gave a loving guide to New York, and I broke down how the Broncos' and Seahawks' rosters were built.

10. And in non-Super Bowl news, the Dallas Cowboys added yet another cook to the kitchen. Problems solved.

Thanks for reading. We'll be back Tuesday, arbitrarily deciding who wins Media Day.

Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie considering retirement

By Gregg Rosenthal
NFL.com
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK -- Super Bowl week is usually devoid of actual news, aside from an injury update or two. Denver Broncos cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie changed all that Monday.

Rodgers-Cromartie, 27, said he is seriously contemplating retirement if the Broncos win Super Bowl XLVIII, according to multiple reporters on the scene.

"I set a goal of five years; I've played six," Rodgers-Cromartie said, via NFL Media Insider Ian Rapoport.

Somewhere, DRC's agent is cringing. He is coming off perhaps his best NFL season and was set to make a huge amount of money on the free-agent market. Even if Rodgers-Cromartie decides to keep playing, as we'd expect, teams will be concerned about his passion for the game. Rodgers-Cromartie says he has been talking to teammates about the possibility of retirement for a while.

"I talk to them all the time," he said. "It's not set in stone. I always tell them. They always think I be joking, but I always just say it might be my last go-round."

Rodgers-Cromartie signed with Denver on a low-cost one-year contract, in part because he gained such a lackluster reputation in Philadelphia for his work habits. Perhaps this news will make it possible for John Elway to bring Rodgers-Cromartie back to Denver on another bargain contract.

Rodgers-Cromartie could actually go through with his plan to pass on millions. We find it a lot more likely he'll backtrack from his Monday comments for the rest of Super Bowl week.

Knowshon Moreno perplexed by LeSean McCoy's scorn

By Chris Wesseling
NFL.com
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- We thought it peculiar back in October when LeSean McCoy took a potshot at Denver Broncos running back Knowshon Moreno.

We thought it even more peculiar when McCoy doubled down a couple of days later, telling reporters that "what I said is what I meant."

Moreno didn't have a clue at the time what he had done to incur McCoy's insults. More than three months later, the Broncos' breakout star is still nonplussed.

"You'll have to ask him, I guess," Moreno said Monday.

"Everyone has their own opinions about teams, about different individuals," Moreno continued. "It is what it is. I'm always focused on this team and trying to get better."

Moreno can't match McCoy's dynamic playmaking ability, but he did finish in the top five among running backs in yards from scrimmage and touchdowns.

Perhaps McCoy was skeptical early in the season because Peyton Manning's ability to read defenses and adjust prior to the snap tends to place Moreno in more favorable situations than other running backs.

Even if the Broncos' record-breaking aerial attack makes Moreno's life easier, it's also true that his skill set has been an ideal fit for the offense.

At Monday's press conference, coach John Fox praised Moreno's "assignment detail" and "accountability and dependability" in the Broncos' passing game.

"You see that in his stats," Fox explained. "You see it with his pass-receiving yardage in combination with the rushing yardage, which is doing all and everything about your job. He's done a tremendous job, and he is maybe one of our most improved players this past season."

There's little question that Moreno's diligence in pass protection and ball security makes him more valuable to the Broncos than other teams.

If he elects to test free-agent waters this offseason, that likely will be reflected in the level of interest he garners.

Demaryius Thomas: Richard Sherman is NFL's best

By Chris Wesseling
NFL.com
January 27, 2014

The Richard Sherman-Demaryius Thomas love fest continues unabated.

Less than 24 hours after Seattle Seahawks cornerback Sherman referred to the Denver Broncos star as one of the top-five wide receivers in the game, Thomas returned the favor Monday.

"I think (Sherman is) the best in the league to tell the truth," Thomas said. "He's always around the ball, coming up making tackles. You really don't see him making no mistakes."

This is shaping up as the most anticipated matchup of Super Bowl XLVIII.

Sherman ranked first among all NFL cornerbacks in opposing passer rating this season. He knocks down and intercepts as many passes as any player in the NFL even though quarterbacks rarely throw in his direction.

On the flip side, no NFL wide receiver has generated a higher rating for his quarterback than Peyton Manning's near 125.0 on throws to Thomas the past two seasons, according to Pro Football Focus.

"Demaryius is a very gifted athlete. Height weight and speed ... very, very gifted. No doubt," coach John Fox said Monday. "One of the better athletes I've been blessed to be around. He's definitely improved, become a much more polished receiver over the last couple years for sure. He gets all the credit for that."

Thomas is one of the rare receivers capable of taking top off a defense vertically, making tough catches in traffic and going the distance on shorter routes such as bubble screens and slants.

Both players have been correct in their evaluations this week. Thomas is one of the handful of best receivers in the league. No cornerback has played at a higher level than Sherman the past two years.

Super Bowl 2014: Giants fans want Broncos, Peyton Manning, over Seahawks

By Brendan Kutty
The Star-Ledger
January 27, 2014

Pat Padula is a little worried.

Padula, of Hopatcong, has been a Giants fan all his life, and can't, in his heart, root against Eli Manning's brother, Peyton as the Broncos prepare to face the Seahawks in the 2014 Super Bowl at MetLife Stadium Sunday.

But there will be a downside to a Denver win, Padula said.

"We are going to have to see way more Papa John's commercials," he said. Peyton Manning owns a bunch of the pizza chain's franchises. "And I think that the owner of Papa John's (John Schnatter) looks weird. So I'm not sure that's a good thing."

While they may or may not share Padula's fear, most Giants fans who read NJ.com agreed with him. As of 9:30 a.m. Monday, the Broncos had received 73 percent of 512 votes in our poll asking who they'd like to see grab the title.

Reader trueblueinmd chimed in as to why he's backing the blue-and-orange — and part of it is because he approves of those colors, he said.

"Big Brother, and the Giants' ex-DC (who could have been our HC except they hung on to Jim Fassel too long). Plus Big Brother being there sticks it to the Irsays who dumped him, and Welker being there sticks it to Belichick.

Plus, Wilson is really young, it's not his turn yet. And while I don't really have a problem with Richard Sherman, I've always found it hard to root for a loudmouth.

And I know it's trivial, but I don't like teams that wear green. Lime green is not a football color!!"

And bjay22 was all about Peyton, as well.

"Ever since Eli was our QB, I have rooted for his brother too... except when their teams versed each other. On a side note, January 31st is Chinese New Year & begins the Year of the Horse. I think Broncos get this."

Though there were some who wanted a Seattle victory. Count netneutrality as a member of the 12th Man.

"SeaHawks. Great city. Great fans. Pete Carroll been around a long time and seems to be a good guy. And a little bit of an underdog...who ARE those receivers?"

On the flip side, John Fox is one of our guys, and I'm usually rooting for him. And Denver and Elway a class organization.

But I go NFC, Underdog, and the city of Seattle where I've spent time and with some of the most passionate, nicest fans in the country. Go Seattle."

Little Ferry resident and longtime Giants fan Mark Barragato said he's also on Team Peyton. But not just because he's Eli's big bro.

Peyton Manning's having "the best season ever for a quarterback," Barragato said. "A Super Bowl ring would be a perfect ending. Also, there's a good chance this will be his last season. So I'd really like to see him take home a ring."

Daniel Rodriguez, of Hopatcong, agreed with Barragato. But Rodriguez also admitted a bit of bias — he met both Peyton and Eli while working as part of the medical staff at the 2009 Gatorade Replay game between Phillipsburg and Easton, and they came off as good guys, he said. The brothers were the game's honorary coaches.

"True class act," Rodriguez said of the Hall of Fame-bound Broncos quarterback.

Super Bowl 2014: Broncos make a comical arrival in Jersey City

By Kevin Manahan
The Star-Ledger
January 27, 2014

Every team event during Super Bowl week, at least until kickoff, is carefully choreographed -- from the team planes touching down at the airport until Sunday's national anthem.

But once in a while even the tightest script written by the NFL -- the best event planners on the planet -- strays unexpectedly. And it can make for a good laugh.

Mike Klis of the Denver Post caught one of those moments as the Denver Broncos arrived at the team hotel, the Hyatt Regency, on the waterfront in Jersey City on Sunday night:

After barreling down the highway from Newark Liberty International Airport with a police escort, the most difficult stretch for the Broncos' buses to navigate was the final 100 yards to their Super Bowl hotel.

Fans had greeted them starting at their downtown exit ramp; a group was there waving large orange towels. The downtown streets of Jersey City were lined with well-wishers, including one guy with a sound system shouting into his microphone, "Here come the Denver Broncos!"

Finally, after inching through the mob that awaited the Broncos in front of their hotel, the buses stopped and Denver football operations boss John Elway walked out of one.

He was immediately approached by a handsome young man wearing a blue overcoat who somehow managed to fight his way through fans, media, security and state troopers.

"Mr. Elway," the man said. "Would you sign this for me?"

Patrick Smyth, the Broncos' media relations director, quickly took control of the situation.

"Sir," Smyth said. "He has to keep moving. He has to meet the mayor of Jersey City."

The young man smiled.

"I am the mayor of Jersey City," said Steven Fulop, 36. "I have here a welcoming proclamation on behalf of Jersey City."

You should have heard Elway cackle. He signed the proclamation and posed with Mayor Fulop for a photo, a sure sign the Denver team that Elway assembled had officially arrived at Super Bowl XLVIII.

Archie Manning Envisions Peyton Playing Past Super Bowl

By Tom Pedullajan
New York Times
January 27, 2014

Peyton Manning's father, Archie Manning, said he expected his son to continue to play for the Denver Broncos beyond this season, even if he added a second Super Bowl championship to his long list of accomplishments.

"I think he still enjoys it," Archie Manning said in a phone interview. "If he can continue to enjoy it and stay healthy, I think he wants to play."

Peyton Manning, who turns 38 on March 24, has not missed a game for Denver despite multiple surgical procedures on his neck that sidelined him for the 2011 season, his last with the Indianapolis Colts.

Archie said of Peyton's health, "He did have some ankle problems, but he was able to play through that and he felt he had a productive year, offensively."

Playing in his 16th season, Manning continued to perform at an elite level in throwing for 5,477 yards, with 55 touchdowns and 10 interceptions. He led Denver to its first Super Bowl since the 1998 season, when John Elway, now the team's executive vice president for football operations, retired after leading the Broncos to a second consecutive N.F.L. title.

Manning added to questions surrounding his future when, at his first Super Bowl news conference Sunday, he said he had no plans beyond this year.

"I've been truly on a one-year-at-a-time basis," he said, adding, "I think that it is the healthy way to approach your career at this stage."

Archie Manning said he understood what Peyton meant.

"He's 37 years old, and when you are at that age, taking it one year at a time is a smart thing to do," he said.

Archie Manning emphasized that Peyton continued to be driven by a love of the game and competition.

"One thing Peyton is not doing, Peyton is not chasing anything," he said. "He's not chasing any records. But he still likes to play."

Archie expressed confidence that Peyton would not try to prolong his career if his body began to fail him and his performance slipped.

"He's enjoyed his journey," he said. "Peyton is smart enough to know when it's time."

BROWNS HIRE O'NEIL Cleveland Coach Mike Pettine hired Jim O'Neil as his defensive coordinator, reuniting him with the coach who helped him turn around Buffalo's defense last season. Pettine also retained the special teams coordinator Chris Tabor from Rob Chudzinski's staff. (AP)

RAVENS HIRE KUBIAK The former Houston Texans coach Gary Kubiak was hired to be the Baltimore Ravens' new offensive coordinator.

Kubiak, 52, replaces Jim Caldwell, who left to coach the Detroit Lions. (AP)

A BRONCO MAY RETIRE Denver Broncos cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, 27, said that he was giving serious consideration to retiring after the Super Bowl.

He is not burned out or worried about his health, he said. He just figures he has had a good run.

"I had a goal of playing five years, and I reached that," Rodgers-Cromartie said. (AP)

MEDICAL MARIJUANA AND N.F.L. Seattle Coach Pete Carroll supports the N.F.L. looking further into whether medicinal marijuana could be beneficial for players. Carroll said he supported Commissioner Roger Goodell's message last week that the league could consider medicinal marijuana as a treatment if science proved it could help players who have had concussions. (AP)

FORECAST NO SURPRISE The weather forecast for the first Super Bowl in an outdoor stadium in a cold-weather city is nothing out of the ordinary. Anthony Gigi, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, said the forecast for Sunday's game called for temperatures to reach a high of 39 with a low of 27, which is average for the area. There is little threat of precipitation. (AP)

Peyton Manning can return the favor by winning in brother Eli's house

By RANDY COVITZ
Kansas City Star
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK — Two years ago, the New York Giants' Eli Manning won the Super Bowl in the stadium Peyton Manning built, Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

Now, Peyton, with the Denver Broncos after 14 years in Indianapolis, has a chance to win a Super Bowl in Eli's home field, MetLife Stadium.

Peyton, who has one Super Bowl victory, has asked his younger brother about playing in MetLife Stadium, but not about Denver's Super Bowl opponent, the Seattle Seahawks. Seattle beat the Giants 23-0 on Dec. 15 at MetLife Stadium, intercepting Eli five times.

"He told me he couldn't help me much with Seattle," Peyton said on Sunday night. "It wasn't one of the Giants' better days. So he said to not ask him for a whole lot of help there. Eli and I have talked about playing in this stadium."

The Broncos also visited MetLife Stadium this season, beating the Giants 41-23 in week two.

"I feel it was helpful to play in this stadium this season," Manning said. "It was the first time I had the chance to play in that stadium. So, it's nice when you've played in it before, at least you kind of know the surroundings a little bit. Eli has been always helpful to me for many reasons. I've talked to him a number of times these past couple of weeks, and he is excited for me. I've always appreciated his help and support."

John Fox: “We’ve played our best football the last month of the season”

By Bob Condotta
Seattle Times
January 27, 2014

For the view from the other side, here’s what Denver coach John Fox had to say to reporters today:

(on how Denver is playing at this time of the season) “There is no question we’ve played our best football the last month of the season, including the last two weeks. So, I think that’s important. I think the same can be said for Seattle as well. It usually comes down to the team that executes the plays the best wins the game, regardless. I think that formula will stand true.”

(on what WR Wes Welker brought to Denver) “Wes has stepped in. He was voted team captain, and I don’t care who you are, coming to a new team, new teammates, that doesn’t happen very easily. It says a lot to the kind of guy he is, both on and off the field. I think he is an unbelievable competitor and very gritty, and that became obvious to his teammates very early on – how he goes about his business on and off the field and preparation. He has been a tremendous addition, and we are sure glad to have him.”

(on what he learned from Chuck Noll that he is applying as a head coach) “In my first year, 1989, I was defensive backfield coach (for Pittsburgh), and I was very blessed to be with Chuck Noll as head coach. We kind of had a bizarre season. We started the first two games – I think we got beat 51-0 at home by Cleveland. That was my first NFL experience, a great experience. Then, we went to Cincinnati, which was a very good football team, and we lost, I think, 48-14 (actual score was 41-10). It wasn’t a very tremendous start. Everybody was down. And of course, fans as they are, were a little bit honest. He stayed even keel. That is the most valuable lesson: to be the same guy and don’t go through the highs and lows because it is very easy to do, especially with outside influences. He was a tremendous technician in the individual fundamentals of football, which was something very important to him. I still believe it comes down to blocking and tackling, even at this level. Sometimes, we lose sight of that with the schemes and stuff. I really think it is staying even keel, not experiencing the highs and lows that a football season can bring to you. And really, the technique, and not more of the ‘want to’ but the ‘how to’ play football.”

(on if he is more appreciative of this Super Bowl trip because of his health scare) “First and foremost, I am appreciative of this, regardless of any health scares or any of the things I’ve been through, this is a very hard place to get to. I’ve been blessed to do it three times, once as an assistant and twice as a head coach. Going back, like any health scare, whether it was your parents or somebody in your family, in this case it was myself, it was a setback. It was a little bit scary for a minute. I really don’t think about it much now. The first four days, I thought about it a little bit because it was like getting hit by a truck. I got better every day just like any player who has been through an injury. I never thought I wouldn’t be back once I was going through the process. Fortunately, I had my family and good medical people, and here I am. I really haven’t thought about it much, to be honest with you, here recently.”

(on what QB Peyton Manning goes through before the snap, and the significance of ‘Omaha’) “I won’t get into the exact specifics (of ‘Omaha’), and really, we’ve never been real thrilled that the league kind of makes us put on these microphones on players. It’s not real fun for us. I know we have to change a lot, and all of those kinds of things. In today’s NFL offensively, there are more and more people doing things at the line of scrimmage, whether it is audibles, and I don’t want to get into too much. There is a lot of communication that goes on at the line of scrimmage in today’s NFL, and that is both offense and defense, even special teams. You’ll see hand signals, you’ll see different things, even in the kicking game. When you give people 18 hours a day to think of stuff, this is what we do. We are very blessed. He (Manning) is very sharp. He’s done it a very long time in his career, and he is as good – I am not going to say he is the best – but he is as good that I have ever been around of doing it.”

(on how he is able to manage the demands of the job with his health and keep a balance) “You know, it’s really remarkable about my health, and I just have to say this, I am 180 percent better than I was eight months ago. I had a valve that was the size of a pinhead, now it is the size of a 50-cent piece. What you do is that you learn to deal with stuff in life, and I attribute it to, of course, some of our hours some of the time. I might have been a little tired, getting old. This is a cause of age. Really, it’s been a blessing. I’m way better than I was physically the last 10 years of my life. So, it’s really been kind of an upgrade, and I feel tremendous.”

(on how important it is to keep a regular-season routine for the Super Bowl) “It’s been critical the whole season. Whether you are in your local city, or wherever you are in the National Football League, obviously it is a very popular sport, and it gets a lot of coverage, and there are a lot of outside influences, whether it’s television, radio, you name it. So, you are dealing with that all season long, and when you get in the playoffs, it ratchets up a notch. All of these players,

whether it's their side or our side, have been dealing with it, and this is kind of the ultimate of it. It is just more of the same, to be honest with you. It's even more heightened this week, with staying on routine, staying on task. It is about preparation, both mentally and physically, so you can go perform."

(on what it would mean to win his first Super Bowl in the New York/New Jersey area) "It would be very exciting. First and foremost, it would be exciting to win anywhere. This is the epitome of the profession, to be named world champs. Both sides, I'm sure, will be putting all of their best to do that. I spent five great years here. I was very blessed. I worked for a great organization. I'm not knocking any other organization, but I just speak for the one I worked for. Tremendous families, both the Mara family and the Tisch family. Great area, both the New Jersey and the New York side. Very avid fans, very much into their football, regardless of what side they are rooting for. It is very passionate. Much like being in this area, people are passionate just about being here. It would mean a lot. I have a lot of close friends here, neighbors from my Wayne (N.J.) days. It would mean a tremendous amount to win it here."

(on how RB Knowshon Moreno moved up the depth chart, and if it had anything to do with improvement in ball security) "Being a running back, that is a key area – ball security. He's done a tremendous job. I think Montee Ball, one of our young guys, has done a tremendous job as has Ronnie Hillman and C.J. Anderson. They have all improved in that area. He was the most veteran of anybody. The thing with Knowshon, the thing he's really improved, is his accountability and dependability. I think that it goes with being a running back, not just toting the rock. It's not just running the football. You have protections. We change a lot of things, and we do a lot of things. We don't just call a play and go to the line and run it. You've got to be a sharp guy, so he is very smart. He's been a professional as far as his preparation goes, and he has become one of the more dependable guys as far as assignment detail and those types of things. You see that in his stats. You see it with his pass receiving yardage in combination with the rushing yardage, which is doing all and everything about your job. He's done a tremendous job, and he is maybe one of our most improved players this past season. I hope he continues that on Sunday."

(on what he saw as Denver brought Terrance Knighton along) "I'll always put it on players. As a coach, we spend a lot of time trying to define players. Basically, our approach is, 'Don't let us define you. You are going to be held accountable. It is going to be based on your performance, where you are on the depth chart, how much you are going to play. All of those things, you earn or don't earn.' Much like all of our players, guys either take heed of that, or don't. So, in Terrance's case, he worked very hard. He had a funny nickname, and I'll let him go into that. He lost 30 pounds. He worked very hard to get his weight in order. He

changed his physical look as far as his body content with our strength and conditioning people. Really, everything Terrance has done, he did (himself). You can have all kinds of talks, you can talk until you are blue in the face. But, until you start seeing actions, they basically make that decision. In his case, he definitely did. We are very excited to have him. He has been a real stalwart up front, especially inside in both the run and the pass. We are pleased in the growth and development he made this year, but I attribute it to him."

(on what non-football activities he has planned for the team this week)

"They kind of figured out those kind of activities on their own. We don't really have a whole lot of things that don't revolve around the game. Obviously, we give them free time flexibility to do with what they want. Obviously, we've got a big event tomorrow. We have a practice today. We are going out to the Jets facility. Wednesday, we are back into regular in-season mode. Thursday, the families arrive. So, they will have some time with their families, albeit after practice and some of their commitments to the team. Nothing is really planned like a special movie, or anything like that."

(on Moreno's turnaround, and how he has altered the offense) "His consistency is what has helped the offense. I think that is a question better for Knowshon. I believe he is going to be with you guys as well. I think it is just maturity. These are young people; young, rich and famous people for the most part – not a great combination for success without some responsibility and accountability. I understand decisions bring consequences. I've seen a tremendous amount of growth. I think it is something for why I do what I do and why most coaches do what they do – is watching that growth and development."

(on the development of WR Demaryius Thomas, and how his career improved with the arrival of QB Peyton Manning)

"It's my third season with the Broncos. When we first got there, we had a different type of offense. Demaryius is a very gifted athlete, both in height, weight and speed as we evaluate people in the draft process and the evaluation of the human talent process. He is very, very gifted, no doubt. He is one of the better athletes I've been blessed to be around. Again, it's developing the skills. Ultimately, it goes back to the kind of person Demaryius is. He's definitely improved and become a much more polished receiver over the last couple of years, for sure. He gets all of the credit for that. It's a lot of hard work, our whole football team has worked very hard to get to this place just like the other side has. Demaryius has been a big part of that, and he is a very, very capable player at his position, and he will continue to grow as we move forward."

(on if he saw anything from the tape of Seattle's game against Indianapolis that could help them) "Just for the record, we looked at every

snap on film, and I'm sure Pete (Carroll) and his crew have, too. It's kind of what we do. Yes, we looked at that. That place (Indianapolis) is a tough place to play, regardless of what team you are. They were a very, very talented team that made the postseason, and did a good job. In answer to your question, without getting into specifics, we looked at that very closely."

(on if he or anyone from his staff had been to the Jets facility) "Our buses leave at 2 (p.m.). Not sure really how far; I know we stayed out in that area this year when we played the Giants in the Short Hills, Florham Park and Summit area – which is a very nice area of New Jersey. We understand it's a little bit of a bus ride. We get to find out. I've heard the facility is very good. Our operations guy tells me that the guys will be complaining that it is so much nicer than ours, so he is not real excited about it. But, we are looking forward to getting out there. We've heard nothing but great things."

Great tight end? No problem for Kam Chancellor, Seahawks

By Bob Condotta
Seattle Times
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. – Even if the Seahawks haven't really had a previous encounter on the field with Denver tight end Julius Thomas — we'll exclude an exhibition game from this conversation — they've seen him before.

They've seen Thomas in the form of New Orleans' Jimmy Graham, Atlanta's Tony Gonzalez and San Francisco's Vernon Davis, all tall, gifted tight ends who might as well be wide receivers.

"Very similar," Seattle strong safety Kam Chancellor said of Thomas, who will face the Seahawks in Super Bowl XLVIII on Sunday at MetLife Stadium. "He's just another athletic tight end with good hands."

Seattle coach Pete Carroll used much the same phrasing to describe Thomas, a 6-foot-5, 250-pound former basketball player at Portland State who caught 65 passes for 788 yards and 12 touchdowns in 2013, a breakout season in his third year in the NFL.

"He's very similar to Jimmy Graham and all the guys that we have dealt with all year long," Carroll said. "So we have all the same issues and problems that we've had during the season."

Seattle, though, has usually turned those issues and problems into answers and solutions, making Davis, Graham and Gonzalez into mostly nonfactors in regular-season and playoff games.

In six games (three against Davis, two against Graham and one against Gonzalez) Seattle held that trio of tight ends to 15 catches for 136 yards and two touchdowns, or an average of 2.5 catches a game for 22.6 yards. That compares to a season average for those three of more than four catches per game and 62 yards.

Chancellor is hardly the sole reason for that success. Everyone in the secondary had their hand at defending tight ends, as did some of the linebackers, specifically K.J. Wright. Thomas, like the others, often lines up wide as a receiver, or in the slot, and the Seahawks rarely adjust their coverage to match up to a specific player.

But because of where he lines up, at strong safety, Chancellor often took the lead role guarding tight ends and could well do so again against Thomas, whom Seattle has played against only in an exhibition game in August.

Not that Chancellor felt like giving away any secrets during his session with the media Monday.

"Nothing specific," Chancellor said when asked to explain Seattle's success defending tight ends this season. "Just playing our defense every snap ... we just play ball. At the end of the day, football is running and hitting and I think our defense does a good job effectively doing it."

The quote was vintage Chancellor, who is becoming the prototype soft-speaking, hard-hitting safety in his fourth year in the NFL.

It's hard to argue Chancellor is overlooked as he was named to the Pro Bowl for a second time and also selected as a second team AP All-Pro.

Still, the Seahawks' defensive headlines tend more often to go to cornerback Richard Sherman and free safety Earl Thomas, each of whom drew consideration as defensive player of the year.

Teammates, though, think Chancellor should have been in that talk.

"Kam, he's been the best player on our defense the whole season, I think," defensive lineman Michael Bennett said. "He's one of the best players in the NFL. I'm surprised he's not up for defensive player of the year."

The Seahawks recognized Chancellor's value last offseason when they made him the first of their young, core defensive players to get a big contract. Rather than let him play out the final year of his rookie deal, the Seahawks gave Chancellor an extension through the 2017 season that could pay him as much as \$35 million and included \$17 million guaranteed.

Seahawks general manager John Schneider said the team will always use a case-by-case basis in deciding whether to extend contracts before they run out, but said last week there was no hesitation with Chancellor, 25, a fifth-round pick out of Virginia Tech in 2010.

"There's certain guys that, A, you just can't afford to extend that at that time, or, B, you just want to see how they handle things," Schneider said. "If you're confident in an individual — we were able to redo Kam last year, and you know Kam's going to be out there just being a pro every single day."

Chancellor, in fact, played the second-most defensive snaps of any Seahawk this year, 1,006 of 1,042 (Thomas was first at 1,008).

Chancellor said the contract was "motivation to get more. It was a testament to them to show that hard work pays off. I think I have been a guy here just grinding the whole time. Doing everything they ask. They took care of me, and I'm taking care of them."

And, he hopes, one more time this season also taking care of Seattle's tight end "issues and problems."

Cancer-Stricken Fan Thanks the Denver Broncos in Amazing Newspaper Ad Kara Christian's salute

By David Gianatasio
AdWeek
January 27, 2014

All the pre-game hype and multimillion-dollar TV buys can't put the Super Bowl and sports fandom in perspective as sharply as this newspaper ad from Kara Christian, a 58-year-old Denver Broncos fan stricken with breast cancer.

The longtime season-ticket holder has followed the team since she was 5, back in 1960, when the Broncos played their first game, and she regularly attends contests at Sports Authority Field at Mile High wearing a big orange wig. She's the kind of ardent fan who arrives at games early to greet home-team players with hugs as they walk to the locker room.

Christian, whose prognosis is terminal, received a field pass for the AFC Championship Game in Denver and a football signed by every Bronco. To say thanks and spur the team to victory in the Super Bowl, she took out a half-page ad in the sports section of Saturday's Denver Post.

She writes: "You shall never know how much your kindness and support has meant to me throughout my illness. An autographed football has made the darkest of days shine brightly with an orange glow. A hug has given me the strength to remain Bronco tough. A field pass has given me encouragement to make it through another day. A phone call has meant the orange and blue world to me." She closes: "I was born a Bronco, I bleed orange and I will proudly die a Bronco," and signs the ad "The Bronco Lady." (Christian qualified for two Super Bowl tickets in the team's season-ticket lottery and plans to attend the game.)

She opens the message by addressing the Broncos as "teammates." This speaks to the intense, intimate bond that die-hard fans have with our favorite teams, ties that inform and enrich our daily lives in ways casual fans can't understand. In our hearts and minds, we're part of the team. We rise with each victory, sink with each defeat. Some say sports isn't life and death. For true believers, it's nothing less. In the best cases, this energy flows in both directions, giving strength to fans and players. It's a spiritual experience that transcends the cynicism of celebrity, contracts and even commercials.

I don't care what USA Today's Ad Meter says after the game. Kara Christian's ad wins the Super Bowl this year.

Leesburg graduate Danny Trevathan to play in Super Bowl with Denver Broncos

By Jerry Fallstrom
Orlando Sentinel
January 27, 2014

LEESBURG — Linebacker Danny Trevathan, who will play in Sunday's Super Bowl with the Denver Broncos, has strong roots.

"Never forget where you come from," the Leesburg High graduate wrote on Twitter the day after the Broncos defeated the New England Patriots 26-16 on Jan. 19 in the AFC championship game.

In the Super Bowl, Trevathan has the challenging task of stopping the Seattle Seahawks' powerful running back Marshawn Lynch and stalking elusive quarterback Russell Wilson.

Trevathan, who attended Kentucky, had a breakout year in his second season. He recorded 87 tackles during the regular season and followed that up with eight against the Patriots. He did have a forgettable gaffe against the Baltimore Ravens. Trevathan snagged an interception off Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco and was headed for a touchdown but dropped the ball before he crossed the goal line.

This season also saw the birth of his daughter Danoir Louise Trevathan, whose photo was broadcast during an NBC Sunday Night Football against the Kansas City Chiefs. "Can't stop looking my lil mama in her eyes," he wrote on Twitter.

Trevathan isn't the first Leesburg High athlete to play for the Broncos. Max Wettstein, a wide receiver/defensive end with the Yellow Jackets from 1959-62, played two seasons as a Broncos tight end after starring at FSU. Wettstein was killed in 1993 in an ultralight plane crash at age 49

Souhan: Sherman rant no worse than Peyton Manning's

By Jim Souhan
Star Tribune
January 27, 2014

A week of Super Bowl hype begins in earnest Monday, finally giving us a chance to discuss the appalling case of the most famous player in the game taking advantage of an interview with a sideline reporter to go on a wild-eyed rant about another player.

Analyze the rant and you find a personality overflowing with arrogance, ego, self-importance and a cunning use of the media.

If you think this is a reference to Richard Sherman, you have a short memory.

Sherman shrewdly made himself a national celebrity with his postgame interview after his Seahawks beat the 49ers in the NFC Championship Game. Whether or not he made himself likable to the average sports fan, he made himself more notorious.

After he taunted 49ers receiver Michael Crabtree, Sherman's jersey sales rocketed. Playing an unheralded position in the NFL's most far-flung city, Sherman, in an instant, transformed himself from a great cornerback into a national celebrity.

Because he is black, loud and dreadlocked, the reaction to his rant on social media included all manner of overt and coded racial commentary, allowing Sherman, whose life story and body of work are admirable, to go from vilified to sympathetic to celebrated in a matter of days.

Imagine if he had used his national platform and celebrity to ridicule one of his teammates.

That's what Peyton Manning did.

Sherman was seen by all too many as crazed. Manning, a celebrated white player in a leadership position, was seen as funny, or powerful, or pointed.

Here's what Sherman said — or screamed — to Fox sideline reporter Erin Andrews: "I'm the best cornerback in the game. When you try me with a sorry receiver like [the 49ers Michael] Crabtree, that's the result you are going to get. Don't you ever talk about me."

Andrews asked, "Who was talking about you?"

Sherman: "Crabtree. Don't you open your mouth about the best, or I'm going to shut it for you real quick. L-O-B."

The initials stand for Legion of Boom, the nickname of the Seahawks' defense.

With his rant, Sherman eliminated himself from consideration for the Lady Byng Memorial Trophy. But was it worse than what Manning once said?

In 2003, Manning did an interview while playing in the Pro Bowl. Then-Colts teammate Mike Vanderjagt had questioned Manning and Colts coach Tony Dungy, saying he didn't see the Colts "getting any better" under the duo's leadership.

Here's what Manning said about that on ABC during the Pro Bowl:

"Here we are, I'm out at my third Pro Bowl, and we're talking about our idiot kicker, who got liquored up and ran his mouth off. What is the sports world coming to when we're talking about idiot kickers. He has ruined kickers for life. [David] Akers and [Adam] Vinatieri, these guys are great guys, and they've been getting killed all week because our idiot ran his mouth.

"When I get home, I'll deal with it. Tony and I will talk about it. It's kind of funny, really, when you think about it. If he's still a teammate, we'll deal with it. That remains to be seen. The sad thing is, he's a good kicker. He's a good kicker. But he's an idiot."

Sherman and Manning both insulted an NFL player on national television. Sherman's rant occurred moments after the end of an emotional game.

Whether his attack on Crabtree was a carryover from the emotions of the game or a calculated attempt to raise his profile, his rant can be summarized as an insult to an opponent, an attempt at self-glorification, and an homage to his team.

Manning's rant occurred days after Vanderjagt went on a Canadian cable show and questioned Manning's leadership. He could have ripped into Vanderjagt through another outlet at another time, but he waited until he was in uniform, during a game, to launch a long, insulting diatribe against a player who would remain his teammate for another two seasons, while mentioning his Pro Bowl appearances and intimating that he had a say in his team's personnel decisions.

Two great players used a national TV interview to criticize another player. Sherman targeted an opponent after an emotional game. Manning targeted a teammate while coasting through a Pro Bowl.

Which was worse?

Denver Broncos owner Pat Bowlen got start in Wisconsin

By Bob McGinn
The Journal Sentinel
January 26, 2014

New York — Pat Bowlen became part of pro football's landscape as the dashing figure in a fur coat along the sidelines of the Denver Broncos, the franchise he has owned since 1984.

His career in football began on the playing fields of Wisconsin as a starting wide receiver for the Champion High School Knights of Prairie du Chien.

How Bowlen got from the former Jesuit boarding school along the Mississippi River to the 48th Super Bowl Sunday at MetLife Stadium is a story worth telling.

Bowlen's mother, Arvella, grew up in Prairie du Chien, a city of 6,000 in southwestern Wisconsin. His father, Paul, was Canadian.

"He met my mother through a whole bunch of stuff," Bowlen said in a brief 2008 interview. "They had gone back to Canada. He was a wildcatter."

Paul Bowlen was engaged in speculative mining and oil drilling in Alberta, Canada, when his wife became pregnant in 1943.

"She wasn't about to have her first baby in some godforsaken place called Vermilion (Alberta)," said Bowlen. "They hardly had a hospital. So she went back to Prairie du Chien."

Pat Bowlen will celebrate his 70th birthday Feb. 18, or 16 days after he hopes his Broncos capture a third National Football League championship in their sixth Super Bowl appearance under his direction.

When it came time for high school, Arvella Bowlen remembered Champion, which had a reputation for being excellent academically and for having a geographically diverse student body.

"She was bound and determined that I was going to go there to school," remembered Bowlen. "I went back there to high school. Played football and hockey, ran the 440 in track. Graduated in '62."

Champion, founded in 1875, reached its peak in the early 1960s with an all-male enrollment of almost 600. More resembling a college campus on a sprawling 101 acres just south of town, Champion had three residence halls and half a dozen other buildings. A new gym-natorium went up in 1963.

"There were about 540 residents and 60 day hops," said Maurice Oehler, a chemistry teacher at Champion from 1962-'71. "There were a lot of kids from Chicago and Milwaukee. The discipline was tough, and it was very tough academically. Ninety-nine percent went on to college."

Roots in hockey

Pat McCorkell, who hailed from Superior, and Bowlen played together on the Champion club hockey team. As freshmen, they thrashed a squad of upperclassmen more than once.

"(Bowlen) grew up with hockey," said McCorkell, a Jesuit priest who presently serves as director of the Jesuit Demontreville Retreat House in Lake Elmo, Minn.

McCorkell also was quarterback on the Knights' football team that played an independent schedule against Catholic schools across the state, Iowa and Illinois.

"In high school (Bowlen) was a very personable guy," McCorkell said last week. "A good athlete, not outstanding, and an ordinary student. In some ways, in that school, nobody was completely ordinary. It (Champion) took the upper-level kids."

Oehler estimated that Champion officials turned down perhaps two of every three applicants for admission during its heyday.

George Blaha, another member of the Class of 1962, is in his 38th season as the TV and radio voice of the Detroit Pistons. He and Bowlen speak several times each year.

Other sports luminaries with Champion diplomas were George Ireland, who coached Chicago Loyola to the NCAA basketball title in 1963, and Jerry Vainisi, general manager of the Super Bowl-winning Chicago Bears in 1985.

Champion would close in June 1975. Martin Luther Prep High School operated there for about 15 years. Since 1997, the medium-security Prairie du Chien Correctional Institution has been housed in the former school complex.

Bowlen went on to earn business and law degrees from the University of Oklahoma, but first he had a stint as a freshman in the football program run by legendary Bud Wilkinson.

"He told me he always wanted to play," said McCorkell. "He got there and he realized he was too small and too slow."

As McCorkell worked toward the priesthood, Bowlen began a law practice in Edmonton while making a fortune in real estate, oil, gas and other natural resources.

Trying something new

In 1983, the American-born, Canadian tycoon decided he had enough money. After examining ownership opportunities in the NHL and Canadian Football League, Bowlen bought the Broncos from Edgar Kaiser for about \$70 million.

"In my late 30s, I got serious about doing something different," Bowlen told the Los Angeles Times in 1987. "I wanted to be deeply involved in an exciting people business of some kind."

Described in 2006 by former Green Bay Packers President Bob Harlan as a "hands-on guy," Bowlen devoted most of his work to the Broncos and various NFL

committees. As chairman of the league's broadcast committee, he negotiated the \$18 billion network TV contract.

Under Bowlen's aggressive leadership, Denver reached the Super Bowl after the 1986, '87 and '89 seasons.

"I lived through getting beat (39-20) by the Giants in Pasadena — just getting killed in the second half," Bowlen said in the '08 interview. "Getting killed (42-10) by the Redskins in San Diego. And getting really beat up by the 49ers in New Orleans, 55-10."

Eight years later, Denver defeated Green Bay in the 32nd Super Bowl, then Atlanta in the 33rd Super Bowl.

New England's Robert Kraft and Bowlen are tied for most Super Bowl appearances by an owner with six. A victory Sunday over Seattle would leave Bowlen tied for fourth place among owners in Super Bowl triumphs.

Over the years, Bowlen has invited McCorkell many times for game weekends in Denver, and he has said mass frequently for players, coaches and staff. They were good friends at Campion and remain so today.

Although Bowlen remains intimately involved with the team, team president Joe Ellis was given primary responsibility for the organization in January 2011.

One of his friends said Bowlen has been suffering the affects of dementia for several years. He seemed somewhat befuddled during the trophy presentation after the AFC Championship Game, and CBS' Jim Nantz instead interviewed vice president of football operations John Elway and coach John Fox as the owner looked on.

"He's certainly not as robust as he has been most of his life," said McCorkell, who last talked to his friend of 55 years early in the season.

In February 1984, Bowlen finished 135th out of 1,100 entrants in the Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii, where he has a home at the base of Diamond Head on O'ahu.

Even now, Bowlen continues working out on a daily basis, and is said to be phenomenal on the StairMaster.

The Pro Football Hall of Fame numbers nine individuals who were inducted strictly on their merits as a team owner. Given Bowlen's success, longevity and service to the league, he could be a legitimate candidate.

Peyton Manning Receives Top Marks As Best Athlete Endorser

By Patrick Rische
Forbes.com
January 27, 2014

I always knew Papa John was a smart guy.

The fact that his little pizza company, along with an array of other businesses, use Peyton Manning as a product spokesperson is just good business.

After all, if you are going to use a celebrity to endorse your product, you might as well use someone that everybody recognizes and likes. And the data shows that few are as adored as Peyton.

Based on Davie-Brown Index findings, which conducts weekly surveys of 1000 American respondents, the data shows that:

- Peyton Manning is currently the top ranked endorser of all active athletes in the U.S., and the 4th ranked athlete endorser overall behind Michael Jordan, Hank Aaron, and Arnold Palmer.
- 87% of those surveyed are aware of him, and 90% of those think he is an effective product spokesperson.
- Comparatively, his much younger counterpart in Super Bowl XLVIII – Russell Wilson of Seattle – only has an awareness level in the U.S. of 28%. Only Buffalo Bills rookie QB EJ Manuel has a lower awareness rating among NFL QBs.

Of course, Wilson appears quite likable and has been a winner in his two short seasons in Seattle. So there is no question that a Super Bowl victory would greatly enhance his future marketability as a product endorser.

Though a Grand Canyon-like divide exists between Manning and Wilson in awareness at present, Wilson has actually had a greater impact on the growth of the team's fan base. Using similar DBI metrics, there has been a 262% growth in the Seahawks fan base over the last 2 years since Wilson's arrival...whereas the Broncos fan base has grown 125% in the 2 years Manning has been in Denver.

That Wilson has had a greater comparative impact on the Seahawks fan base is more a function of the fact that Seattle's national brand has increased as the team's competitiveness has increased over the last few years, whereas Denver has had a strong brand for a long time...largely established by another Hall of Fame quarterback, 2-time Super Bowl winner and now team president John Elway.

Demaryius Thomas's mother, grandma will watch him from prison

By Michael David Smith
ProFootballTalk.com
January 27, 2014

Broncos receiver Demaryius Thomas won't be able to bring his family with him to the Super Bowl. Thomas's mother is currently serving a 20-year prison sentence and his grandmother is serving a life sentence, both for their roles in a conspiracy to distribute cocaine.

But while they can't be there to cheer him on, Thomas says his mother and grandmother will be able to watch the Super Bowl, and will support him from afar. Thomas's mom and grandma are both in the federal prison in Tallahassee, Florida, so he doesn't get to see them often during the football season, but he said he talked to them recently.

"My momma, she just told me, 'I told you you would make it.' We haven't really talked about it much but I talked to my grandma and she said the same thing," Thomas said today. "She got emotional and all, but they just said, 'You were going to make it.' They get to watch every game that comes on TV there and they've got the t-shirts. All of the ladies have the t-shirts and watch me, so that's special."

Thomas was only 11 on the day when police broke down the door of the family home to arrest his mom and grandma, so he has missed a lot with them, but he says they still inspire him.

"They drive me more to know that they're there and they're watching me," Thomas said. "I try to go out there and play my best because they're going to talk about it to the people in the jailhouse."

Peyton's place in history a hot topic this Super Bowl week

By Michael David Smith
ProFootballTalk.com
January 27, 2014

Is Peyton Manning the best quarterback ever? That's a question being debated this Super Bowl week, and some say the answer hinges on what he does on Sunday.

The argument for Manning is mostly based on the regular season. And when looking only at the regular season, Manning might already be the best quarterback ever. He's the only four-time NFL Most Valuable Player, and he's expected to become the first five-time MVP when the votes for the league's year-end awards are announced on Saturday. If it were just a matter of judging the best quarterback ever to play in the regular season, Manning might already have the title. In fact, a writer at GQ has already boldly proclaimed that "Peyton Manning is the greatest quarterback ever to set foot on the gridiron."

But it isn't just about the regular season. Manning may need to win a second Super Bowl ring on Sunday to establish himself as the best ever, and Woody Paige of the Denver Post has made the case that one more ring is the one more thing that Manning requires to be the best ever.

The truth is, when judging Manning's career people are probably going to overreact either way to the result of Sunday's game. If the Broncos win, we'll be flooded with stories about how Manning has taken his place as the best ever. If the Broncos lose, we'll be flooded with stories about how Manning chokes at big moments. But that's just the nature of how NFL quarterbacks are judged. And if Manning turns in a great game in the Super Bowl, a lot of people will judge him as the best quarterback ever.

Terrance Knighton talks Russell Wilson's tendencies

By Michael David Smith
ProFootballTalk.com
January 27, 2014

Broncos defensive tackle Terrance Knighton has picked up a few things from his film study of Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson that he was willing to share to the media today.

"You've just got to watch a lot of film. Quarterbacks have tendencies. His tendency is that he is a right-handed quarterback; he wants to get out to his right and throw," Knighton said of Wilson. "He's more successful that way. So we've got to do a good job of keeping him in the pocket and force him out of his comfort zone. When he's moving left he'll tend to run it more and when he's moving right he wants to pass it more. We just have to do a good job of containing him. He'll get out and he'll make his plays during the game, but we'll just have to limit them."

Wilson threw only nine interceptions in the regular season and hasn't thrown one yet in the playoffs, and Knighton said that quality of Wilson's has been particularly impressive for a young player.

"Each week he's getting better and better. He's one of those guys who doesn't turn the ball over," Knighton said.

Perhaps most important to Wilson's success is his scrambling ability, which Knighton noted.

"He extends plays, he's a smart player and he can beat you with his feet and with his arm," Knighton said. "We have to keep him in the pocket."

Julius Thomas anticipating a physical game on Sunday

By Josh Alper
ProFootballTalk.com
January 27, 2014

Broncos tight end Julius Thomas broke out as a pass catcher this season, his third in the NFL after playing basketball in college.

During Monday's media session, Thomas said he never imagined his life would lead him to the Super Bowl when he was getting ready for NCAA tournament games at Portland State. He also probably didn't imagine that he'd be getting ready to take hits from the likes of Kam Chancellor, although he's ready for it now.

Thomas said he anticipates a physical matchup with the Seahawks and that the Broncos have to match Seattle's physicality when the opportunities to do so present themselves. He also said that he plans to avoid big hits whenever possible, but that doesn't mean he'll be playing the game any differently than the way he played all season.

"No. I think all year I've been trying to avoid big shots," Thomas said. "That's just something you do as an offensive player, you don't want to let guys tattoo you when you're out there running with the football. On the line, that's a physical part of the field. All physicality is welcomed down there in that part of the trenches."

Thomas said the Broncos aren't making a special point of being more physical for this game during meetings and practices, but it will be a different kind of test for their offense. The same is true of the Seattle defense, which makes the meeting of those two units something plenty of us will be anticipating between now and Sunday.

Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie says he's contemplated retirement if Denver wins

By Mike Wilkening
ProFootballTalk.com
January 27, 2014

Broncos cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie is a talented, proven starter at a position that is always in demand. What's more, he is a free agent at season's end, and he is only 27 years old.

However, he has reportedly at least given thought to stepping away from football if Denver wins the Super Bowl on Sunday.

Numerous reporters took to Twitter Monday afternoon to report that Rodgers-Cromartie has indicated he's at least thought of calling it quits after this season.

"I set a goal of five years, I've played six," Rodgers-Cromartie said Monday, according to Ian Rapoport of NFL Network.

Lindsay Jones of USA Today, Mike Garofolo of Fox Sports and Paul Klee of the Colorado Springs Gazette also reported that Rodgers-Cromartie brought up retirement on Monday.

Via Alex Marvez of Fox Sports, Rodgers-Cromartie indicated that any intent to retire was "not set in stone."

The suspicion here is that this is not the last we've heard of this story this week.

Jets won't peek at Broncos this week, lest they see a QB

By Darin Gantt
ProFootballTalk.com
January 27, 2014

The Jets are going to be in their own building this week, while the Broncos use it to get ready for the Super Bowl.

But they're going to do the best they can to stay inconspicuous.

"We won't go anywhere where there's windows. We'll be in the interior," Jets General Manager John Idzik said, via Brian Costello of the New York Post. "We're there anyway. We'll be there through their practice. We won't go anywhere within eyeshot of the Broncos, unless they ask us. We want to respect their privacy. We realize this is the culmination of their season. It's the most important week of a lot of careers. We want to try to foster a good environment for them."

The Broncos are using the Jets' fields, locker room, weight room and trainers' facilities, but Jets officials are still around working on their offseason plans.

Idzik said the Broncos have been "very sensitive," to not being rude guests. So that makes it easier to not take a peek.

Besides, looking out the window and seeing a great quarterback on the field might just confuse them.

Broncos to practice outdoors today, since it's nice

By Darin Gantt
ProFootballTalk.com
January 27, 2014

Considering today might be the balmy one this week, the Broncos are going to go play outside.

According to Sal Paolantonio of ESPN, the Broncos are going to work out outside today, rather than using the Jets indoor facility.

Broncos coach John Fox said last night he'd prefer to work outdoors if possible, since he's more worried about the impact of running around on a hard artificial turf surface than the temperatures.

It's going to get colder in greater New York tomorrow, with highs in the teens forecast for Tuesday. So while the Broncos may go inside later, they're going to take advantage of reasonably mild conditions while they can.

Matt Prater finally back on his feet, will practice today

By Darin Gantt
ProFootballTalk.com
January 27, 2014

Broncos kicker Matt Prater needed the week between the conference championship games and Super Bowl, but not to recover from anything football-related.

Prater's finally able to practice again today, after sitting out last week to recover from a virus.

"Hopefully, in another day or two, I'll be back to normal," Prater said, via Mike Klis of the Denver Post. "I got some kind of flu or something. It started to come on Tuesday night.

"When I woke up Wednesday morning, I felt like I got run over by a truck."

Prater's been exceptional this season for the Broncos, missing just a pair of field goals (30-of-32) and recording touchbacks on 75 percent of his kicks. Altitude helps with some of that, but when he's well, he's as good as they come.

Weather concerns mean no blimps at Super Bowl

By Darin Gantt
ProFootballTalk.com
January 27, 2014

It's only Monday, and we've already found someone to replace Peyton Manning in the can't-play-in-cold-weather narrative.

According to Jim Baumbach of Newsday, concerns about the frigid and possible snowy weather made advertisers ground one of the staples of game days — blimps.

The decision was made months ago, actually, as the giant bags of hot air (don't pick the low hanging fruit, even if I pulled the branch down for you) usually stay in warmer climes this time of year.

Of course, the fact Super Bowls are usually in warmer climes may have made this piece of news more surprising to me than it should have been — especially since MetLife, the company with its name on the Super Bowl host stadium, owns a pair of them.

"It's all the stuff that surrounds cold weather, the conditions that happen to make snow, ice, even rain," spokesman Shane Winn said. "All of those things add to the risk of flying because they can add considerable weight to the airships. It makes flights treacherous. . . .

"They're not up here. If MetLife could put its blimp up in the air here during Super Bowl week here in New York and New Jersey, we would do it."

A Goodyear spokesman said their two blimps were in San Diego and Florida, getting aerial shots of a golf tournament and a Miami Heat game.

One of those is played inside a building. Which makes even less sense than being surprised at the lack of blimps in over greater New York.

Preparation of 'Pot Roast' Took Years

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- With a nickname like "Pot Roast," the marketing possibilities are endless for defensive tackle Terrance Knighton -- if the Broncos win Super Bowl XLVIII.

"Well, yeah, we go out and win the Super Bowl, I'm pretty sure there'll be something. Maybe a Chunky Soup commercial or something like that," said Knighton, who came mentally prepared for the barrage of questions from national media, most of which will be getting to know him for the first time.

The nickname was bestowed upon him during a 2009 flight back from Seattle by former Jaguars linebacker Clint Ingram, whom Knighton described as "probably the biggest comedian that I've played with."

"It was dark on the plane, everybody was sleeping and the stewardess was saying, 'pot roast, pot roast,' and I raised my hand, as if that was my name," Knighton said. "The guy behind me (Ingram) was like, 'Yeah, I'm going to start calling you, 'Pot Roast,' and I'm like, 'Yeah, whatever.'"

"It stuck with me, so I'm just glad I ordered that instead of shrimp alfredo."

He carried the nickname from Jacksonville, spent most of last year trying to distance himself from it, but in recent weeks has embraced it, especially since the reunion with fellow ex-Jaguar Jeremy Mincey.

"He was 'Pot Roast' then, and he's still 'Pot Roast' to me," Mincey said on Jan. 15.

But he might not have ever been "Pot Roast" if had followed through on his desire to stop playing football back at Windsor (Conn.) High School.

"I actually quit football my sophomore year, and wanted to play basketball," Knighton said. "My mom dragged me back out on the field and said, 'No, you belong on the football field.'"

But there's still some things he learned from basketball that he applies to football.

"I'm a trash talker. On the basketball court, I would say I'm like Rasheed Wallace," Knighton said. "On the football field, I'll get into it with guys, but I'm more trying to save my energy and not get into it, because O-linemen sometimes will get the last laugh, because they basically can do whatever they want to. There's no rules for any guys on offense."

Despite that, he loves the game and his place in it.

"I've always loved football. I think when I stopped playing, that was more because I think I got bored with it. I just wanted to focus on one thing," he said. "It's a good thing my mom snapped me back into it."

But in high school, basketball was "definitely a lot more fun," he noted.

"And people see your face more," he added.

But this week, people will see his face more than ever, and football has taken him places of which he could have only dreamed when he was in Connecticut.

"I'm glad I went back and played football," he said.

And by doing so, he's poised to take his place among the list of colorful characters to have played in this most massive of annual sporting events.

Super Bowl Postcards: Media Day Attire

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
January 27, 2014

NEW YORK -- "What are you going to wear in the game Sunday?"

This was an actual Media Day question years ago, posed of Hall to Fame running back Emmitt Smith. It was not from a football reporter, but an MTV personality of early-1990s vintage, "Downtown" Julie Brown.

Until this week, this was not a question asked of Media Day itself. Players wore their jerseys, in part because the team photo took place after the event, and the matter was settled. But team photos were Monday. While the Broncos got their shot for posterity, I shot a picture of their wardrobe.

And now we have a special Nike outfit for an event that exists in the haze between curiosity and infamy. Whether it leans more toward one or the other will depend on the question being asked. If there are any as vacuous as Brown's, we'll have our answer.

DRC: 'I'm Still Thinking' About Retiring

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- Sunday afternoon, Peyton Manning and Champ Bailey dismissed the notion of retiring if they win the Super Bowl, saying that it was a matter to be considered in the future, but not with the game lurking, their health good and their passion for the game intact.

A day later, Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie took a different approach, acknowledging that he has considered walking away if the Broncos win Super Bowl XLVIII, and saying he was "somewhat" serious about the notion.

"I'm still thinking about it," he said. "You know, I had my fun in this league ... (I've) got to weigh my options and see how I feel at the end of the season."

This was the sixth NFL season for the 27-year-old Rodgers-Cromartie. That's more than he thought he would play when he broke into the league in 2008 as a first-round pick from Tennessee State whose reputation surged after a stellar Senior Bowl week that year.

"Coming from a small school, you know all the talk, small-school guys aren't supposed to make it in the NFL and stuff like that, so you know with the league average being only 2-3 years, I gave myself five," he said.

Rodgers-Cromartie's initial contract with the Arizona Cardinal out of Tennessee State was for five years. He played out the length of the deal -- including two seasons after he was traded to the Philadelphia Eagles -- before signing with Denver last March.

His one-year deal with the Broncos means he will become a free agent in the spring, unless the two sides can hammer out a deal before free agency begins at 2 p.m. MDT on Tuesday, March 11. But as he repeated throughout his press conference Monday, retirement is an option, and he said he's shared those thoughts with teammates.

"I talk with them about it all the time," he said. "It's not set in stone. They always think I am joking about it. I love those guys, I think I've earned their respect and they sure have mine."

Rodgers-Cromartie admitted there are no health reasons for him to retire.

"If at the end of the day, if I really think about it and that is my decision ... then yeah. I've had my fun," he said.

If Rodgers-Cromartie retires, he has a notion of what he wants to do, saying that he wants to return to college to study psychology and become a guidance counselor.

"I'm still a young guy, not Champ Bailey being around for 14-15 years," Rodgers-Cromartie said. "I had a goal of playing 5 years and I reached that ... so, however I feel after the game."

The pronouncement came after a season that was the best of Rodgers-Cromartie's career. With Bailey out for most of the regular season because of a foot injury, Rodgers-Cromartie filled the shutdown corner void, and has allowed just one touchdown in the last 14 games. According to ProFootballFocus.com, opposing quarterbacks have a 69.8 rating when throwing at Rodgers-Cromartie since Week 1. That rating drops to 47.5 for the Broncos' last 14 games.

"You can trust him. You know he's going to win his matchup," said defensive tackle Terrance Knighton. "He's highly competitive, and he's probably the most gifted athlete I've ever been around. He can jump over 40 inches, he runs a 4.2, and he can get out of bed and do that."

"Sometimes we watch him in practice and we're in awe by how quick he moves and the things he reacts to. When the whole side of the field is shut down, it makes things a lot easier for the defense, and I'm pretty sure Coach (Jack) Del Rio appreciates it, too."

But after Monday, the crucial question is, for how long will Del Rio and the Broncos be able to appreciate his work?

Super Bowl Postcards: Boat Show

By Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- I'm on a boat.

Not only is that a strikingly catchy song by The Lonely Island, it's the case for the Broncos players this week for virtually all media availability.

The Cornucopia Majesty is a ship docked beside the Broncos' team hotel, and it's big enough to host hundreds of media members looking to interview the AFC champs.

"This is my first time," Demaryius Thomas laughed when asked if he'd ever been interviewed on a boat. "I'm nervous, because I don't like water."

Fortunately the boat doesn't rock very much, so seasickness doesn't seem to be an issue.

"It's cool," Paris Lenon said.

Just another fun tidbit from what has been a very eventful Super Bowl week already.

From March Madness to the Super Bowl

By Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
January 27, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- In March, 2009, Julius Thomas was leading his Portland State team into the NCAA Tournament for the second time in school history.

A captain on the basketball team, Thomas had lettered in the sport four times. But he was about to make a big transition -- but one that wasn't entirely unheard of.

"It seems kind of odd to say my goal was to become a professional football player in one year, but some guys had done it before me and had some success," Thomas said. "Antonio Gates, Jimmy Graham, guys that have made great careers and they're tremendous athletes. They definitely paved the way for me. I think that what they did made it possible for me to then get drafted and have this opportunity."

Thomas decided to make the leap to football. And of course, he had a glamorous position in mind as he walked on to the team.

"I was like, 'Coach, I'm going to be a great wide receiver for you guys,'" Thomas laughed. "The first day of practice, the tight ends coach said, 'Julius, you're over here.' I was like, 'What? Hold on, I don't know about all that.' But (Head) Coach (Nigel) Burton, he sat me down and we talked about it and he told me that he felt if I played tight end I'd be able to create matchup problems. I really thank him for helping me decide to play tight end. It was a great move on his part to not let me play receiver. I've loved playing tight end ever since."

The biggest transition, Thomas said, was learning to block.

"Catching footballs is a little bit different than catching basketballs, but you're still used to catching things, timing objects and getting both hands on them," he said. "So I don't think that took very long to change at all. But blocking is sport-specific. The only time you'll be blocking in your sports career is if you're a football player playing tight end or lineman of some sort. So that did take a little bit of time to get adjusted to. So many small things that you guys probably wouldn't even imagine all was a learning process."

He went on to earn first-team All-Big Sky Conference honors after hauling in 29 passes for 453 yards and two touchdowns. Nine of those catches went for 20 yards or longer, and 18 of them picked up first downs.

Fast forward three years and the 2011 fourth-round pick has increased that production exponentially at the professional level.

This season, Thomas was selected for his first Pro Bowl -- of course, he had other engagements in New Jersey -- after catching 65 passes for 788 yards and 12 touchdowns. Now he's preparing to play in the Super Bowl.

"This isn't something that I imagined doing when I was 20 years old getting ready to play in the NCAA Tournament," Thomas said. "I wasn't thinking, 'Man, if you just fast-forward that clock a little bit, you'll be competing in the biggest game in America.'"

He went from one-year college player to a key cog in the highest-scoring offense in NFL history. And there's even an enormous photo of the tight end adorning the Super Bowl media center in New York.

"Is my helmet on? OK, that's good. So I won't get recognized too much," he smiled. "That's a lot of people walking by seeing that thing."

Thomas' journey to this point is a big story during the lead-up to Super Bowl XLVIII. And with all the media attention surrounding the players, it would be understandable if Thomas simply wanted to get back to work on the practice field. But doesn't think the Broncos ever stopped working.

"We practiced Saturday, we got in a little later yesterday and we're practicing again today. But that's what we're here for. We're here to achieve something," Thomas said. "I'm looking forward to practice because this is the time of year you've got to stay on top of it. You've got to continue to enjoy it, even throughout this week. We have a tough team to play and we've got to make sure we're on top of everything we need to do."

"It's just a blessing to be here," he said. "I've been very blessed in my athletic career, so I'm going to enjoy it and am very much looking forward to participating in the game on Sunday."

Lenon Recounts Long Road Here

By Mike Morris
DenverBroncos.com
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JERSEY CITY -- Paris Lenon paused for a moment, then cracked a wide grin as he reflected on the spring of 2001, when he played in the inaugural, and final, season of the XFL – the only active player in the NFL with such a claim.

“I think the craziest thing I could remember,” Lenon said. “Our defensive coordinator, who played in the league and had been a great coach in the league, he coached with the Buffalo Bills for all the years that they went to the Super Bowl. His name is Walt Corey. Old school guy.”

Lenon then let out a hearty laugh as he continued to tell the story.

“And I remember, he smoked cigars in the meetings,” he said. “That was pretty funny, just sitting here and saying, ‘Wait a minute, is that – oh wow, he’s back there smoking a cigar.’ That was him. He’s a great guy.”

It’s a memento that remains with Lenon 13 years later, all those years after the XFL’s short-lived run concluded when the league folded only weeks after its inaugural championship game – and when Lenon’s journey was merely beginning.

At one point in his career since then, the 36-year old Lenon has played on the only team in NFL history (the 2008 Lions) to finish with an 0-16 record. That campaign was quickly followed by a stint on a 2009 Rams team that finished 1-15 and was outscored by 261 points during the course of the season.

“It was a challenging time not having success as a team,” he said regarding the Lions’ winless 2008 campaign, when he recorded 121 tackles, 1.5 sacks and forced a pair of fumbles. “It’s very difficult. But you still have a job to do when you go out there and do it to the best of your abilities. You handle it like a pro.”

It’s only another chapter from a wide assortment of professional experiences for Lenon from the onset, when – after earning All-Atlantic 10 honors multiple times in his collegiate career at Richmond – he went undrafted in the NFL. He got his first shot when he signed with the Panthers as a college free agent in May 2000, but the team released him soon after.

“The lowest point was when I first came out of school and I got cut for the first time,” Lenon said. “That was the lowest point.”

That led him to the XFL, where he played with the Memphis Maniax.

"I heard about a new league. I had been released – had just gotten out of school, had been released, heard about this league," Lenon said. "At the time, I had opportunity to go to NFL Europe and I heard about this league in the U.S. – I preferred to stay at home. I don't like flying far. So I thought it was a good opportunity."

From that opportunity, Lenon finally carved out his place in the NFL – although that place ended up being in many different locations. He had very brief stints during the offseason and preseason with the Packers and Seahawks in 2001, but both teams released him, before the Packers finally signed him to their practice squad towards the end of the 2001 season.

Since then, his road featured stops with the Packers (2002-04), Lions (2006-08), Rams (2009) and Cardinals (2010-12) before arriving with the Broncos late in training camp this season after linebacker Stewart Bradley was placed on injured reserve. During the journey, he's started all 16 games in six total seasons, recorded more than 100 tackles in four, and twice (in 2011 and 2012) has served as a team captain.

On Sunday, Lenon will add another rather unique experience to that list: playing in the Super Bowl.

"It's a complete reversal," he said, reflecting on where he finds himself today compared to where he's been along the way. "We have, thus far, we've had a very successful season. We still have one game ahead of us and we've got to put in the work. We have been putting in the work and we will continue to."

Lenon notched 22 tackles in the regular season and has become a key contributor on a defense that allowed just 16.5 points per game and 289.5 yards per game in its two postseason contests. And as he prepares to face the NFC-Champion Seahawks on the biggest stage on which he's ever played, Lenon is sticking to the same mantra of handling the game as a professional that he's maintained throughout his football career.

"We are going to go out there and we're going to do our jobs to the best of our abilities," Lenon said. "We're going to play as one. And we're going to try to limit their offense as best we can."

From cigar smoke to the Super Bowl, it's been a long ride for Lenon – but it's one that he won't stop to appreciate until this latest, and perhaps most memorable chapter, has finally been written.

"I don't think it's sunk in to the point where I'm in awe of it," Lenon said. "I'm going to allow myself to get to that point maybe after it's all over. Right now, it's business. This is a big challenge ahead of us and we're looking forward to it."

That's What He Said: Super Bowl Monday

By Brandon Moree
DenverBroncos.com
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JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- On board the Cornucopia Majesty docked behind the team's hotel on the Hudson River, a few of the Broncos met with the media in advance of Super Bowl XLVIII. Each of the players fielded questions for nearly a half hour before heading off to practice at the New York Jets practice facility.

Here are some of the highlights.

Running back Knowshon Moreno

On Seahawks running back Marshawn Lynch

"Every back has a different style. You want to say that each back power and speed but each back has their own little thing. Marshawn is a great running back just like a lot of the running backs in this league, even the ones that you may not mention. You may say, 'who's that guy?' You don't know him but he might be good still. He's in this position, he's in the NFL for a reason. Not too many people get that opportunity. There are a lot of great backs out there and he is one of them for sure."

On Peyton Manning's calls at the line

"It's crazy, sometimes I'm confused. I mean what are you doing? (laughs) But he knows what he's doing. There is just so much going on you have to be on the same page as a team – offensive line, receivers, quarterback and running back. Everyone has to be on the same page especially when a lot is going on and the crowd is there or whatever is going on. You just definitely have to be on the same page."

On Seattle's front four

"Front four? You could say their whole defense. Everyone, they fly around to the ball. They make some big plays and you have to make plays. At the end of the day, if you make more plays you come out with big victories. But those guys fly around, make big hits, get turnovers. They are the number one defense for a reason. It's going to be a great contest."

Linebacker Paris Lenon

On the coldest game he's ever played

"We played my first year in Green Bay, we played Minnesota on a Sunday night. I forgot what the temperature was, but with the wind chill, it was like -30."

On Russell Wilson

"First of all, I guess you've forgotten that I played against him twice last season. (laughing) I think he's improved, but I thought he was pretty mature as a rookie."

He's continuing to develop. And he's a very effective guy. We've got to try to make it tough for him."

On the Broncos defense

"I think we have a group of guys that take their jobs seriously and are going to put the time in this. And, like I said, have been putting the time in since we knew who we were playing. We are going to go out there and we're going to do our jobs to the best of our abilities. We're going to play as one. And we're going to try to limit their offense as best we can."

Cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie

On Super Bowl experience and keeping it normal

"Basically, just shared my experience being in the Super Bowl and told the guys last week was going to be big in preparing for this game. When you get here, there will be a lot of distractions and you're going to want to enjoy being here, so the main thing is to take last week and try to bring it over to this week. Being in the game, first just being here just getting media day out of the way and understanding that it is still just a game."

On his approach this time around

"I was a rookie the first time, I was just young, still wrapped up in the concept of being in the NFL. I was just happy go lucky. Happy to be there and excited and really enjoyed it. Now that I am a little older, I understand that we are here to play our game and after we get a victory, we can really enjoy the festivities."

On how to game plan for Russell Wilson

"It's hard. He's a guy that can beat you running or throwing, so the main thing is to keep him inside the pocket and not let him scramble around because he has receivers that can get down the field and get open, they're good in their routes and anytime he can get outside the pocket, he can make things happen. It makes it more difficult when he extends plays as a corner because you have to cover for a long time, if you get pressure and get after him, I think we should be good."

Defensive Tackle Terrance Knighton

On how to prepare for Russell Wilson

"You've just got to watch a lot of film. Quarterbacks have tendencies. His tendency is, he's a right-handed quarterback; he wants to get out to the right and throw. He's more successful that way. We've just got to do a good job of keeping him in the pocket and forcing him out of his comfort zone. When he's moving left, he'll tend to run it more, and when he runs right, he wants to pass it more. So we just have to do a good job of containing him. He'll get out; he'll make his plays during the game. We'll just have to limit them."

On the AFC Championship Game being the defense's best performance

"Yeah, I think so, and like I said, it was just about peaking at the right time. Our offense has been rolling all season, and we just want to play complementary

football, and we want to do our part, get three-and-outs, get off the field, and that's what it's about in the playoffs: teams that can stop the run, and allowing our offense to be on the field and control the clock."

On his relatives that are Patriots fans not talking to him

"No, they're cool. The only thing they were saying was, 'Just don't hurt Brady.' That was all they kept saying to me. They're happy that we won and I'm in the Super Bowl; they were just wondering about Tom Brady's longevity."