

It's a bad idea to give ax to Broncos center Matt Paradis

By Woody Paige
DenverPost.com
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A year ago today, Matt Paradis was cut by Broncos Planet.

Today, he is the center of their universe.

"What a crazy ride I've had in football," Matt says.

Since Paradis showed up at Broncos camp last summer as a dicey sixth-round draft choice, he has been a red-haired, Paul Bunyan-sized mystery man. Who knew?

In the seventh grade, Paradis was the backup quarterback for Council (Idaho) Junior High.

"Mostly, I ran the quarterback sneak," he said.

He grew out of the position and into a lumberjack.

As a senior at Council High, Paradis, a defensive tackle and offensive guard, was selected the top eight-man football player in the state — despite tearing his ACL in practice before the championship game.

"The surgery was postponed," he said. "The doctor put a brace on my knee, and I played."

The Lumberjacks won.

Paradis received no football scholarship offers.

"Eight-man football, small town (population 839, counting crows), wrecked knee," he said. "I wasn't recruited. I decided not to attend college. I was going to work for my father."

Parents Michael and Janice Paradis own a cattle ranch (300 acres, 150 cows).

Football isn't that tough. When Matt was in kindergarten as the youngest of four children, his job every dawn was to drive the family's 1957 flatbed pickup while his father threw hay bales off the back. A 5-year-old kid can't reach the gas and break pedals.

"My dad put the car in second gear, made it roll, jumped out and got on the back," he said. "I stood on the seat and held the steering wheel."

Ultimately, Boise State coaches told Matt he could be a walk-on defensive lineman and a grayshirt while rehabilitating.

He earned an academic scholarship and selection as Boise State's best scout-team player. A season later he was asked (ordered?) to switch to center. Paradis started 26 straight games and was named all-Mountain West and selected for the national Hampshire Honor Society team.

The Broncos took a chance on Paradis. Previously the organization had drafted six Boise State players, including another offensive lineman No. 1 in 2008. Tackle Ryan Clady turned into a Pro Bowler.

Paradis was cut at the end of the 2014 camp, then signed a few days later to the practice squad, on which he spent the entire season — forgotten.

"The coaches thought enough to keep me around, and I just kept grinding and hoping," he told me Friday.

If he failed, Paradis would use his business economics degree to become a financial adviser.

The practice squad's other nine members picked Paradis to a mythical "Scout Team Pro Bowl."

"It was their idea of a joke," he said.

Paradis is funny, personable, intelligent, humble, strong as Babe the Blue Ox and a natural leader.

However, in the Broncos' 2015 media guide, Matt was listed in the back of the profile section with "other players." Just a guy (JAG). The Broncos had acquired veteran center Gino Gradkowski from Baltimore.

Matt might as well have been a 300-pound backup QB.

But Paradis wasn't disillusioned or delusional.

"I think I really developed as a player last year. It was like a redshirt year," he said. "This offseason I tried to soak up information and concentrate on technique, footwork, the new blocking schemes and calls, being more forceful. I think my consistency and work ethic must have gotten the coaches' attention. I appreciate their belief in me."

In camp Matt became the center of attention. He supplanted Gradkowski as No. 1 on the depth chart and started the first two exhibitions with rookies Max Garcia at left guard and Ty Sambrailo at left tackle.

"We bonded and helped each other out," he said.

Then, suddenly and shockingly on Tuesday, the Broncos signed free agent Evan Mathis, who was graded by Pro Football Focus in 2013 as the best in the league at left guard.

The center now is flanked by Mathis and another former Pro Bowler — Louis Vasquez. Those two have combined to play exactly 200 NFL games. Paradis has zero.

"Incredible," Matt says. "I'm very lucky. I couldn't even imagine starting and being surrounded by two great guards. I've got to work even harder to stay with them."

Could the interior offensive linemen — Mathis, Vasquez and Paradis — be the Broncos' MVPs? A year from today The Council Kid could be All-World, too.

Kickin' it with Kiz: Peyton Manning may not fit so well in this offense

By Mark Kiszla
DenverPost.com
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Don't drink and write. With all due respect, Kiz, you must have been drinking before your column praising the Broncos' acquisition of veteran guard Evan Mathis. Unlike what you wrote, Mathis will add very little to Denver's success. The problem is quarterback Peyton Manning is going to get destroyed in coach Gary Kubiak's zone-blocking offense. It's like putting a square peg in a round hole. Manning is getting squeezed by Kubiak to run the ball and Denver probably will be 1-3 after four games.

John, Huntsville, Ala.

Kiz: Perhaps you are a bit confused. I write 'em sober, but folks often need a drink after reading 'em. But I actually share some of your square-peg, round-hole concerns, if only because Kubiak seems to be preparing for life after Manning while telling No. 18 he's still the man. Until Denver got Mathis, I thought this was a 10-6 team. On paper, the Broncos look more like a contender now. But, as John Elway recently noted, "How many championships has paper won?"

Cracked column. With the Broncos' cuts coming, a preseason game to analyze, Mathis joining the team and a new coaching staff, all Kiz can manage is a column about how a video game ranks Demaryius Thomas versus Odell Beckham Jr.? Seriously, Denver Post. Try harder.

Paul, big and angry

Kiz: We here at Kickin' It Headquarters beg your forgiveness. We forgot. There's no lighthearted observations allowed in sports, especially about something as serious as a video game. Duly chastised, we will now return to the very serious business of staring at the ceiling all night, worrying if Bennie Fowler can claim the 53rd roster spot.

Show business. Kiz, I enjoy your appearances on "The Sports Show" webcast.

Mike, Orlando, Fla.

Kiz: Whether you watch every weekday at 1 p.m. Mountain time or click the tasty, bite-sized video clips on demand, "The Sports Show" is more entertaining than Al Gore could have imagined when he invented the Internet. Hosts Woody Paige and Les Shapiro are not only everything a bon vivant should be, they're everything I want to be when I grow up.

Short-timer. And today's parting shot is a blast at Rockies shortstop Jose Reyes, who cashes big paychecks but also complains that he doesn't want to waste his time playing for a last-place team.

I don't suspect the Rockies have interest in wasting their time and money on a light-hitting, below-average player. But general managers throughout baseball think as much of Reyes as he thinks of the Rox. So they deserve each other.

Broncos improve to 3-0, but touchdowns remain in short supply

By Troy Renck
DenverPost.com
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The second-quarter play symbolized the challenge of change. Peyton Manning took a shotgun snap Saturday and looked right. Wide receiver Cody Latimer cut hard on a slant. He was covered, but tight end Owen Daniels was not.

Daniels stood in the end zone with his arms in the air, waiting for a pass that never came. Manning fired incomplete to Latimer as San Francisco 49ers safety Jaquiski Tartt dived into the Denver quarterback's knees.

Level of concern remains a relative concept in the preseason. But after the Broncos' 19-12 victory Saturday night, chewing fingernails and downing a few slugs of Pepto-Bismol is permissible.

The Broncos delivered an impressive clinching touchdown drive — third-string running back Juwan Thompson plunged in from the 1-yard line with 2:08 remaining — but that was long after Manning exited.

"We did some good things we can build on. We have to do a better job finishing in the red zone," Manning said. "There were a couple of bad throws by me on two throws to Demaryius (Thomas). We are still kind of developing that chemistry and identity. But we are continuing to improve."

Manning spoiled Broncos fans for three seasons, making touchdown marches look as uncomplicated as a summer day. On this warm August evening, he remained out of rhythm, trying to blend his arm into an offense built on legs. Manning guided six drives Saturday, resulting in six points on a pair of Brandon McManus field goals. In 10 preseason drives, Manning has yet to produce a touchdown. The Broncos' starting defense has yet to allow a touchdown, though, tempering concern with an equal dose of optimism.

It's easy to dismiss exhibition statistics, but moments continue to surface that provide a reminder that Denver's hybrid offense remains a work in progress.

"The biggest thing offensively is that we don't have a lot to show for the good things that are going on," coach Gary Kubiak said. "I have to put us in better situations to protect the quarterback. There are things we can fix, but there needs to be a sense of urgency."

Manning finished 14-of-21 passing for 124 yards. He underthrew Thomas on a potential touchdown on the first drive, then misfired into the end zone for an easy interception by 49ers reserve cornerback Kenneth Acker.

Manning later fired a laser strike to Andre Caldwell for an 18-yard gain, showing a glimpse of the improved arm strength his receivers have raved about this summer. The indelible image, though,

centered on missed opportunities and Manning's safety. The 49ers sacked Manning three times. If that seems like a lot, it's because it is. Manning wasn't sacked three times in a game last season.

Denver's offensive line, missing new starting left guard Evan Mathis, who went through a strong pregame workout and is on track to start the season opener, struggled in blitz protection. San Francisco linebacker NaVorro Bowman wrecked the game plan, sacking Manning twice with delayed pressure through the interior.

A counterpoint, of course, exists for Manning. He played without wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders, who would have been a starter if the game counted. Sanders creates a deep threat, forces elasticity in the opponent's defense in play-action situations. In his absence Saturday, the Broncos used a diet of short slants and crossing routes. Beyond the strike to Caldwell, Thomas produced the biggest gain on a 16-yard bubble screen.

The numbers the past two games by the Broncos' first-string offense leave a wide gap for improvement: 62 plays, no pay dirt. The ground game, meanwhile, forges hope. Denver rushed for 79 yards on 17 carries in the first half, topped by C.J. Anderson's 49 yards. Thompson passed Monte Ball on the depth chart at tailback, delivering strong second-half runs against the 49ers.

The defense, meanwhile, boasts preseason numbers that should ease concern about Manning. Denver's first-string defense owns four sacks, including DeMarcus Ware's safety on a second-quarter corralling of 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick. Opponents are 8-of-15 passing against the starters for 46 yards in three preseason games, all Denver wins.

Kaepernick didn't complete a pass against the Broncos until late in the second quarter. Inside linebacker Brandon Marshall remained active and the secondary stout, even with cornerback Chris Harris sitting out (hamstring).

"We gave up a couple runs and stuff like that, but overall I thought we did a heck of a job," Marshall said. "We haven't given up a touchdown; those are the facts. That's a testament to the hard work we've put in."

By design, Manning will be hard pressed to approach his statistics of the last three seasons. But time exists to find his way because this fang-bearing defense continues to provide evidence it can win ugly.

Takeaways from Broncos' win over 49ers

By Troy Renck
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About that offense?

Teams struggle in preseason. But teams led by Peyton Manning, who spent the last three seasons mocking the record books, don't. So to see Manning lead 10 drives over the past two weeks without scoring a touchdown is a bit jarring. Manning blamed himself for a lack of execution in the red zone on Saturday night, pointing to a pair of poorly throw passes in Demaryius Thomas' direction. He insisted he's comfortable under center. And he remained encouraged by the running game, which included 79 first-half yards from C.J. Anderson and Ronnie Hillman.

There were positives. The Broncos held the ball for more than 20 minutes and went 6-for-8 on third downs in the first half. But the accomplishments felt hollow without touchdowns.

"We would like to be a finely-tuned machine going into week one," Manning said. "But we just have to continue to improve."

Coach Gary Kubiak cited the time of possession and running game as positives, but said there "needs to be a sense of urgency to fix things." Manning was sacked three times. "I had us in a couple of tough situations that I've got to do a better job of with our quarterback. They're things that we can fix," Kubiak said.

That will likely come in practice as the starters are not expected to play in the preseason finale on Thursday at home against the Arizona Cardinals. The defense continues to rouse optimism. The first string unit has yet to allow a touchdown, and held San Francisco's Colin Kaepernick to a pair of first-half completions.

As lights still shine at Sports Authority Field at Mile High, some observations:

–The Broncos continue to search for the right mix of huddle, no-huddle, under center and shotgun. Manning remains open to the new scheme, which has shown real promise in the ground game. Manning is 22-for-35 for 176 yards in two games, including an interception in the end zone.

–Manning misses Emmanuel Sanders. The receiver likely could have played tonight, but the team is wisely taking a cautious approach with his hamstring injury. Sanders provides the ability to take the top off a defense, a skill that limits double teams on Demaryius Thomas.

–As for Sanders, he remains a candidate to return punt returns. Kubiak was not happy with the Broncos' sloppiness on Saturday. Omar Bolden and Isaiah Burse struggled to catch punts.

–Montee Ball entered camp hoping to challenge C.J. Anderson for the starting job and now he's hanging onto a roster spot with white knuckles. He believes he's fallen to fourth string behind Anderson, Ronnie Hillman and Juwan Thompson after rushing for 11 yards on four carries. Ball has 16 carries for 41 yards in the preseason. Anderson netted 49 yards on Saturday, and Hillman leads the team with 155 yards on

21 carries. Kapri Bibbs, the former CSU star, didn't carry the ball Sunday, another sign of the tough odds he faces to make the team.

–Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware produced sacks, leaving the Broncos with 15 in three games. Wade Phillips' defense has exceeded expectations. In 11 series featuring the Broncos starters, the defense has allowed two fields goals, while forcing seven punts, one fumble and one safety (Ware on a sack on Saturday).

–Linebackers Brandon Marshall and Danny Trevathan played together for the first time, and showed promise. Marshall has had a terrific preseason. Trevathan made his debut, and after missing an early tackle in the backfield, settled down. Said Trevathan, "This is linebacker heaven. This is defensive heaven right here. You want to have fun, and you want to go out there and knock some heads, get loud and get the crowd pumped. This is the type of defense you want to be in."

–Safety David Bruton, whose versatility should get him on the field more as T.J. Ward moves into the box as a linebacker in certain packages, led the Broncos with five tackles. Rookie Darius Kilgo, who will be counted on to contribute early in the season, finished with four tackles. The Broncos are expected to scour the waiver-wire looking for defensive line depth.

–Starting left guard Evan Mathis worked out before the game and is expected to practice with the team on Monday. Cornerback Chris Harris (hamstring) could have played, but there's no reason to push it.

–The first wave of cuts down to 75 are due by Tuesday. However, a few could be made on Sunday and Monday.

Broncos vs. 49ers preseason: 5 things to watch

By Troy Renck
DenverPost.com
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All together now: It's preseason. This is football's equivalent of spring training. The stats matter, but only with context. They mean something when a player is trying to make the team, but almost never matter for an established veteran. So don't panic if Peyton Manning doesn't perform like he's going to challenge his 2013 passing records (A hint, he's not breaking them in this offense, and that should be a good thing).

But there are reasons to watch beyond the violence and the fact that, it's you know, football. Five things for Game 3.

1. Health

Even if the the 49ers blank the Broncos and cause five turnovers, it will be a successful night if the Broncos escape with no injuries. Nothing hurts more than losing a starter in a meaningless game (just ask the Packers, Panthers, Cowboys and Steelers). The last thing the Broncos need is to have to duct tape a position with the regular-season opener 15 days away.

2. Offensive improvement

General Manager John Elway admitted the offense will likely be a work in a progress when the season begins. Gary Kubiak is blending Manning's strengths with his zone-blocking scheme. It will take a few games. That doesn't mean the unit doesn't need to make progress to boost its confidence. The starters are expected to play between 30 and 35 snaps. That should take them to halftime, or even beyond, if necessary. Manning played four drives last week, all ending in punts. He was undermined by two key penalties and a pair of drops from James Casey and Demaryius Thomas. Playing longer and likely slower — it's unlikely the Broncos will use as much no-huddle Saturday — should allow Manning and C.J. Anderson to find their rhythm.

3. Make an impression with cuts looming

The first wave of cuts could begin as soon as Sunday with Tuesday at 2 p.m. the deadline to slice the roster to 75. For fifteen players, the dream will end. Most of the players will be fourth-stringers, but there are always a few surprises. The deadline to reach 53 is Saturday at 2 p.m.

4. Receiver shuffle

The first three receivers remain set: Demaryius Thomas, Emmanuel Sanders, who will sit out Saturday with a hamstring injury, and Cody Latimer. There are three strong candidates for the remaining two spots: Jordan Norwood, Andre "Bubba" Caldwell and Bennie Fowler. Norwood functions as a true slot receiver, and could provide insurance if Sanders' hamstring injury lingers. The expectation is that Norwood will split punt returns with Omar Bolden Saturday night. If he does well, it would help his cause because it's hard to keep an extra receiver who doesn't play special teams. Sanders is expected to

return to practice this week. Fowler moved ahead of Caldwell early in camp, but Caldwell rallied with a long touchdown catch last week.

5. Get a long look at backups

Montee Ball faces one of the most important games in his Broncos career. He is still expected to make the team, but needs to gain traction. Can quarterback Brock Osweiler build off the momentum of his strong August? And what gives with the offensive line? Will they keep seven or eight? If both reserve tackles make it — Chris Clark and Michael Schofield — that could make it tough to keep Shelley Smith and Gino Gradkowski. Max Garcia is a lock, and likely a future starter next season.

Demaryius Thomas looking to be 100 percent ready for regular season

By Nicki Jhabvala
DenverPost.com
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Demaryius Thomas was hoping you had tempered your expectations. Just for a little bit.

"I'm about 95 percent. I'm not at 100 yet," he said with a grin, hoping his statement was believable after Thursday's practice. "I say that because I have a brain (mistake) on the field sometimes."

Thomas didn't want to mislead you. He didn't want you to watch the Broncos' third preseason game against the San Francisco 49ers on Saturday and believe all the kinks in the offense would magically disappear.

He was, however, hoping to correct them, and hoping that with more time and more snaps, he and Peyton Manning could eliminate that pesky 5 percent. But his second preseason showing probably didn't close the gap.

Thomas and Manning played the first half, the most they have thus far in the preseason. But their timing — under center and in shotgun — was off once again.

On Denver's first drive, Manning underthrew a pass to Thomas in the near left corner of the end zone. Another attempt intended for Thomas in the end zone was intercepted. And by the end of the half, Thomas had only three receptions for 30 yards.

In their preseason debut at Houston last weekend, Thomas and Manning looked like the duo from the last few seasons in the Broncos' pass-friendly offense. Thomas was targeted six times, catching three for 24 yards as Manning often worked in the shotgun. But the first-team offense struggled in the win, gaining 67 net yards in four drives, all of which ended in punts. After reviewing the film, Thomas came up with his own points of emphasis for Saturday.

"We can do better on third-down conversions," he said. "We had a couple third-and-2, third-and-3 that we couldn't get. When you get in the red area, you've got to score touchdowns."

The last time he faced the 49ers at home, Thomas had no problem doing just that. Manning connected with Thomas for his record 509th career touchdown pass in the second quarter, and then again for No. 510 in the third quarter.

But on Saturday, the Broncos again struggled in the red zone, going 0-for-3 in the first half. Their third-down efficiency improved, going 5-for-9 (56 percent).

While preseason games carry no meaning for the Broncos' record or for their starters, it's still viewed as valuable playing time to test the new offense before the games count.

But after two tests, Thomas may be sticking with that 95 percent.

Peyton Manning gets sacked three times in first half vs. 49ers

By Nicki Jhabvala
DenverPost.com
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The third one is usually the most important.

But on Saturday night, the third one also was perhaps the scariest for the fans watching from the stands at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Against the San Francisco 49ers in the Broncos' third preseason game of the summer, Peyton Manning helped the Broncos to an 8-3 lead by halftime but was sacked three times along the way.

The last time Manning was sacked that many times was in October 2013, when he was taken down four times at Indianapolis.

The first two sacks Saturday came on the same drive in the first quarter, courtesy of NaVorro Bowman, the 49ers linebacker Manning had praised two days earlier for his return from a major knee injury.

"I always pull for guys when they get injured — guys that come back," Manning said Thursday. "Guys that put that time in, work hard, rehab and get back out there. I wish him the best."

The third sack came during the Broncos' first drive of the second quarter, from Corey Lemonier.

Each sparked collective gasps at Sports Authority Field. And each provided evidence that the Broncos' offense is still working out the kinks in Gary Kubiak's zone-blocking system.

Broncos' first-team defense impressed again

Three games. Zero touchdowns allowed. The Broncos' first-team defense impressed yet again, while the first-team offense struggled to find its footing.

The starting defense has not allowed a touchdown and has given up only 20 yards passing this preseason. San Francisco quarterback Colin Kaepernick didn't complete a pass against the Broncos until late in the second quarter.

Von Miller, again, set the tone for the Denver defense when he took down Kaepernick 29 seconds into San Francisco's opening drive.

Two drives later, DeMarcus Ware found the 49ers quarterback and brought him down in his own end zone for a safety.

The three sacks brought the Broncos' league-leading total this preseason to 14.

Broncos' special teams fumbled at home

Isaiah Burse muffed a punt return in the third quarter but recovered the ball. The Broncos' special teams have fumbled four punts or kickoffs this preseason. ... As expected, the Broncos ran the ball more Saturday. C.J. Anderson racked up 49 yards on 13 carries. ... Chris Harris and Emmanuel Sanders did not play. Both are nursing hamstring injuries. ... A total of 73,156 fans attended Saturday's game, but 2,993 purchased tickets went unused.

Peyton Manning, Broncos' offense struggle in first half vs. 49ers; run game, defense solid

By Nicki Jhabvala
DenverPost.com
August 29, 2015

he third one is usually the most least important.

But on Saturday night, the third one was perhaps the scariest for the fans watching from the stands of Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Against the 49ers in the Broncos' third preseason game of the season, Peyton Manning helped the Broncos to an 8-3 lead at the half but was sacked three times along the way.

The last time Manning was sacked that many times was in October 2013, when he was taken down four times at Indianapolis.

The first two on Saturday came on the same drive in the first quarter, courtesy of NaVorro Bowman, the 49ers linebacker Manning had praised two days ago for his return from a major knee injury.

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Each sparked collective gasps from Sports Authority Field. And each were evident that the Broncos' offense is still working out the kinks in Gary Kubiak's zone-blocking system.

Manning played under center more Saturday than he did in his preseason debut against Houston. But the timing and rhythm with his receivers and tight ends were off. He overthrew Cory Latimer up the middle, and then underthrew Demaryius Thomas in the end zone on the opening drive.

And on a later drive, Manning had tight end Owen Daniels out wide, but the pass, again, fell short.

The offense wasn't without bright spots, though. More snaps for the starters meant more time for C.J. Anderson to run the ball.

And run, he did.

In the first half, Anderson had 49 yards on 13 carries, the longest of which was 13 yards.

On the other side, the first-team defense continued to impress. Von Miller sacked Colin Kaepernick 29 seconds into San Francisco's opening drive. Then Ware added another sack — in San Francisco's end zone for the safety.

The first-team defense has yet to allow a touchdown this preseason. And Kaepernick failed to complete a pass in the first half.

ROSTER CHANGES

Players not playing for Broncos: Emmanuel Sanders (hamstring), Chris Harris (hamstring), Tony Carter, Lerentee McCray (multiple injuries), Evan Mathis, Jeff Heuerman (ACL), Dan Light (waiver claim), Kenny Anunike (knee).

Starting lineup changes for Broncos: Max Garcia to start at left guard for Mathis. Cody Latimer to start at wide receiver for Sanders. Bradley Roby to start at right cornerback for Harris.

Players not playing for 49ers: Cornerback Tramaine Brock, linebacker Philip Wheeler, linebacker Desmond Bishop, tight end Vance McDonald.

KEY UPCOMING DATES

- Sept. 1 (2 p.m.): Roster cut to maximum 75 players
- Sept. 5 (2 p.m.): Roster cut to maximum 53 players
- Sept. 6 (11 a.m.): Up to 10 players selected to practice squad
- Sept. 13 (2:25 p.m.): Regular-season opener vs. Baltimore at Sports Authority Field

They Said It: Peyton Manning, Broncos weigh in on preseason win vs. 49ers

By Nicki Jhabvala
DenverPost.com
August 30, 2015

The Broncos defeated the 49ers 19-12 at Sports Authority Field at Mile High on Saturday to extend their preseason record to 3-0. Here's what coach Gary Kubiak, Peyton Manning and other players had to say after the win.

GARY KUBIAK, COACH

On if he's concerned about the offense:

"The biggest thing offensively is we don't have a lot to show for some of the good things that are going on. You hold the ball for 20 minutes in the first half, you're over 50 percent on third downs, you think you'd be scoring some points. That's the thing that's discouraging. I had us in a couple of tough situations that I've got to do a better job with our quarterback. They're things that we can fix. Now there needs to be a sense of urgency. We've got a couple weeks yet to get some things cleaned up. We'll get there."

On Manning's comfort level in the offense:

"I think he's fine. We went back to some no-huddle stuff. Obviously, those are things that he's extremely comfortable with. Under center, two of the sacks, actually, all three of them, happened with him coming out under center. I feel pretty confident from a coaching standpoint we can go fix those things. We're going to continue to do a lot of things offensively and we just have to do some of them a lot better than we did tonight."

On the punt return job:

"I'm concerned with the way we're handling the ball. That's the biggest thing. I like our ability to make plays back there. I think Omar (Bolden) can make some big plays, but we haven't handled the ball very well. We've put the ball on the ground the first punt return, if I'm correct, and fumbled another one. Obviously, we've got to settle down there. Emmanuel (Sanders) is very capable and could be a great, great punt returner. We have to get him back. Protecting the ball is of the utmost importance."

PEYTON MANNING, QB

On playing under center:

"I'm pretty comfortable doing that. I've been doing that for a long time. I've been in the shotgun a little bit more as of late, but I've definitely played under center for a lot of my career, so I feel pretty good doing that."

On the up-tempo offense:

"It's whatever's coming in from the sideline. We talked about that during the week, about mixing some huddling and some no-huddling, and that's what we did tonight. We moved the ball well out of both scenarios. Just didn't score touchdowns."

On decisions about the offense:

"This is the Broncos' offense. I don't know about how much negotiation is going on, but I think they're all trying to put us in the best situations for us to move the ball and get down the field. It's our job to do that."

On the defense:

"They have high expectations and they had like zero passing yards in the first half. I don't know if I've seen that in quite some time, so I think they have high expectations, but they want to get better as well. Our offense can feed off them."

C.J. ANDERSON, RB

On the biggest improvement the offense needs to make before Week 1:

"We just need to score. We're doing everything we want to do, but in Houston we had four possessions and zero points. Today we had possessions and are moving the ball, but had a turnover here, penalty there. We're just killing ourselves. It's not like the defense is beating us. We're beating ourselves up."

OWEN DANIELS, TE

On the offense's timing:

"I don't think there's a lot of concern. We've got to make good use of our time the next couple weeks. I think people are used to seeing a lot more points on this offense. But I don't think there's a need to hit the panic button."

LOUIS VASQUEZ, RG

On the performance of the offensive line:

"I was a little disappointed. We didn't score in the red zone, we were put in some tough spots, but whatever the coach calls, we have to respond and put it in the end zone. ... We have to trust the scheme and we have to execute better."

On fixing the mistakes on the offensive line when there's interior pressure:

"Technique. You have to see it coming, you have to react to it faster. The pre-snap read will help guys see it and react to it quicker."

BRANDON MARSHALL, ILB

On the first-team defense not giving up a single touchdown this preseason:

"We haven't really focused on not giving up a touchdown. But those are the facts. We haven't, and that's a testament to the hard work that we've put in."

On if he's surprised by the success of the defense so far:

"I don't know if I'm surprised, because of the players we have and who Wade Phillips is. But I'm very happy and I'm very excited for what's to come."

On if the Broncos could have the NFL's best defense:

"Oh yeah. We can be No. 1, and I think we will be No. 1."

SHANE RAY, OLB

On playing alongside DeMarcus Ware and Von Miller:

“You have to do what the great ones do if you want to be remembered. I want to make my name worth something.”

On his sack dance:

“I don’t have any names for dances. It’s all fun. It’s football. I learned from my big bro Von and DeMarcus with their celebrations. When you get a sack, it’s a lot of hard work that goes into it, so it’s always fun to just go up there and turn up a little bit.”

DANNY TREVATHAN, ILB

On his first game back from injury:

“It felt good to get out there and get a little movement and live action. It’s the first time I’ve been live in about a year. I feel good about where I’m at right now and how strong I can get.”

On if there was any relief in getting the first game back out of the way:

“Yeah, there was. But I want it more and more. It’s hard when you’re getting warmed up and they take you out. But it’s all for the best. Once you get it out of your system and you get back to being that linebacker, being that instinctive person that you were born to be — it feels good.”

On the Broncos’ style of defense:

“This is linebacker heaven.”

DEMARCUS WARE, OLB

On the defensive performance:

“Defenses win championships. That’s what we’re trying to do, is be consistent and not just play six games like we did last year well. We’re trying to play well throughout the whole season because that’s what it’s going to take.”

Montee Ball “surprised” by few snaps in Broncos’ preseason win vs. 49ers

By Cameron Wolfe

DenverPost.com

August 30, 2015

Montee Ball didn’t get a carry until the fourth quarter of the Broncos 19-12 win over the 49ers.

The third preseason game is usually the game that best models the regular season. And although Ball is still listed as the No. 2 back on the Broncos’ depth chart, he was the fourth running back to touch the football. That didn’t sit well with the former second-round pick.

“I was really surprised by that. I barely got any touches,” Ball said. I guess that’s the way they wanted to do it.”

Coach Gary Kubiak, who has built a career out of getting the most out of running backs, defended his decision of not playing Ball much by saying it’s tough to get four running backs carries in a game.

“Special teams is a big factor with him and Juwan (Thompson),” Kubiak said. “We’ll see. I’m fine with Montee.”

Kubiak said the roster cut to 75 would likely happen Monday morning and it’s unlikely to expect any of the four running backs — C.J. Anderson, Ronnie Hillman, Thompson and Ball — would be among them. But when the 53-man roster is decided by Saturday, Ball could be in the conversation, depending on his performance in the final preseason game, Thursday.

“I heard I was going to get a lot of snaps, but it just didn’t work out like that,” Ball said. “Right now it’s C.J., Ronnie, then Juwan, then me. So I guess just what it is.”

Through three preseason games, Ball has 16 carries for 41 yards and no touchdowns. And like Kubiak mentioned before, he isn’t a big factor on special teams.

Not many fourth-string running backs make NFL teams without outstanding special teams play and Ball might be holding on by the merits of his high draft choice.

In the most telling moment, the Broncos chose Thompson over Ball at the goal line in the fourth quarter, and the 2014 undrafted back punched it in.

“It’s a trust factor. I’ve been working hard and it’s good that they believe in me,” Thompson said.

The Broncos could very well keep all four running backs, but if they do cut one it looks like it’ll be Ball before Thompson.

“I think I deserve to be on this team, but we’ll see how it goes,” Ball said.

Peyton Manning on offense: 'We're still very much figuring out who we are'

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

August 30, 2015

Preseason football is a different kind of physics, it is a place where every action often has an over-reaction.

And as the Denver Broncos starters, including quarterback Peyton Manning, concluded their preseason work Saturday night against the San Francisco 49ers -- the regulars will not play in Thursday's preseason finale -- the hills around their home stadium were alive with the sound of hand-wringing.

The Broncos faithful see a 3-0 preseason record, a defense that has bordered on ridiculous at times in its ability to sack quarterbacks and frazzle opponents to go with a run game brimming with get-it-done potential.

Ah, but those with even the most orange-colored glasses see an offense that is out of sorts with a future Hall of Fame quarterback in Manning who did not throw a scoring pass in what was his roughly three quarters of preseason work.

And Saturday night, in the Broncos' 19-11 win at Sports Authority Field at Mile High, Manning was sacked three times, twice in a four-play span by 49ers linebacker NaVorro Bowman, threw an interception in the end zone as he tried to get the ball to Demaryius Thomas and also underthrew Thomas on another play that would have been a cake-walk touchdown if Manning had done what he has done so many times before and deftly dropped the ball into Thomas' waiting hands.

"Would we like to be a finely-tuned machine going into Week 1? Sure," Manning said. "With some newness, some different players and some different things that we're doing, that's what we're working toward. ... Not to make excuses you can still win games as your kind of finding your identity.

"We're still very much figuring out who we are and what we're going to be as far as things we can really hang our hat on," Manning added. "I still think we can win games as we're developing kind of that identity."

But nothing, as in no thing, shakes the bee hive in the Broncos' home city these days more than than Manning being anything less than astoundingly perfect. And Saturday night, with both teams playing on a limited game plan, the Broncos looked like they couldn't protect Manning and Manning looked less than comfortable in the new playbook.

A measuring stick for comfort level is Manning to Thomas, and on attempts to Thomas in this preseason Manning is 6-of-11 passing for just 54 yards and an interception.

Thomas skipped the offseason program as his representatives tried to hammer out the eventual five-year deal he signed just before training camp opened. Manning is in an offense that is asking him to do different things, including line up under center far more than he has in recent seasons.

Toss in that wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders hasn't played in the two preseason games Manning has, that the Broncos have tried to play three starters in the offensive line that haven't played in an NFL regular-season game and you have the recipe for raised eyebrows all around.

"The biggest thing offensively is we don't have a lot to show for some of the good things that are going on," said coach Gary Kubiak. "We hold the ball for 20 minutes in first half (Saturday night), you're over 50 percent on third down, you think you'd be scoring some points, that's the thing that's discouraging. ... I had us in a couple tough situations that I've got to do a better job with our quarterback. There are things we can fix. There needs to be a sense of urgency to get some things cleaned up."

The Broncos did hold the ball for just over 21 minutes in the first half Saturday, they had a 14-play drive, a 13-play drive and converted 5-of-9 third down situations. They also ran the ball for 79 yards in the half.

Those are gaudy numbers for two quarters of work, but the two field goals the offense scored, to go with three sacks and one interception were not. The Broncos say they can fix it, Manning says he's comfortable and all involved say the focus is now what happens against the Baltimore Ravens in two weeks.

Still, Broncos executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway said this week the offense was a "work in progress." Well, the clock's ticking and the Broncos certainly need to get to work because to go where they want to go, they'll need to make a lot more progress.

DeMarcus Ware's sack for a safety highlight for aggressive defense

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

August 29, 2015

Consider it a called shot, but DeMarcus Ware made the call in May when he predicted “we’re going to be able to get to the quarterback a lot of different ways.”

And the Denver Broncos certainly have, registering their 15th sack in the preseason when Shane Ray dragged 49ers backup quarterback Blaine Gabbert with five minutes remaining in Saturday night's 19-12 victory over the San Francisco 49ers. Ware had just one of those sacks along the way, but it went for a safety early in the second quarter Saturday when he pulled down 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick in the end zone.

The Broncos had 12 different players contribute at least .5 of a sack during the preseason.

Broncos' Von Miller shows he is more than ready for regular season

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
August 29, 2015

Here are some highs and lows in terms of individual performances from the Denver Broncos 19-12 victory over the San Francisco 49ers Saturday night in Sports Authority Field at Mile High:

HIGHS

LB Von Miller: He had a sack in limited playing time Saturday and continues to show he is poised for a monster season in what will be an aggressive defense. He had two sacks overall in what was essentially two quarters of work in three preseason game appearances.

RB Ronnie Hillman: Hillman averaged 7.5 yards per carry on his five carries in the opening half Saturday and averaged 7.5 yards a carry overall in the first two games of the preseason. He will cause problems for defenses on the perimeter and has run for power when he's had to.

WR Jordan Norwood: Norwood, who fumbled a punt and muffed another in the preseason opener, has made the most of his chances to fill in for the injured Emmanuel Sanders when the Broncos offense goes to the three-wide look. Working out of the slot for the most part, Norwood had four receptions in the first half with Peyton Manning in the lineup, including a 15-yarder in the first quarter to convert a third-and-13.

LOWS

QB Peyton Manning: Certainly no time to find a panic button, but Manning looked unsettled Saturday night after the 49ers created some early pressure. He missed several of his usual bread-and-butter throws, including an underthrown ball on what would have been a touchdown to Demaryius Thomas in the first quarter and an interception in the end zone on an attempt to Thomas in the second quarter.

Offensive line: They're in it together. Sure, the 49ers were adding some extra rushers in a preseason game, but it wasn't all that exotic as they consistently created pressure – at one point Manning took a hard hit on his knee and was sacked three times.

RB Montee Ball: It's more about what was revealed about the depth chart here, but Ball entered training camp as the No. 2 running back and a few short weeks later he found himself in the No. 4 spot. C.J. Anderson, Hillman and Juwan Thompson all entered the game against the 49ers before Ball, who did not play until the fourth quarter. But he did have a 20-yard reception with just over 13 minutes left in the game.

Broncos defense dominant, offense still looks to find the groove in passing game

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

August 29, 2015

A few thoughts on the Denver Broncos' 19-12 victory over the San Francisco 49ers Saturday night at Sports Authority Field at Mile High:

What it means: Folks have seen the last of the Broncos' regulars since the group will not play in Thursday night's preseason finale against the Arizona Cardinals. The starters on offense played the first half and while the team ran the ball well -- 79 yards in the half of work -- the Broncos were unsettled in the passing game at times. The defense, with some of the regulars like Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware leaving in the second quarter, was dominant as 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick did not complete a pass until the final minute of the opening half.

Play of the game: With the 49ers backed up to their own 3-yard line with 13 minutes, 13 seconds remaining in the second quarter the Broncos were in their base 3-4 look. They Broncos immediately changed the line of scrimmage off the snap as Ware, turned the corner on 49ers tackle, and former Broncos lineman, Erik Pears. Ware pulled Kaepernick down for a safety, even as Kaepernick tried to extend the ball out of the end zone with his right arm.

Stat of note: Manning was sacked three times in his half of work, twice by 49ers linebacker NaVorro Bowman in a four-play span. Manning was not sacked three times in a game in all of the 2014 season and the last time he was sacked at least three times in a regular season game was Oct. 12, 2013, when the Indianapolis Colts sacked him four times in a 39-33 Colts win.

Injuries of note: The Broncos had two safeties -- T.J. Ward and Omar Bolden -- injured on the same second-quarter drive and both left the game after each had the wind knocked out of them. Had it been the regular season they would have been able to go back into the game fairly quickly. Wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders, who missed much of the month with a hamstring injury, ran some routes before the game, with Zac Dysert at quarterback, and remains on track to play in the regular-season opener.

What's next: The Broncos will close out the preseason Thursday night against the Cardinals at Sports Authority Field at Mile High in what will be the last chance for several players down the depth chart to state their final case to make the roster. The Broncos are particularly crowded at linebacker and running back.

Broncos will look for some answers in crowded backfield against 49ers

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

August 29, 2015

With the Denver Broncos set to play their starters at least a half Saturday night against the San Francisco 49ers, it likely will be the last game-day look at the regulars in the preseason since the Broncos are expected to hold the front-line players out of next week's preseason finale.

So, a little W2W4 against the 49ers:

Find the rhythm: Quarterback Peyton Manning has shown in practice he fits the new offense the Broncos have constructed just fine. Manning has shown a live arm, good accuracy on the move and he's taken some risks on the practice field, pushing the ball into coverage from time to time as he tries to learn what will work best. And there will always be growing pains when a team travels from one playbook to another, but the team's offense just needs to put some drives together, show some aptitude in the new system and put the ball into the end zone. The Broncos do not have a rushing touchdown in two preseason games and the starters on offense have put together just one touchdown drive, albeit in limited duty.

The real deal: With linebacker Danny Trevathan set to play in his only game of the preseason, Saturday will be the first time the Broncos' starting defense is on display. Linebacker Brandon Marshall, who had offseason foot surgery, played 16 snaps in last week's game against the Houston Texans, and Trevathan, who had three separate left leg injuries last season including a dislocated kneecap, is slated to play about 20 plays Saturday against the 49ers. Marshall and Trevathan at the two inside linebacker spots means the Broncos would have the prospect of having all 11 projected starters in the lineup against the 49ers. The only question mark in the group is cornerback Chris Harris Jr., who was held out of Thursday's practice with a sore hamstring. But coach Gary Kubiak said Thursday afternoon he thought Harris would play at least some against the 49ers.

Crowded backfield: Kubiak said C.J. Anderson was the No. 1 back long before the Broncos had even opened their offseason program, but Anderson has done his part in the passing weeks and months and is solidly the No. 1 with the regular season looming. But Ronnie Hillman, decisive in his running to the tune of a gaudy 7.5 yards per carry in two preseason games, is the No. 2. Montee Ball and Juwan Thompson are in the next tier, and Thompson holds a bit of an advantage in terms of who would eventually be active on game day in that Thompson can play both running back and fullback to go with a full slate of special teams work. Toss in the fact that the Broncos also have liked what they've seen from Jeremy Stewart and Kapri Bibbs and, other than linebacker, the group at running back just might be the most difficult to reduce over the next two weeks. All involved need to make the most of every carry.

Move some people: Newly signed Evan Mathis will not be in the lineup Saturday night, but the Broncos starters in the offensive front need to show a little more pop in short-yardage situations while the team's backs need to move the pile a bit as well. The Broncos have faced six third-and-1 situations in two preseason games to go with two third-and-2 situations. In those eight plays, the Broncos have converted first downs just twice. That's a lot of potential plays left on the table for the offense and they

are just the kind of situations the Broncos wanted to address in the new offense. The Broncos consistently struggled up front last season, both in protecting Manning and creating room for their running backs. And if they are truly a more physical offense, which they've said they want to be, then those short-yardage situations are exactly the time for them to show it.

Broncos, Peyton Manning look to work out kinks in new offense against 49ers

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

August 29, 2015

The Denver Broncos will play their third preseason game at 9 p.m. ET Saturday vs. the San Francisco 49ers in Sports Authority Field at Mile High. Here's a couple of things to watch for during the game?

Why watch: This will be the last action of the preseason for the Broncos regulars as most of the starters are expected to play at least a half. That includes quarterback Peyton Manning, who has played just 21 snaps – all last week against the Houston Texans – so far in the preseason. The Broncos starters have scored just one touchdown on offense and don't have a rushing touchdown in the preseason so the Broncos could certainly use to find a little rhythm on that side of the ball to be sure.

Did you know: In what is a sure sign there has been some turnover at the top along the way the five most experienced players on the Broncos roster – Manning (18th season), defensive end Antonio Smith (12th season), outside linebacker DeMarcus Ware (11th season), guard Evan Mathis (11th season) and tight end Owen Daniels (10th season)– are all free agents signed since 2012 with Smith and Daniels having been signed earlier this offseason and Mathis having been signed this week.

Sunday NFL preview: Have Eagles found franchise QB?

By ESPN.com Staff

ESPN.com

August 29, 2015

NFL Nation reporters look ahead to what Sunday has in store for each team.

AFC EAST

Buffalo Bills: The Bills have finally reached the end of their extended quarterback competition. Rex Ryan will make a decision Sunday on a starter -- although, for competitive reasons, he will not make the decision public. EJ Manuel played his way back into the race by posting a perfect passer rating (158.3) in Saturday's win over the Pittsburgh Steelers, although it will be hard for Ryan to turn away from Tyrod Taylor following a 12-for-13 outing Saturday and sharp performances in the first two preseason games. -
- Mike Rodak

Miami Dolphins: Ryan Tannehill continued his stellar preseason, going 15-for-19 for 145 yards and a touchdown against Atlanta. In three games, Tannehill has completed 80 percent of his passes without an interception. The health of the offensive line, however, remains a concern. The Dolphins played with their third-string left tackle, Dallas Thomas, on Saturday and center Mike Pouncey tweaked his knee in the first quarter. -- James Walker

New England Patriots: The Patriots are off Sunday and one of the areas they'll be looking at is how to proceed at fullback without injured James Develin (broken right tibia). Bill Belichick said the team will look at its options, which could include everything from putting Develin on injured reserve and signing another player, to keeping Develin on the roster and looking in-house for a replacement. -- Mike Reiss

New York Jets: The Jets will get a confirmation on the severity of Leonard Williams' knee injury on Sunday, when the first-round pick will have an MRI. The early indications are a bone bruise, according to ESPN's Adam Schefter. The Jets have decent depth on the defensive line, but losing Williams would be tough, especially with Sheldon Richardson facing a four-game suspension. The good news is that Muhammad Wilkerson didn't suffer any setbacks with his balky hamstring on Saturday night against the Giants. -- Rich Cimini

AFC NORTH

Baltimore Ravens: Steve Smith put on quite a show in Saturday's preseason game, showing once again that he's an emotional leader on the team. He caught four passes for 95 yards, including a 63-yard touchdown in the first quarter. Smith later got into an altercation that led to his ejection, and the Ravens struggled after he left the game. -- Jamison Hensley

Cincinnati Bengals: Although Marvin Lewis said Andy Dalton was "fine" after being taken out of Saturday night's game against the Bears for precautionary reasons, the Bengals quarterback still will be using Sunday's off day to get rid of any lingering soreness he has. Dalton hurt his neck at some point on the Bengals' opening offensive series. -- Coley Harvey

Cleveland Browns: The team has a day off following the game against Tampa Bay, and players can enjoy it. The first-team defense harassed Jameis Winston, the punt return unit got a touchdown from Travis Benjamin and the offense had a 16-play drive for a touchdown. -- Pat McManamon

Pittsburgh Steelers: The defense against Buffalo in a word ... unsettling. Call it a preseason warm-up if you must, but the Steelers need to think long and hard on the off day about how they plan to stop people. On offense, though, DeAngelo Williams is looking poised for a good early-season performance. -- Jeremy Fowler

AFC SOUTH

Houston Texans: Sunday's game will mark Brian Hoyer's first as the Houston Texans' starting quarterback. In that sense it will be different for the Texans, but they aren't treating the game any differently than they treated the first two preseason games. It's a time for evaluation -- especially of their inside linebackers, safeties and running backs. The Texans will not treat it as a dress rehearsal for the regular season as many teams do. -- Tania Ganguli

Indianapolis Colts: The Colts couldn't avoid injuries in their third preseason game. Starting defensive tackle Art Jones left Saturday's game against St. Louis with an ankle injury. That's a tough blow for the Colts because they're at their best stopping the run when Jones is on the field, which unfortunately wasn't too often last season. Jones missed seven games last season with an ankle injury. -- Mike Wells

Jacksonville Jaguars: The Jaguars begin preparations for dealing without DE Andre Branch (sprained MCL) on Monday. Chris Smith gets the first crack at being the first- and second-down end. Chris Clemons will get some snaps there as well but his main role is turning out to be as a third-down rusher. -- Mike DiRocco

Tennessee Titans: In a road game with no game plan, the Titans had a chance to win some straightforward one-on-ones. There weren't a lot of instances of the Titans winning those and making plays in Kansas City, which is cause for at least some concern heading into Week 4. -- Paul Kuharsky

AFC WEST

Denver Broncos: Pressure up the middle was a consistent problem for the Broncos' offensive line for most of 2014. It reared its ugly head in Saturday night's preseason game against the San Francisco 49ers. Peyton Manning was sacked three times by the time the second quarter was a few minutes old, with the 49ers successfully adding the extra rusher into the middle of the formation. Newly signed Evan Mathis will be worked into the offense in the coming week. And while Mathis won't play in the preseason finale Thursday night, the Broncos hope he can help settle things down in the middle of the formation by the regular-season opener against the Baltimore Ravens. -- Jeff Legwold

Kansas City Chiefs: Quarterback Alex Smith and the rest of the starting offense won't play much if at all in Thursday night's final preseason game at St. Louis. So the offensive goal as the Chiefs return to practice on Sunday is to maintain the rhythm they found in their 34-10 win over the Tennessee Titans. Smith was 16-of-18 for 171 yards and two touchdowns against Tennessee. -- Adam Teicher

Oakland Raiders: Starting tailback Latavius Murray should play about a half, perhaps more, along with the first-unit offense Sunday evening against visiting Arizona. Oakland offensive coordinator Bill

Musgrave has raved about Murray's vision and use of his hands. The Raiders are expecting a lot from Murray, who had just 82 carries last season. -- Bill Williamson

San Diego Chargers: Players will take Sunday off, returning to the field at Chargers Park on Monday. Roster cuts from 90 players down to 75 are due Tuesday at 4 p.m. ET. However, general manager Tom Telesco and coach Mike McCoy could make the cuts sooner, turning their attention to the team's final preseason game against the San Francisco 49ers at Levi's Stadium. -- Eric D. Williams

NFC EAST

Dallas Cowboys: The Cowboys were able to see some regulars play vs. the Minnesota Vikings on Saturday but Dez Bryant wasn't one of them. He won't play in the last preseason game either, but Tony Romo believes he and Bryant will be able to make up for lost time on the practice field well enough for the Sept. 13 opener against the New York Giants. -- Todd Archer

New York Giants: Expect the Giants to bolster their secondary Sunday with the addition of an old friend. Safety Stevie Brown, released by the Houston Texans on Friday, is scheduled to visit the team's facility and take a physical. While other teams have called to express interest in Brown, his preference is to rejoin the Giants -- and they are interested in signing him. At this point, it seems all but certain Brown will join the competition to start at safety when the Giants resume practice this week. -- Dan Graziano

Philadelphia Eagles: QB Sam Bradford was nearly perfect on Saturday night vs. the Packers, going 10-of-10 for 121 yards and three touchdowns in one quarter, exiting with a 25-0 lead. Have Chip Kelly and the Eagles finally found their franchise signal-caller in the injury-prone Bradford, who is coming off his second torn ACL? Philadelphia finishes its preseason Thursday night against the New York Jets. Don't expect the starters to play much. -- Phil Sheridan

Washington Redskins: Another positive for the Redskins' offense in the preseason win over Baltimore was seeing tight end Jordan Reed on the field. Reed caught two passes for 21 yards, including one diving grab. They weren't huge numbers, but it did show Reed's ability and how he can help the offense -- provided he stays healthy. -- John Keim

NFC NORTH

Chicago Bears: Head coach John Fox scheduled an off day for the players after Saturday's preseason game in Cincinnati, but the rest of the organization will be plenty busy on Sunday. With the first wave of cuts due soon, Fox and general manager Ryan Pace need to pare down the roster to 75 prior to 3 p.m. CT on Tuesday. Most of those cuts are usually completed ahead of Tuesday's official deadline. In injury news, wide receivers Marquess Wilson (hamstring) and Eddie Royal (hip) worked out at Paul Brown Stadium before Saturday's game. Royal tested out his banged-up hip by running routes and coming out of breaks for about 15 minutes. The Bears hope all of their injured receivers (except for Kevin White) can return in time for Week 1 vs. the Green Bay Packers. -- Jeff Dickerson

Detroit Lions: The Detroit Lions have an off day Sunday as they rest up for the preseason finale against Buffalo on Thursday. Looking ahead to Monday, it will be interesting to see if the Lions pull Joique Bell off PUP or Haloti Ngata off the NFI list Monday so they can start practicing to get ready for the season opener on Sept. 13 in San Diego. -- Michael Rothstein

Green Bay Packers: The Packers will spend Sunday assessing their injuries from Saturday's preseason game against the Eagles. The biggest concern will be receiver Randall Cobb, who left with a right shoulder injury in the first quarter. Starting right tackle Bryan Bulaga (ankle) and nickel cornerback Micah Hyde (neck) also left the game in the first half. -- Rob Demovsky

Minnesota Vikings: While players get a day off on Sunday, the Vikings' coaching staff will deliberate about which players to let go in Tuesday's initial round of roster cuts. Coach Mike Zimmer had said coaches wouldn't make decisions on the first round of cuts until after Saturday's preseason game in Dallas, and the Vikings will have 14 players to let go by Tuesday, when their roster has to be at 75. -- Ben Goessling

NFC SOUTH

Atlanta Falcons: The Falcons agreed with wide receiver Julio Jones on a five-year extension Saturday reportedly worth \$71.25 million (\$47.5 million guaranteed), then Jones proceeded to sit out the third preseason game against the Dolphins. That was a smart move for the Falcons to protect their investment going into the regular season. Jones and the starters are highly unlikely to play in the final preseason game Thursday. And Jones probably should get a few snaps off during practice next week, too. -- Vaughn McClure

Carolina Panthers: Based on last season, the Panthers likely will have made their first round of roster cuts by the start of Sunday's afternoon practice. Based on the lack of snaps in Friday night's 17-16 loss to New England, undrafted rookie wide receiver Damiere Byrd could be an early casualty despite impressing early in training camp. Injurywise, this will be a big week with defensive end Charles Johnson (calf), defensive tackle Kawann Short (back) and rookie wide receiver Devin Funchess (hamstring) expected to be full go in preparing for Thursday's preseason finale at Pittsburgh. -- David Newton

New Orleans Saints: A lot of defensive backs can still make or break their chances at earning a roster spot in Sunday's third preseason game. And they should get ample opportunity to do so with starting safety Jairus Byrd and cornerback Brandon Browner still sidelined by injury. Safeties Pierre Warren and Kenny Phillips and cornerbacks Stanley Jean-Baptiste and Kyle Wilson are among those who need to prove they belong on both defense and special teams. -- Mike Triplett

Tampa Bay Buccaneers: The Bucs still have some work to do in getting rookie quarterback Jameis Winston ready for the start of the regular season. Winston seemed to take several steps back in Saturday night's loss to the Cleveland Browns. He got his most extensive playing time of the preseason but was largely ineffective, completing 6 of 15 passes for 90 yards with an interception. He also was sacked four times behind an offensive line that started rookies Donovan Smith and Ali Marpet. -- Pat Yasinskas

NFC WEST

Arizona Cardinals: Arizona had a day of rest while it traveled to Oakland for the third preseason game. The starters are expected to play the first half, at most, although coach Bruce Arians said quarterback Carson Palmer may not make it through the first half. -- Josh Weinfuss

St. Louis Rams: Rams quarterback Nick Foles offered his best preseason performance Saturday night, completing 10 of 11 passes for 128 yards and the starting unit's first touchdown of the exhibition

season. But the questions about the offensive line aren't going away anytime soon. The Rams' first unit averaged 2.3 yards per carry and allowed the Colts to sack Foles twice and pressure him a handful of other plays. Guard Jamon Brown left with a sprained ankle and did not return to the game, though the team said he could have. -- Nick Wagoner

San Francisco 49ers: After an unwatchable first-half performance against the Denver Broncos, the Niners' first-team offense has a lot of work to do when it comes to protecting quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who was under constant pressure. Kaepernick was 2-for-5 passing for 13 yards and was sacked for a safety. Forced to run for his life, Kaepernick's three rushes for 53 yards were a highlight. The right side of the line, where Erik Pears started at tackle and rookie Ian Silberman was at guard, needs special attention -- Paul Gutierrez

Seattle Seahawks: Following last night's game against the Chargers, the players will get a day off. The coaches and front office, however, will try to come up with answers to some of the team's more pressing issues. Most notably, is it time to settle on five starters on the offensive line? Or is more mixing and matching necessary? And of course, will there be any progress toward a solution with Kam Chancellor? -- Sheil Kapadia

Broncos offense sluggish but defense beats 49ers, 19-12

By Mike Klis

9 News Sport

August 29, 2015

These 2015 Denver Broncos are making it difficult to come up with a catchy slogan.

C.J. and the Wade Machine.

Phillips, Peyton and the Punt.

For the first time in his four Broncos preseasons, Peyton Manning didn't generate a touchdown. He directed nine possessions in two preseason games. No touchdowns. He did engineer two field goal drives and set up a safety in the first half of the Broncos' 19-12 win against the San Francisco 49ers on a warm, summer Saturday evening at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

But this isn't the same Manning offense that gave Thunder so much exercise the past three years.

Not that this Broncos' version is bad. In fact, they might be quite good in a 19-12 sort of way. It's just going to take some getting used to.

"We're still kind of developing that chemistry and that identity and I think it will continue to be developed during the season but I think we're heading in the right direction," Manning said.

There was 21 minutes and 21 seconds of ball possession in the first half. That's impressive. Still, it's stunning how much this offense has changed compared to the spread-'em-out, throw-it-around version Manning operated in 2013. Manning set NFL records with 55 touchdowns and 5,477 yards that year. The Broncos scored an NFL record 606 points. Receivers, it seemed, were always open.

This year's offense will have to Hurry! Hurry! If it's going to be half as prolific.

"It's geared a lot different," said Broncos right guard Louis Vasquez, who is in his third year with the team. "Everyone knew that once he had the coaching change. We're probably not going to put up the numbers we did two years ago but that comes with the scheme that coach (Gary) Kubiak brings. It doesn't mean (we can't win more). It takes pressure off No. 18 because we are a run-happy offense. Any time we can take pressure off Peyton and we're running the ball well that just opens the playbook for him."

A gathering of more than 73,000 saw the Broncos improve to 3-0 in the four-game preseason while Manning managed to stay healthy, although there was a time or two when he had to bail before contact when a sack was certain. Manning's work was finished at halftime, at which point he completed 14 of 21 passes for only 124 yards. He threw an interception into the end zone that killed one drive and was sacked three times.

All three sacks occurred on plays that began with Manning taking the snap from under center Matt Paradis and not from the shotgun position where he has primarily operated the past 10 years or so.

"The biggest thing offensively is we don't have a lot to show for some of the good things that are going on," Kubiak said. "You hold the ball for 20 minutes in the first half, you're over 50 percent on third downs, you think you'd be scoring some points. That's the thing that's discouraging. I had us in a couple of tough situations that I've got to do a better job with our quarterback. They're things that we can fix. Now there needs to be a sense of urgency. We've got a couple weeks yet to get some things cleaned up. We'll get there."

The Broncos' running game was fine as by halftime C.J. Anderson had gained 49 yards on 13 carries and Ronnie Hillman added 30 yards on four carries. They are a nice power-and-speed combination.

"We just need to score," Anderson said. "We're just killing ourselves. It's not like the defense is beating us. We've beating ourselves up. It's something we need to work on."

Manning has not yet looked comfortable. He was unable to avoid one crushing hit. While delivering an incomplete pass to the end zone, Manning was leveled thigh-high by 49ers blitzing safety Jaquiski Tartt.

Manning said he came out of that hit fine, but the pressure cost him a touchdown as his rushed throw to Cody Latimer was errant while tight end Owen Daniels was wide open in the end zone.

"They brought the house, they brought everybody," Manning said. "Matter of fact I don't think anyone was even covering Owen on the play. I wish I would have looked there but I was kind of keyed in on going to Cody."

After watching his quarterback bend in two, Kubiak had Manning take one more snap with 1 second left in the half (officially Manning's 10th possession of the preseason), then got him out of there.

Last week the talk was about how Manning was struggling to find his rhythm with Kubiak's new offense. This week brought a broken record.

Perhaps, the offense will improve once it has speedy receiver Emmanuel Sanders and Pro Bowl guard Evan Mathis in the lineup the next time Manning plays, which will be in the regular-season opener Sept. 13 against the Baltimore Ravens. The receiver Sanders has missed the entire preseason with a hamstring injury; the left guard Mathis was just signed off the street. Both will be ready by the opener.

The most satisfying development of this preseason has been the Wade Phillips-coordinated Denver defense. Phillips started coaching NFL defensive players in 1976, the year before Orange Crush became better known as Denver's Defense than a flavored carbonated soda.

The 49ers' offense led by fast-running, passing-challenged Colin Kaepernick practiced all week against the Broncos' defense and still couldn't figure it out. Kaepernick almost went an entire half without a completion, finally connecting on an 8-yard play with Quinton Patton with 45 seconds remaining.

Kaepernick was sacked twice – one each by Denver's dynamic duo of Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware. The Ware sack was good for a safety. It came on the first play after Britton Colquitt's 62-yard punt pinned the 49ers back to their 3-yard line.

"It's easy to go to work with a guy like Wade Phillips," Miller said.

The Broncos got a third sack in the second half from first-round rookie Shane Ray, giving them 15 in three preseason games.

"You don't want to be that young guy that when you're put out there and they depend on you that you can't step up and make plays," Ray said. "I'm doing everything in my power to be an aggressive player and be better than I was the day before. And I think from game 1 to game 3 I've shown the steps I've taken to be more aggressive, be more dominant."

Pressuring the quarterback and covering the receivers are the strengths of this Denver defense. It's possible it will need work stopping the run. In particular, Denver's defense did a poor job of spying the quarterback. Kaepernick had two long runs off broken pass plays that led to the 49ers' late, first-half field goal.

There wasn't much offense in the second half, either. Broncos' backup quarterback Brock Osweiler completed 7 of 8 passes in the third quarter, but for only 26 yards. A 27-yard pass interference penalty against the 49ers' Mylan Hicks set up a go-ahead touchdown plunge by Broncos running back Juwan Thompson with 2:08 remaining.

Thompson then ran in the 2-point conversion.

"Our defense played lights out," Osweiler said. "And then I don't think the offense was perfect tonight by any means but the one's and two's, both groups made plays when they needed to. We improved in certain areas from last week. There was a big emphasis on third-and-short. I think we did that this week. I think we're taking steps in the right direction. But I think there's always room for improvement."

Another week, another spot lower on the depth chart for running back Montee Ball. A second-round draft pick in 2013 and the starting running back to open 2014, Ball is now fourth string behind Anderson, Hillman and Thompson.

Ball did have a nice catch-and-run for 20 yards in the fourth quarter that set up a Brandon McManus' 45-yard field goal.

"He continues to work hard," Kubiak said. "Special teams is a big factor with him and Juwan as far as playing on a regular basis. We'll see. I'm fine with Montee. I wish there would be more. I promise you there'll probably be more to go around on Thursday."

The Broncos will begin whittling their 90-man roster down this week. They will cut 15 players on Sunday or Monday morning. They will then make a second cut to 53 players following their fourth and final preseason game Thursday night against the Arizona Cardinals.

There's also a decent chance the Broncos will add a defensive lineman and possibly a tight end for depth purposes.

9 Objectives for Broncos in preseason game vs. 49ers

By Mike Klis

9 News Sport

August 29, 2015

Here are 9 objectives for the Broncos in preseason game No. 3 (Saturday night on KTVD at 7 p.m.) against the San Francisco 49ers at Sports Authority Field at Mile High:

1. No injuries

The starters, including Peyton Manning, are supposed to play for – gulp! – a half, maybe a series into the second half. Have to keep the good guys healthy for the season-opener.

2. Play like there's no tomorrow

The Broncos will cut 15 players on Sunday and Monday morning.

3. First team touchdown

In his previous, and only preseason game at Houston, Manning and the first-team offense had four possessions. They all finished with Britton Colquitt punts.

4. Shake off Trevathan's rust

Inside linebacker Danny Trevathan only got about 1 ½ games worth of playing time last season. He tests his reconstructed left knee for first time.

5. Get Montee some confidence

C.J. Anderson and Ronnie Hillman will get most, if not all, the first –half carries. But Coach Gary Kubiak wants to give some action to third-stringer Montee Ball and No. 5 back Kapri Bibbs.

6. Establish back-up receivers

Demaryius Thomas, Emmanuel Sanders and Cody Latimer are set. It looks good for Jordan Norwood in the slot. Do they keep both Andre "Bubba" Caldwell and Bennie Fowler as backups for the outside?

7. More from Brock Osweiler

The No. 2 quarterback won't come in until the second half in this game – a true test for a backup.

8. Contain Kaepernick

Knowing the Broncos have 12 sacks through their first two preseason games, San Francisco's long-legged quarterback Colin Kaepernick may eye a running lane as he feels the heat from the shotgun.

9. Put the special in special teams

The kickoff coverage should improve with Brandon McManus booting with altitude. Britton Colquitt has to hold off Spencer Lanning, who has punted well. Omar Bolden needs to refine his punt returning fundamentals.

What fans thought of the metal detectors at Sports Authority Field

By Jonathan Gonzalez

9 News Sport

August 29, 2015

As Broncos fans entered the gates at Sports Authority Field on Saturday, they were greeted for the first time by a new security standard: metal detectors at each gate.

Metal detectors have been installed at four different NFL stadiums this season, as part of a league-wide effort to increase security at games.

"I'm in law enforcement," said one man, "so, naturally I think it's a good idea anytime you protect the public from a possibility of being injured. That's what you have to do."

The new security measures are intended to replace the old pat downs and wand system that has been in place for the last four years, although several wands were used Saturday when someone triggered a metal detector.

"The new metal detector system will allow fans to enter Sports Authority Field at Mile High faster and more efficiently while being much less intrusive than security methods used in the past," Assistant General Manager of Sports Authority Field at Mile High Scott Bliek said in a statement. "Our goal is to increase safety and reduce lines for all fans attending events at our stadium."

For fans who showed up at the gates when they opened -- around two hours prior to kickoff -- getting into the stadium was a relatively smooth experience, and did not feature many of the issues that Coors Field experienced on Opening Day with its own metal detectors.

It wasn't until about 30 minutes before kickoff, when fans found themselves stuck in long lines at the gates, some waiting up to 20 minutes to get in.

"I'm fine with standing in line with everything going on," said one woman. "And I think as the games go on, things will get faster."

Many others told 9NEWS they didn't like the lines, but were happy to see new security measures being taken.

The key to avoiding the lines seems to be showing up early enough.

"I've never seen it this long," said one man. "You know what? It's a beautiful night. There's a bunch of people out here so I just think it is what it is."

Metal detectors will be mandatory for all NFL stadiums in 2017.

Manning on the run in Denver's 19-12 win over 49ers

By Arnie Stapleton

Associated Press

August 30, 2015

Sure, Peyton Manning said, he'd like to have played more this summer — and better.

He swears he's not worried.

"I think we can still win games as we're developing the identity," Manning said Saturday night when Denver rode its stifling defense and good ground game to a 19-12 win over the sputtering San Francisco 49ers.

Manning was doomed by protection problems and an interception in the end zone one week after penalties and dropped passes kept him from finding any rhythm. He was 14 for 21 for 124 yards and was sacked three times, twice by linebacker NaVorro Bowman.

Manning isn't expected to play against Arizona next week, meaning he'll head into the regular season having directed just two scoring drives — both of them field goals — on 11 preseason possessions.

At least he'll have two-time Pro Bowl guard Evan Mathis and receiver Emmanuel Sanders (hamstring) by then. Mathis signed this week, giving the Broncos' young offensive line some much-needed experience.

The 39-year-old QB has taken some forced time off this summer, sitting every few days because of his age and to get longtime backup Brock Osweiler some work. GM John Elway says he'll take a rusty Manning early on over an exhausted one down the stretch, and he predicted the offense will be a "work in progress" for a while.

Manning agreed.

"Would we like to be a finely tuned machine going into Week 1? Sure," Manning said. "With some newness, some new players and some different things that we're doing, that's what we're working toward. But the key is for us to improve through the season."

Juwan Thompson scored the game's only touchdown on a 1-yard run with 2:04 left that erased a 12-11 deficit.

The Broncos (3-0) reached the 20-yard line three times when Manning was in the game, but managed only a pair of Brandon McManus field goals. Cornerback Kenneth Acker intercepted Manning's underthrown pass to Demaryius Thomas in the end zone.

"You hold the ball for 20 minutes in the first half, you're over 50 percent on third downs, you think you'd be scoring some points," lamented Denver coach Gary Kubiak.

Bowman, who missed all of last season after a devastating knee injury in the NFC championship game in January 2014, ditched his knee brace and had nine tackles.

"He had a great look in his eye," 49ers coach Jim Tomsula said, and so he played him much longer than planned.

Bowman, who had three tackles in three snaps against the Cowboys last week, was thrilled with the extended work "because I'm going to have to (play more) in about two weeks."

Colin Kaepernick struggled again, failing to complete a pass until the final minute of the first half, which ended with Denver ahead 8-3. He was just 2 of 6 for 13 yards and scrambled three times for 53 yards.

"We have things to work on," Kaepernick said. "That's what our preseason is for."

DeMarcus Ware sacked Kaepernick in the end zone for a safety in the second quarter, the highlight of another stellar outing by Denver's starting defense, which has allowed six points in 11 drives.

NEXT MAN UP: Outside linebacker Corey Lemonier has risen through the depth chart not so much because of his stellar play but because Aldon Smith was released three weeks ago after his latest run-in with the law, and Ahmad Brooks was placed on leave Thursday. Lemonier had three tackles and a sack of Manning.

BOLDIN ON BOLDEN: Anquan Boldin was whistled for a 15-yard personal foul for a blindside block on safety Omar Bolden, who was shaken up on the play just before halftime. Denver's Bolden got the wind knocked out of him, as did starting safety T.J. Ward on another play.

AUSSIE WATCH: Jarryd Hayne, the former Australian rugby league star, had a much quieter day, catching one pass for 18 yards and running twice for 0 yards. He had 258 total yards in two games. But he knew he wasn't going to get much action against the Broncos. "We knew Game 3, that's when the starters get their most reps and preparation for (the opener)," Hayden said.

SIDELINE SPECTATOR: Among the players who didn't suit up Saturday night was tight end Dan Light, whom the Broncos signed Friday. Light is a 6-foot-5, 265-pound tight end from Fordham. His father, Dan, died of ALS two years ago. After signing with the Broncos, he tweeted, "I love you dad. Our dream came true. I am an NFL football player."

NFL Capsules

By Staff

Associated Press

August 30, 2015

Buffalo Bills quarterback EJ Manuel made his case to reclaim the starting job by going 7 of 8 for 170 yards and two touchdowns in a 43-19 preseason win over the Pittsburgh Steelers on Saturday.

Getting his turn to start in Buffalo's offseason-long three-way quarterback competition, Manuel hit Charles Clay for a 67-yard touchdown in the first quarter. He re-entered the game for two-plus series in the third quarter, and hit Tobias Palmer for a 37-yard touchdown as Buffalo improved to 2-1.

For Pittsburgh (1-3), Michael Vick hit Martavis Bryant for a 63-yard completion on his first snap from scrimmage after taking over for starter Ben Roethlisberger in the first quarter. It was Vick's debut with the Steelers, who signed the 35-year-old after backup Bruce Gradkowski sustained a season-ending left hand injury last week.

Vick finished 4 of 5 for 116 yards and was sacked once in two series.

REDSKINS 31, RAVENS 13

BALTIMORE (AP) — Kirk Cousins filled in capably for injured quarterback Robert Griffin III, throwing for 190 yards and a fluke touchdown.

With Griffin sidelined by a concussion, Cousins went 20 for 27 for 190 yards with an interception to help the Redskins take a 14-13 halftime lead. His second TD pass of the preseason came on a deflection plucked out of the air and carried into the end zone by Jamison Crowder.

Colt McCoy started the third quarter for Washington (3-0) and produced touchdowns on his first two drives, although both scores came against Ravens reserves and the last march covered only 20 yards following an interception.

McCoy completed 10 of 12 passes for 95 yards and two TDs, both to Rashad Ross.

Griffin's availability for the Sept. 13 opener against Miami is uncertain.

Baltimore (1-2) lost its second straight.

SEAHAWKS 16, CHARGERS 15

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Steven Hauschka kicked a 60-yard field goal with 16 seconds left. Hauschka had missed a 58-yard attempt with 3:46 remaining. His winning kick, from midfield, barely cleared the crossbar. He also made field goals of 40 and 27 yards.

Nick Novak, competing for a job with rookie Josh Lambo, kicked a 52-yard field goal midway through the fourth quarter to give San Diego a 15-13 lead.

Novak also made a 32-yarder goal in the first quarter. The Chargers (2-1) brought in Lambo because Novak struggled on kickoffs last year. Lambo kicked a winning 47-yarder as time expired at Arizona a week earlier, as well as field goals of 53 and 43 yards. Lambo had a 28-yard field goal against the Seahawks (1-2).

The Chargers had a scary moment when franchise quarterback Philip Rivers hit his throwing hand on a defender's hand late in the second quarter. Rivers then threw an incomplection in the end zone on third down and headed into the locker room early with a trainer.

EAGLES 39, PACKERS 26

GREEN BAY, Wis. (AP) — The Packers lost receiver Randall Cobb to a shoulder injury, while Eagles quarterback Sam Bradford threw three touchdowns passes.

Bradford was 10 of 10 for 121 yards before giving way to backup Mark Sanchez in the second quarter for Philadelphia (3-0). Acquired in the offseason from St. Louis, Bradford is coming back from tearing his left ACL twice in a 10-month span while with the Rams.

The Packers (1-2) keep losing players.

Cobb left after landing on his right arm while trying to catch a pass near the sideline on Green Bay's first offensive series. He is the second Packers starting wideout to get hurt in the preseason. Jordy Nelson was lost for the season with a right knee injury last Sunday against Pittsburgh.

Starting quarterback Aaron Rodgers didn't play.

BRONCOS 19, 49ERS 12

DENVER (AP) — Peyton Manning failed to get the Broncos into the end zone in seven possessions, but Denver rode its stifling defense and good ground game.

All that rest has turned into rust for Manning, who was doomed by protection problems and an interception in the end zone one week after penalties and dropped passes kept him from finding any rhythm.

Manning was 14 for 21 for 124 yards and was sacked three times, twice by linebacker NaVorro Bowman.

Manning isn't expected to play against Arizona next week, meaning he'll head into the regular season having directed just two scoring drives — both of them field goals — in 11 possessions this preseason.

BENGALS 21, BEARS 10 CINCINNATI (AP) — Andy Dalton sneaked in for a touchdown on Cincinnati's opening drive, then came out of the game as a precaution with a sore neck.

The Bengals (2-1) were looking for a lot more out of their starting offense after a three-turnover performance during a loss at Tampa Bay. Dalton threw two interceptions in that one.

He completed all six of his passes during a 16-play, 77-yard drive that consumed 9 minutes, 11 seconds. Dalton finished it with a sneak from inside the 1-yard line, and was kept on the sideline after that because his neck hurt.

Bengals quarterbacks completed their first 13 passes against the Bears (2-1), who again failed to get a touchdown out of their starting offense. Chicago's offense has managed five field goals and no touchdowns in the preseason.

COLTS 24, RAMS 14

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Andrew Luck threw his first touchdown pass of the preseason, helping the Colts get off to a fast start.

Nick Foles got his first TD pass in Week 3, too, hitting Chris Givens in stride on a 44-yard play in the second quarter for the Rams (0-3).

Adam Vinatieri had a big day for the Colts (1-2), hitting field goals on the first and last possessions of the half, plus his successful onside kick led to Andre Johnson's 32-yard reception for a 10-0 lead midway through the first quarter. Then he put it out of reach with a 55-yarder with 2:53 left.

Clayton Geathers recovered the onside kick and Luck hit Johnson five plays later, capitalizing on busted coverage in the middle.

BROWNS 31, BUCCANEERS 7

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — Josh McCown finished two long drives with touchdown passes to outplay rookie Jameis Winston.

Back in half-filled Raymond James Stadium and facing the team that released him to clear the way to select Winston No. 1 overall in this year's draft, McCown completed 17 of 23 passes for 117 yards. He showed why the Browns (1-2) think the 36-year-old quarterback can help them contend for a playoff berth.

Winston, meanwhile, struggled in his third preseason start. The 2013 Heisman Trophy winner was 6 of 15 for 90 yards, threw one interception and was sacked four times before leaving after one series in the third quarter.

VIKINGS 28, COWBOYS 14

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — Tony Romo threw two touchdown passes even as Dez Bryant again sat out for the Cowboys, and Minnesota's Teddy Bridgewater was perfect in the Vikings' win.

Bridgewater completed all seven of his passes for 76 yards and finally found a connection with his new receiver. Mike Wallace had three catches for 50 yards, including a 39-yard grab.

Cordarrelle Patterson had a 107-yard kickoff return for Minnesota.

Romo, who completed one pass for minus-1 yard in his only series while Dallas lost its first two preseason games, was 5 of 8 for 88 yards in his five series. Both TDs were in the second quarter, with a 60-yard catch-and-run by Terrance Williams.

Dallas led 14-10 when Romo threw his final pass, an 8-yard TD to Lucky Whitehead.

Bryant has dealt with a strained hamstring throughout camp and hasn't played since signing his new \$70 million, five-year contract in mid-July.

DOLPHINS 13, FALCONS 9

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. (AP) — Ryan Tannehill threw for 145 yards in less than a half despite working behind a makeshift offensive line.

Miami center Mike Pouncey left in the first half because of a knee injury, leaving the Dolphins (1-2) with only two starting offensive linemen at their regular positions. Pouncey limped to the locker room shortly before halftime and didn't return.

Tannehill went 15 for 19 for 145 yards and a touchdown before leaving shortly before halftime with Miami leading 7-3. His scoring pass covered 2 yards to Rishard Matthews.

In three exhibition games, Tannehill is 33 for 41 for 303 yards with three touchdowns and no interceptions.

While Tannehill wasn't touched, counterpart Matt Ryan was sacked three times in four series.

JETS 28, GIANTS 18

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. (AP) — Ryan Fitzpatrick threw two touchdown passes and Antonio Cromartie scored on a 59-yard interception return in the waning seconds of the first half.

After struggling in place of the injured Geno Smith in the first two preseason games, Fitzpatrick hit 9 of 14 passes for 127 yards. He threw an 18-yard touchdown pass to Eric Decker and added a 24-yarder on a screen pass to Zac Stacy as the Jets (2-1) showed balance on offense.

Rashad Jennings scored on a 1-yard run for the Giants (1-2), whose first-team offense has produced 10 points in 12 preseason possessions. Eli Manning (12 of 16 for 90 yards) was having a good half until Cromartie stepped in front of James Jones and scored with 6 seconds left in the half.

Shaky again, Denver Broncos' offense worth a second opinion

By Paul Klee

Colorado Springs Gazette

August 29, 2015

My new friend Nick Walshaw is a recovering rugby player from Australia. I wondered, because on the smoky-hot practice fields at Broncos headquarters last week, Nick baked his shorn head in the sun, while the locals hunted down shade.

"I'm loving this weather, mate. It's winter back home," he reminded during Denver's 19-12 preseason win against San Francisco at Sports Authority Field on Saturday. This was all relatively new to Nick, a journalist who traveled across the globe to report on Jarryd Hayne, the rugger from Australia attempting to secure a spot on the 49ers' roster without a football background.

This was all new enough that I felt obliged to tell Nick the Broncos used to score points, lots of points, so many points the NFL record books could devote an entire chapter to Peyton Manning alone. "I'm sure he'll be fine," Nick said, and surely there are optimistic sectors of Broncos Country that agree with my friend.

He is Peyton Manning, after all. Superman sleeps in his pajamas, at least until it gets cold.

But there must be a smidgeon of doubt creeping into your mind, an annoying tickle that suggests the Kubiak-Manning football marriage needs counseling, that maybe the whole age thing has legs. I don't believe those things — not yet, anyway — but you can't ignore the Broncos first-team offense in the preseason was a tough eyesore to rub away.

Before 73,156 people — "For an exhibition game, mate?" Nick said — Manning and the offense formerly known as the 18th Airborne scored eight points in the first half. Saturday night's downer came after a preseason game, at Houston, in which the starters didn't score in four possessions. Since the starters won't play in the preseason finale Thursday, this goes down as his first preseason here that Manning's offense didn't score a touchdown. Has that ever happened, even back in Indy? I'd have to check. This isn't new only for Nick; it's new for everyone.

"I wouldn't hit the panic button whatsoever," tight end Owen Daniels said.

Perhaps because it's so difficult to imagine a Manning offense that doesn't score lots of points and turn the scoreboard into the Griswold family Christmas tree, it's way too soon for rash judgments on an offense that has been entirely overhauled.

These hiccups very well could be the opposite of Nikoloz Tskitishvili in his first NBA summer league, a sign of nothing at all. It's worth noting, however, that Manning in the third preseason game, the so-called dress rehearsal, usually shoots off a warning signal to the rest of the NFL, even in limited snaps.

Year One in Denver: 10 of 12, 122 yards, two touchdowns.

Year Two: 25 of 34, 234 yards, one touchdown.

Year Three: 21 of 27, 243 yards, two touchdowns (and one taunting penalty).

Nick tells me that fantasy football isn't a thing in Australia, but fantasy rugby is a huge thing. Even so, anyone knows what transpired after those preseasons. Points. Lots of points. Record points.

Year Four concluded late Saturday night, when Manning played the first half and scored only these numbers: 14 of 21, 124 yards, 62.4 passer rating. Two passes, in particular, made you squint your eyes and tilt your head. The first one looked to be a sure touchdown, Demaryius Thomas having beaten his man near the goal line, but the toss came up short and was deflected away. The second also landed short of Thomas, the targeted receiver, and it was intercepted in the end zone.

"We're still kind of developing that chemistry," Manning said of the offense.

Both pass attempts were very un-Peyton, as was missing Daniels, wide open in the end zone, on another drive.

"I think he's fine," Kubiak said, adding, "We're going to do a lot of things offensively. We've just got to do some of them better than we did tonight."

This is the part in the story where it's fair, and necessary, to remember it's the preseason, and lesser quarterbacks have stumbled in August only to hijack the scoreboard in December. The Broncos aren't showing their hand, or their full playbook, not when the season opener against the Ravens is two weeks away.

"We've just got to score," running back C.J. Anderson said. "We're doing everything we wanted to do."

And the defense. Oh, the defense. Wade Phillips' starters played 11 preseason possessions and allowed only two field goals. By the end of September, the defense will be closing in on nickname territory.

"I think they (the Niners) had zero passing yards in the first half," Manning said, perhaps offering a subtle reminder that their passing game could be much, much worse. "It's been a long time since I've seen that."

Over his career, Manning has passed for roughly the distance between Dove Valley and Monument — about 40 miles, an amazing distance when you think about it, if not as far as Nick traveled to get here from Australia. Manning is 2,147 yards shy of the alltime record held by Brett Favre, so it's no coincidence the Broncos play the Packers and Colts in Weeks 8 and 9, right around the time Manning could shatter that record, too.

Considering the resume, and the dazzling displays of the past three seasons, it seems dangerous, even dumb, to think this new offense won't work, or to doubt Manning at all.

Broncos hopeful Nathan Palmer is a one-man band

By Paul Klee

Colorado Springs Gazette

August 29, 2015

There's a beat bumping through Nathan Palmer's brain right now. The origin? It could be anything, he says, from a conversation he had with a Broncos teammate, to a news story he watched on Denver Channel 4, to a memory from his childhood in Indiana.

Soon as this day is over, once Gary Kubiak has dismissed the Broncos from another day at training camp, Palmer has designs on putting this new beat to work.

"After long days like this, I like to play the piano to relax myself," Palmer says, and it's then you realize this man is so far removed from the jock stereotype, football almost seems like a foreign subject. Palmer's first passion is football. The Broncos sign his paycheck. That's where his focus must remain. Bills to pay, you know?

But his other passion is music. His own music, more specifically, a collection of songs he wrote, recorded and turned into an album on iTunes: "R.I.P. 2 My Heart."

Yes, there's an accomplished musician on the Broncos training camp roster. Real name: Nathan Palmer. Stage name: NaPalm. His sound?

"I have a mellow tone. Good harmonies," he says.

"I don't try to put it into a box. I can recreate my sound. Sometimes I might be mad, and you get a gritty song. Sometimes I might be sad, and you get a softer side. Sometimes I might be hype, then you get me real fired up."

Then you get something like "Rings," a single he wrote and recorded that opens like this:

I'm designated, elevated and celebrated

Because I'm chosen, you're (sic) only move is to replicate it

Been on my grind; I stay dedicated

I'm just a young hungry brother turned gladiator

"That song," he says, "was actually written about going through OTAs and training camp. It's an inspirational song. A lot of my teammates have it on."

Some of the other wide receivers on the Broncos roster have been Palmer's biggest supporters, guys like Emmanuel Sanders and Demaryius Thomas. Omar Bolden, a safety, has been there to watch him perform at long-standing Denver venues like the Gothic Theater on Broadway and the Bluebird Theater on Colfax.

"He's talented. You should really go watch him," Bolden said.

"Life is bigger than football. Eventually this (stuff) is going to end. Nate, he's got something to fall back on, something he loves," Bolden added. "You want to be able to have other interests, other relationships with guys. Football is everything for us right now. But it's not everything to us."

Palmer is entering his fourth season in the NFL. He appeared in one game for the Broncos in 2014. His love for music, though, began as a kid.

"I started with music in church a long time ago," Palmer says. "Most people have a hobby. I just wanted to stay busy when I'm off the field, when I'm not working out. It's easy to find trouble out here in the offseason, so I wanted to find something that would keep me entertained. And it's something I'm good at and can make money at."

He hopes to turn music into a full-time gig when the time is right - after football.

"Keyword: After," he says. "I want to play this game as long as I can."

Until then, Palmer, an undrafted free agent out of Northern Illinois who played for noted wide receivers coach Brian Anderson, will maintain one of the more interesting hobbies in the NFL. He records his music at Denver's Side 3 Studios, or in the studio he had built in his apartment, and studies the artists he enjoys most: Usher, Chris Brown, Beyonce, among others. The inspiration for his music can come from anywhere, even a football practice that just concluded under a bluebird sky at Dove Valley.

"You'd be amazed at what can inspire music," Palmer says.

"It could be something that's extraordinary, that really strikes you, or something that happens in a normal day, going about your life."

The Art of the Sack Dance with Von Miller

By Paul Klee

Colorado Springs Gazette

August 29, 2015

He Superman'ed after dropping Cam Newton. That episode was memorable, if only because of the speed Von Miller flashed to catch the nimble quarterback, the power he flexed to bring Newton down - with one arm, mostly.

He honored teammate (and former football idol) DeMarcus Ware, with the Hulk Smash. After sacking Falcons quarterback Matt Ryan, on a critical third-and-5 play in Atlanta, he fed himself with two spoons - "Eating Greedy," Miller called it.

"I don't think I'll ever run out of ideas," the Broncos star pass-rusher said.

But this one? This one was new, fresh, a departure from Miller's ever-changing lineup of sack dances. This was Vonnie Football spreading his creative wings.

"Wooooo!" he shouted during a training camp practice. Upon roasting right tackle Ryan Harris on a move that showcased Miller's flexibility, the linebacker took off in a dead sprint. He "hit" the quarterback - although, in camp, defensive players are not allowed to actually hit the quarterback - and raced into the Paul D. Bowlen Memorial Broncos Centre as if he urgently needed to use the facilities.

Call it the "Walk-Off Sack." This was Bo Jackson racing into the tunnel at the Kingdome, Dan Dierdorf commenting: "He may not stop until Tacoma. He's gone."

With 49 sacks through four seasons, one of which was shortened due to a six-game suspension, Vonnie Football has allowed plenty of opportunities to show off his dance moves. There's not a singular sack dance he leans on. Rather, his is a library of sack dances, some of which are scripted beforehand.

From where does he draw his sack-dance inspirations?

"It could come from anyone," Miller said. "My teammates, they'll give me ideas. I'll get input from my teammates. There's a lot of ideas in there."

Miller's ideas, and those of his teammates, were clever enough to earn him the No. 1 ranking for sack dances last season, according to NFL.com. Given his reputation as a ready and willing sack dancer, it makes sense he will follow Jerry Rice and Hines Ward as NFL players-turned-contestants on ABC's "Dancing with the Stars."

But that's for another day, perhaps when the 26-year-old retires. It's not climbing out on a thin limb to predict Miller is in line for a career season, even a record-setting season, after witnessing his dazzling training camp and hearing how new defensive coordinator Wade Phillips wants to use his star defender.

"He can rush the quarterback," Phillips said, simplifying a defensive structure that too often became overly complicated under the previous regime. "So we're going to let him rush the quarterback."

And this is no small detail to note: Miller is in a contract year. His expires after this season, and the market has been set. Kansas City pass-rusher Justin Houston signed for six years, \$101 million in July, and Miller's next contract likely will be the richest deal for a defensive player in NFL history.

Heads up, team record of 18.5 sacks. Time to cut a rug.

"It's for the fans," Miller said. "We have the best fans in the NFL, and I want them to have a good time. At the end of the day we're playing a game.

"It's fun."

Opposing quarterbacks shouldn't plan on having success against Broncos' defense

By David Ramsey
Colorado Springs Gazette
August 29, 2015

Colin Kaepernick led the 49ers to the Super Bowl. His arm is mighty. He frightens defensive coordinators.

"He's very athletic," John Elway said Thursday, "and he's got that big-play ability to avoid things and make things happen."

The athletic quarterback with the mighty arm made precious little happen Saturday night against the Broncos' stifling defense.

During the half he played, Kaepernick led his teammates to zero yards of passing offense and only three first downs. Two of those first downs came on frantic scrambles out of the pocket in the final two minutes.

Kaepernick spent most those two quarters sprinting away from a pack of motivated Broncos. He had virtually no chance to display that big-play ability. He looked mediocre, and that was in his better moments.

On a night Peyton Manning looked ordinary, the Broncos first-team defense was extraordinary. The pass rush was ferocious. The rush defense was physical, especially when Aqib Talib decked the 49ers' Reggie Bush, who was dancing without a clue.

Yes, this was only a preseason game, and it's perilous to seek lasting answers from games that fail to matter.

But the Broncos defense utter domination of Kaepernick and his offensive sidekicks could be a preview of the season.

Is Manning still Manning? Is he still the quarterback who can seize control of a Sunday afternoon?

The encouraging news from Saturday night is the Broncos could still soar even if Manning and the offense lack the overwhelming power of the past three seasons.

The defense delivered most of the highlights in the first half. We saw DeMarcus Ware roaring into the backfield to trap Kaepernick for a safety.

We saw Von Miller playing with enough effort and skill to make us wonder if he deserves to refer to himself constantly in the third person.

Miller wants, he said Wednesday, "to be the Von I know that I can be."

Good luck on that one, Von.

And we saw the Broncos deliver a fierce pass rush on Kaepernick even with Miller and Ware resting on the bench. Pity the quarterback who drops back in the pocket on 3rd and long against the Broncos.

Sure, the rush defense is not as dominating, but this is 2015, not 1965. The NFL is ruled by the pass, and the Broncos defense has been expertly constructed to hassle the quarterbacks who rule the league. Just ask Kaepernick.

Tom Brady and Aaron Rodgers will arrive at Mile High this season, leading two of the NFL's most powerful offenses. The Broncos looked ready for those invasions, even if Manning is not Manning.

Broncos' defense expects to knock offenses off rhythm

By Matt Wiley

Colorado Springs Gazette

August 29, 2015

Rhythm does not concern Wade Phillips.

Forget the YouTube clip of the Broncos' defensive coordinator doing the "YMCA", it's the timing of an NFL offense that Phillips shows no regard for.

As Denver transitions to a 3-4 alignment (three linemen and four linebackers), which has been a Phillips trademark for decades, one thing is clear: the Broncos will try to be as disruptive as possible.

"We're going to be a pressure defense," Phillips said. "If it's pressure out of zone and zone blitzes, or it's pressure out of man and man blitzes, that is what you try to decide."

With pass rushers Von Miller, DeMarcus Ware and first-round pick Shane Ray on the outside applying a rush on opposing quarterbacks, the rest of the team should benefit.

"I hope so. I think with the pressure we're going to bring we're going to force some quarterbacks to make more mistakes," cornerback Chris Harris said during training camp. "I really think we are going to make more picks just by the pressure. We are bringing the heat."

Denver ranked second in the NFL in least yardage allowed per play and third in yardage per game, yet some players feel there is room for improvement.

"I like this defense a lot," Sylvester Williams said. "A lot more attacking. Pretty much get up field and make plays."

One player who figures to make a lot of plays is linebacker Brandon Marshall.

"I've been studying a lot of film," he said. "We watch the Texans, Brian Cushing and DeMeco Ryans. It's basically the same defense that they ran. I expect the same production from me and Danny (Trevathan)."

Cushing had more than 110 tackles each year he played 16 games with the Texans. Ryans had more than 110 four of the five years he played in the middle of Houston's defense.

If all goes according to plan, the linebackers in the middle are going to compile tackles when the defensive linemen are not getting loose in the backfield.

"It's been treating me good so far," Williams said of the defense. "I've been able to get up field, penetrate and make plays."

Williams added that coaches have put an emphasis on jumping up and batting down passes.

"Coaches are excited about that, tipping the ball," he said. "Coaches preach that a lot. Getting batted balls."

Williams likes the versatility of the defensive line. He said that since everyone on the line can play multiple positions, players should remain fresh.

"Since I have been in Denver this is the hardest-working group I've been around defensive line wise," he said. "We are going to have a great defensive line this year."

Harris thinks the entire defense should be special.

"If we don't give up big plays we can win every game," Harris said, "so it's really on me, and (Aqib) Talib, and the secondary guys to not give up those big explosives and it will be hard for us to lose."

Long lines, no major issues with metal detectors on first Broncos home game

By Kyle Horan
ABC 7News Denver
August 30, 2015

As Broncos fans went to see the team play at Mile High stadium Saturday evening, they were subject to the venue's newest feature: 93 metal detectors at all ten gates.

Thousands of people entered through the gates and some lines did start to stretch from the stadium. A Denver Police Officer told 7NEWS reporter Kyle Horan the lines were longer than what he's used to.

"I worked at the old stadium and this stadium -- these crowds are a little backed up today," said Det. John Haney.

Saturday's game was a preseason bout versus the 49ers.

Some fans did not have to wait too long in line. Dan Hoffert timed his wait. It only reached 6:45.

"Anytime you have a human doing a metal detector, you always have that chance of not getting a detect," Hoffert said. "Here, you go through, it beeps, they wand you down."

"The new metal detector system will allow fans to enter Sports Authority Field at Mile High faster and more efficiently while being much less intrusive than security methods used in the past," Assistant General Manager of Sports Authority Field at Mile High Scott Bliet said to DenverBroncos.com.

According to info. from the site, the metal detectors are similar to the models used by airport TSA. However, guests won't have to remove belts, shoes, watches or other similar clothing items.

What we learned: Bradford, Taylor have strong games

By Dan Hanzus, Marc Sessler, Conor Orr, Gregg Rosenthal and Tyler Dragon

NFL.com

August 30, 2015

For most NFL starters, the preseason essentially ended on Saturday night. Some key players will suit up for a series or two in the fourth week of the preseason, but many more will start preparing for the season opener. The hay is in the barn.

Saturday was relatively uneventful, which is great news. It appears we avoided catastrophic injuries, and many of the same themes we've seen the last two weeks continued. Sam Bradford was nearly perfect while directing three touchdown drives.

Tyrod Taylor did everything possible to cement a starting job, although EJ Manuel also played great. Peyton Manning continued to look a little uncomfortable in Gary Kubiak's offense, while Kirk Cousins had an effective audition for the Week 1 starting job in Washington.

You know the preseason is nearly over when Rex Ryan finally will make a decision about his starting quarterback. He's going to inform his quarterbacks on Sunday, but not tell the media. So we'll just wait for the inevitable leak out of Buffalo, and start looking ahead to Week 1. It's finally that time of year.

Cleveland Browns 31, Tampa Bay Buccaneers 7

1. Jameis Winston showed plenty of promise last week against the Bengals, but Cleveland's defense created all sorts of problems for Tampa Bay's rookie quarterback. The No. 1 overall pick threw for just 21 yards over his first four drives before handing the ball to Doug Martin for a 19-yard touchdown run in the second quarter. Winston really had no chance early against a Browns defensive front that chalked up two sacks right away and saw defensive lineman Desmond Bryant dominate first-year Bucs guard Ali Marpet.

2. Josh McCown enjoyed his best drive of the preseason in the first quarter, guiding Cleveland on a 16-play, 80-yard march that ate nine-plus minutes off the clock before the veteran passer lobbed a 3-yard touchdown strike to Brian Hartline. McCown was mostly mistake-free, finishing with 17-of-23 passing for 117 yards with two touchdowns. With Terrelle Pryor still packaged away in bubble wrap, Cleveland's uninspiring cast of pass-catchers lacks a difference-maker, but Travis Benjamin has enjoyed a nice camp. He made a string of clutch grabs and opened the scoring with a saucy 53-yard punt return.

3. Football fans were again prevented from seeing rookie Duke Johnson. The Browns running back was yanked from action by trainers, who evaluated the third-rounder for a concussion. It's a frustrating situation for offensive coordinator John DeFilippo, who has barely had Johnson on the field during camp. The first snaps went to Isaiah Crowell, who finished with 27 yards off eight totes compared to 26 yards off seven rushes for Terrance West. This unpredictable committee-based backfield is destined to drive Fantasy Heads nutty all season.

-- Marc Sessler

New York Jets 28, New York Giants 18

1. The Giants' offense had their most competent drive of the preseason, a 14-play opus that spanned almost 90 yards midway through the second quarter. For a brief moment in time, everything looked stable. Then Eli Manning, attempting to lead a last-minute scoring drive at the half, threw a completely telegraphed pick-six intended for James Jones that was walked across the goal line by Antonio Cromartie. At least Odell Beckham had his first catch of the preseason. Watching the Cowboys and Giants on split screen, it was jarring to see two organizations with similar philosophies look so different. An example? Manning getting downed by Jets defensive tackle Leger Douzable off a four-man rush. Romo, around the same time, spent 5.27 seconds rambling around in the pocket before finding an open Lucky Whitehead for a TD strike.

2. On defense, the Giants' struggles were illustrated nicely on a clean touchdown strike from Ryan Fitzpatrick to Eric Decker. Safety Jeromy Miles, a six-year vet, was caught out of position and Decker slid right into an empty pocket of space. It says a lot about the team's roster construction that Stevie Brown, recently cut by the Houston Texans, will probably be a Week 1 starter for this team assuming all goes well with his physical. General manager Jerry Reese has done well in the face of criticism before -- especially criticism stemming from certain decisions not to address certain positions in free agency or the draft -- but the safety spot might truly sting the Giants this year. There had to be a better backup plan for losing out on Devin McCourty in free agency. The Jets know this, too, and weren't shy about testing the Giants deep early.

3. Brandon Marshall's declaration that he feels better than ever this preseason set off plenty of trope alerts, but he might actually be right. The dynamic wideout was especially smooth on an adjustment route that required a tight cut into open space in the first half. The Giants certainly respected his ability to go deep as well.

4. The Jets could have the deepest stable of running backs in the AFC, and even if Zac Stacy doesn't entice, there's no question plenty of teams (ahem, Dallas) were watching that screen pass he took in for a touchdown at the end of the first half. Is he above replacement level? Perhaps. Is he a competent running back that can handle 10-12 carries on Sunday and pick up first downs? Absolutely.

5. Jets kicker Nick Folk became the latest kicker to duff a long extra point. If this becomes a regular occurrence, the quality of games will be exponentially better. Drama!

-- Conor Orr

Minnesota Vikings 28, Dallas Cowboys 14

1. Teddy Bridgewater ducked out fairly early, but we're not sure anyone in Minnesota will have a problem with it. The budding franchise quarterback finished 7 of 7 and not just on check-down throws. Bridgewater hit a streaking Mike Wallace down the right sideline for 39 yards toward the end of the first quarter to set up a field goal -- something Wallace's old quarterback wasn't able to do consistently.

But it wasn't just the touch passes. Bridgewater is maturing in the pocket as much as he's becoming a more confident passer. Facing a formidable Cowboys rush, it was refreshing to see Bridgewater bury himself toward the line of scrimmage and keep his team in range for points.

2. Dallas' offensive line might be becoming a better pass-blocking unit, too. Though they'll stake their reputation on the running game, this is a team that might need to lean a little more on Tony Romo this season. Romo's ability to keep plays alive could finally mesh with extended time in the pocket.

This might be why the Cowboys have been fairly careful with inserting La'el Collins into their offensive line. Collins did not start and did not play in the first half on Saturday with chemistry serving as the most important reason.

3. Completely understand the Vikings' reticence with Cordarrelle Patterson, but my goodness, he is the most athletic player on the field every time he leaves the bench. It is a type of Tavon Austin situation that has to be taken care of so as not to waste Patterson's prime years.

Vikings offensive coordinator Norv Turner and head coach Mike Zimmer mentioned a certain precision lacking in his routes. But just look at this kick return! Something has to give.

4. Terrance Williams looked brilliant again, especially on the 60-yard touchdown pass from Romo. On that in-route, Williams roasted five Vikings defenders on his way to the end zone. Seeing the 25-year-old develop during his third season will be fascinating. It might not surprise anyone to see him improve on last year's career-best eight touchdowns.

5. As we mentioned here, Darren McFadden took the lead in Dallas' running back competition, but we might not know how significant it was until his performance is evaluated Sunday. Injuries will always be the No. 1 question with McFadden, but he did answer some lingering questions about how much burst -- if at all -- he has left.

-- Conor Orr

Seattle Seahawks 16, San Diego Chargers 15

1. Russell Wilson struggled. The Seahawks passer threw for just 35 yards in the first half as Seattle went into the break with an uncharacteristic 80 total yards of offense and just four first downs. Wilson's first six dropbacks included an intentional grounding call, two scrambles and a hit on the quarterback as he threw.

The Seahawks held the ball for just 8:07 of the first half and looked out of sync from the start. Finishing 7 of 15 for a measly 56 yards, Wilson was far from sharp and showed a lack of chemistry with tight end Jimmy Graham.

2. San Diego's offense owned the time of possession early, but Chargers fans have reason to be concerned with the ground game. After averaging 2.0 yards per carry against the Cardinals last week, San Diego's starters amassed just 2.9 yards per tote in the first half against Seattle. We're still waiting for presumed workhorse Melvin Gordon's big breakout.

After chalking up just 11 yards off six attempts against the Cowboys in Week 1 of the preseason, Gordon -- who didn't play last week -- produced 34 yards at just 2.4 yards per rush. He looked better between the tackles, but Gordon hasn't exactly popped off the screen this month.

3. What's not to like about Tyler Lockett? Seattle's rookie wideout torched the Bolts with a 67-yard punt return for a touchdown in the second quarter. With two special-teams scores this preseason, the third-rounder has shown immediate playmaking ability. Stevie Johnson, meanwhile, looks like a nice fit for Philip Rivers and the Bolts.

Bonus takeaway: Rivers hit the thumb of his throwing hand on a defender's helmet in the first half, but laughed it off. He's fine.

-- Marc Sessler

Washington Redskins 31, Baltimore Ravens 13

1. If this was Kirk Cousins' audition, he did just fine. The quarterback -- a surprise starter after Robert Griffin III failed to get medical clearance from an independent neurologist -- recovered from an early Terrell Suggs interception to lead Washington on two second-quarter touchdown drives. Afterwards, coach Jay Gruden praised Cousins' performance but said no decisions would be made until they sorted out Griffin's unclear medical situation.

2. Quite an eventful preseason outing for Steve Smith. The ageless veteran showed off his ever-sneaky jets on a 64-yard catch-and-run touchdown in the first quarter, then got ejected for fighting with 49ers cornerback Chris Culliver.

The fracas started after Redskins linebacker Keenan Robinson delivered a WWE-style tackle on Ravens receiver Kamar Aiken. Culliver should consider himself very lucky that Smith didn't get to finish the job.

3. We learned before the game that Redskins left tackle Trent Williams signed a five-year extension that makes him the highest paid offensive lineman in NFL history. On Saturday night, we were reminded how important Williams is to Washington's offensive line.

The Redskins did not allow a sack, a week after Griffin took a vicious beating that led to a diagnosed concussion. Williams sat out that game with a sore toe.

-- Dan Hanzus

Miami Dolphins 13, Atlanta Falcons 9

1. The Dolphins got a huge scare when Pro Bowl center Mike Pouncey was forced to exit in the first quarter after suffering a knee injury. He'll have an MRI on his knee Sunday, but sounded supremely confident the scan will come back clean. "I ain't concerned at all," Pouncey said, via ESPN.com. "I will be back in practice next week, and I ain't missing any games. So you don't have to worry about that."

2. A troubling night for the Falcons' offensive line, which gave up four sacks in the first half. Matt Ryan was brought down three times, which is way too much contact for August football. In the O-line's defense, these were Ryan's first three sacks of the preseason. Also, Ndamukong Suh and Cameron Wake were involved, which probably warrants mentioning.

3. Dolphins wide receiver Jarvis Landry turned heads with a 46-yard reception in the second quarter that showcased the crafty second-year man's ability to make defenders miss in open space. Landry finished

the night with five catches for 84 yards and showed a nice rapport with Ryan Tannehill. This Dolphins offense might be ready to make the leap.

-- Dan Hanzus

Indianapolis Colts 24, St. Louis Rams 14

1. Despite a lot of penalties from his teammates and poor protection, Nick Foles did quite well to complete 10-of-11 passes for 128 yards and a pretty 44-yard touchdown to Chris Givens.
2. Aaron Donald appears to be in midseason form, including one sequence where he dominated the Colts line to get in the backfield on three straight plays.
3. High-priced Colts defensive tackle Art Jones left with an ankle injury on the second play of the game and left the stadium in a boot. The Colts' thin defense can ill afford to lose him.

-- Gregg Rosenthal

Philadelphia Eagles 39, Green Bay Packers 26

1. It's safe to say Chip Kelly's team is prepared for the regular season. After scoring 76 points the last two weeks, the Eagles blitzed the Packers' starting defense to the tune of 39 points in the first half. Sam Bradford had three touchdowns in three drives without an incomplection. His steady progress is the story of the preseason in Philadelphia.
2. Barring a Matt Barkley trade, the Tim Tebow experiment could be ending soon. He failed to convert two tries at a two-point conversion, and fumbled a snap in limited work.
3. Green Bay has more injuries to worry about: Randall Cobb suffered a shoulder injury, and defensive back Micah Hyde had a neck spasm.
4. The Packers didn't start Aaron Rodgers, but Brett Hundley looked fantastic playing the majority of the game. The Packers might have found their long-term backup quarterback; he finished with 315 yards, two touchdowns, and a pick on 31 throws.

-- Gregg Rosenthal

Buffalo Bills 43, Pittsburgh Steelers 19

1. Rex Ryan said he'll choose his starting quarterback on Sunday. It's hard to imagine it not being Tyrod Taylor, who delivered his third-straight solid performance of the preseason. EJ Manuel also played extremely well, but Taylor has been the best man for the job this month. Matt Cassel didn't do much in his time on the field, and appears to be on the outside looking in. Then again, we've given up trying to read Ryan in this QB competition.
2. Ryan had to be scratching his head watching Michael Vick thrive in his Steelers debut. Vick -- who struggled under Ryan with the Jets last season -- delivered a beautiful rainbow deep ball for a 63-yard completion in his first throw as a Steeler.

Vick clearly needs more time with the playbook, as evidenced when he was forced to burn two timeouts in one series, but he showed a surprising lack of rust considering he spent months unattached to an NFL team.

3. Martavis Bryant delivered a dominant first-half performance with receptions of 63, 36 and 39 yards, including one score. He also drew two pass-interference penalties, all against Buffalo's first-team defense. This is what the Steelers will miss if Bryant's four-game suspension holds.

-- Dan Hanzus

Denver Broncos 19, San Francisco 49ers 12

1. The Denver Broncos look to be going with a much more balanced offensive attack this season, which bodes well for the longevity of Peyton Manning. Yet their offense was out of sync during Saturday's win against the San Francisco 49ers, but that's why they play preseason games.

Manning was average against the San Francisco 49ers' defense. He threw an interception while trying to force a ball to Demaryius Thomas, and later missed tight end Owen Daniels wide open in the end zone. Manning finished 14 of 21 for 124 yards with one interception. The team did finish with 110 yards rushing with a running back-by-committee approach.

2. Some of the Broncos' struggles on offense can be attributed to their offensive line. Manning was on the ground far too often. He was sacked three times and twice by NaVorro Bowman in the first quarter. Gary Kubiak has to be concerned with Denver's pass protection heading into the regular season.

3. The 49ers have endured a historically bad offseason, but Bowman is doing his best to make San Francisco fans forget about the drama with the team. Bowman was all over the field for the Niners in the first half. The linebacker had nine total tackles, including two sacks. Bowman was the best player on the field.

4. We're still waiting to see the improvements made by Colin Kaepernick. There were rumblings this offseason that the quarterback looked different after working with Kurt Warner over the summer. Yet the fifth-year quarterback showed some of the same flaws that plagued him last season. He still locks in on his primary target and holds on to the ball too long.

Completing a pass was a struggle for Kaepernick. He finished just 2 of 5 for 13 yards. While Kaepernick was ineffective with his arm, he did hurt the Broncos with his legs. The Nevada product had a couple of nice runs. But his ability to pass from the pocket still leaves much to be desired.

-- Tyler Dragon

Cincinnati Bengals 21, Chicago Bears 10

1. Bengals head coach Marvin Lewis said Andy Dalton's neck injury, which came after a fourth-and-goal QB sneak for a touchdown, is a non-issue and that removing him from the game was simply a precaution. Still, the Bengals might have wanted to get more than 16 plays out of their starter for the night, especially after a performance to forget against the Buccaneers last week.

2. Jay Cutler has quietly been one of the better quarterbacks this preseason statistically. However, this has not manifested itself in points -- as in any points for Bears offensive starters this preseason.

@BradBiggs

#Bears starting offensive unit yet to score a touchdown in preseason action.

We've seen teams carry this malaise into the regular season plenty of times. We've also seen teams like the 2014 Giants come out and score in droves after a miserable preseason. The problem in Chicago, of course, is that Cutler isn't exactly Eli Manning.

3. Part of the Bears' problem? Alshon Jeffery hasn't practiced in almost three weeks after sustaining a calf injury, and he didn't play Saturday. As first-round pick Kevin White undergoes a potentially season-ending procedure, Chicago has to be wondering what happened to its initial vision for this offense.

-- Conor Orr

Postgame: Three Things vs. 49ers

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
August 30, 2015

It wasn't elegant and there were hiccups, but the Broncos emerged from Saturday with their preseason record still unblemished after Juwan Thompson's game-winning touchdown run over the right side of the line powered the Broncos to a 19-12 win at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Before the game, I identified three storylines to watch. Here's how they turned out:

1. GETTING THE OFFENSE INTO RHYTHM.

The first-team offense mounted the kind of lengthy drives it couldn't sustain seven days earlier in Houston. Its first scoring march to a 37-yard Brandon McManus field goal consumed eight minutes, 13 seconds and took 14 plays. Its second field-goal drive gobbled up six minutes and 12 seconds, covering 72 yards in 13 plays.

But the 49ers' blitz stymied the Broncos, and helped knock them off track. Although the Broncos recovered from Navorro Bowman's first sack to get out of second-and-17 via two passes to Jordan Norwood, they couldn't recover from Bowman's second sack, which knocked the team back to second-and-18 from the San Francisco 23-yard-line. Peyton Manning looked for Demaryius Thomas near the end zone on third-and-14, but Thomas had to stop for the pass, and Dontae Johnson hit him as the football arrived, forcing an incomplection.

The 49ers' third sack, a Corey Lemonier blitz that saw him break through unblocked, forced the Broncos to punt early in the second quarter.

"It's not a 'his problem,' or, 'it's this person's problem.' It's all of us as a unit," RB C.J. Anderson said. "It's just mistakes. It's just focus and [being] mentally dialed in, and we'll find a way. We've got a great coaching staff, and we've also got great veteran leaders. We'll find a way to make it happen, and I promise you we'll be ready [for] Week 1."

The Broncos settled down and advanced to the red zone twice more, but got just three points from those drives, as an interception and a failed third-and-goal pass from Manning to Cody Latimer kept the first-team offense out of the end zone.

On that final failed red-zone foray for the first team, Latimer couldn't come up with the football, but TE Owen Daniels was wide open six yards deep in the end zone. Manning didn't target him, a decision he lamented after the game.

"Cody said the [defender] hit his elbow as he was about to catch," Manning said. "I mean, they brought the house. They brought everybody. As a matter of fact I don't think nobody was even covering Owen on the play. I wish I would've looked there but I was kind of keyed in on going to Cody."

2. DEALING WITH A MOBILE QUARTERBACK.

Until the last series of the first half, the Broncos bottled up Colin Kaepernick. Prior to that possession, Kaepernick accounted for minus-13 yards on 0-of-3 passing with two sacks for 13 yards in losses. Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware each sacked Kaepernick once, and did a good job getting in position to contain him and prevent him from taking off into the secondary.

But with 1:39 left in the second quarter, the defense took the field without Ware and Miller; they had obviously shown enough.

"I said, 'You get those two out and let everybody continue to play,'" Kubiak recalled telling Defensive Coordinator Wade Phillips.

And although Shane Ray and Shaquil Barrett still mounted pressure, the Broncos were caught out of position and Kaepernick took off, sprinting twice for 53 yards to move the 49ers into field-goal range.

Quarterback runs were the only plays that separated the Broncos' first-team defense from solid statistics against the ground game. Kaepernick and Russell Wilson picked up 65 yards on four carries against the Broncos' No. 1 defense; opposing running backs averaged 4.32 yards per carry.

But if the Broncos' pass defense remains as dominant as it has been, that won't matter. The sacks in the first half ensured that the 49ers finished the first half with zero passing yards, and the first-team defense permitted just 33 yards through the air the entire preseason and racked up four sacks.

3. AVOIDING INJURIES.

T.J. Ward was briefly treated on the Broncos' sideline, but was back up and standing and was fine. Omar Bolden was treated on the field, but only had the wind knocked out of him; he too, was fine.

The Broncos' first goal was to emerge from Saturday's game in good health. Mission accomplished. If Chris Harris Jr. and Emmanuel Sanders can complete their healing from training-camp hamstring injuries and the next two weeks of practice can pass without incident, the Broncos will have their full complement of first-teamers for Week 1 with the lone exception of Ryan Clady on injured reserve. That's as good a situation as the Broncos could hope to find.

Kubiak said that Harris would have played if Saturday's game was in the regular season, and that Sanders would have been "very close" to playing.

Ups, downs for Peyton Manning and the Broncos' first team

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
August 30, 2015

The results were different, but the frustration was the same for the Broncos' offense as it concluded its work at halftime of Saturday's 19-12 preseason win over the San Francisco 49ers.

Unlike last week, the offense mounted some consistent drives. After a first-series three-and-out, the Broncos marched into the red zone on three of their next four possessions, including two drives that took 13 and 14 plays. But the Broncos mustered just two field goals for six of a possible 21 points.

A combination of first- and second-teamers that included QB Brock Osweiler scored touchdowns in Seattle and Houston, but the entire first-team offense finished its nine possessions over the last two weeks with six points, an interception, 18 first downs and 263 yards.

"Super frustrating," said RB C.J. Anderson. "You go out there and you put a good drive together, you move the ball well, and we're just not finishing, and that's just something we've got to go work on.

"We'll go back and look at the tape, we'll get better and we'll definitely be finishing Week 1, I can promise you that."

Peyton Manning finished the first half with 14 completions in 21 attempts for 124 yards. But he had one pass for Demaryius Thomas intercepted in the end zone by Kenneth Acker, and another to Thomas that was broken up by Dontae Johnson, forcing the Broncos to settle for their first field goal.

Manning was sacked three times, including two on blitzes by NaVorro Bowman that weren't picked up by the running backs. A third sack came when Corey Lemonier took advantage of good coverage and breached the pocket unblocked, with every blocker already engaged.

"[Bowman] timed up some pretty good blitzes so I kind of give them credit on those plays," Manning said.

In all three cases, Manning anticipated contact and headed for the grass before he absorbed a crunching hit.

The Broncos ran more plays under center than they did last week with the first-team offense; 26 of their 41 first-half snaps saw Manning work under center. Manning was 9-of-14 for 72 yards with an interception on shotgun snaps, and 5-of-7 for 52 yards with no interceptions working under center, but he was sacked three times as the 49ers cranked up their blitzes.

"I feel pretty confident from a coaching standpoint we can go fix those things," Head Coach Gary Kubiak said of the sacks from under center. "We're going to continue to do a lot of things offensively and we just have to do some of them a lot better than we did tonight."

"I'm pretty comfortable doing that," Manning said of his work under center. "I've been doing that for a long time. I guess we've been in the shotgun a little bit more as of late but I've definitely played under center for a lot of my career so I feel pretty good doing that."

The Broncos' first team had as many first downs under center (seven) as from out of the shotgun. Their first-down rate was a bit higher from the shotgun (one every 2.14 snaps) than under center (one every 3.71), but they also ran much more often under center.

"I think we continue to run the ball pretty effectively. We have to make some big plays off of that," Kubiak said. "If you're going to do that, you're usually going to do that under center, selling the run and doing those types of things."

Broncos evaluate progress after extensive first-team looks

By Allie Raymond
DenverBroncos.com
August 30, 2015

Three games into the preseason and just two weeks away from the first game of the regular season, the Broncos have shown glimpses of brilliance and areas for improvement.

A late-game rally lifted Denver over the 49ers, 19-12, Saturday night in their first home game of the preseason at Sports Authority Field at Mile High. But just because the Broncos notched another win in the preseason, it doesn't mean the team is up to where they think they should be this point in the season.

Some would say that the third game of the preseason is the 'dress rehearsal', or the closest we'll get to see real action before the regular season. The Broncos' first-team offense and defense saw playing time for a full half, the most they've had all preseason. There's still another week of preseason games on the slate, but even then starters don't usually see much playing time.

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On the offense, Denver struggled to find their rhythm in the first half with their first-team offense. At the conclusion of the first two frames, Denver came up short on three red-zone attempts despite netting 182 offensive yards.

For veteran right guard Louis Vasquez, he saw plenty for the Broncos' offensive line to work on.

"I was a little disappointed. We didn't score in the red zone," Vasquez said. "We were put in some tough spots, but no matter what, whatever the coaches call, we've got to respond and we've got to get in the end zone."

Entering his sixth season in the NFL, Vasquez has had plenty of experience working out the kinks in the preseason. But in his opinion, he says the third game of the preseason is supposed to be a team's worst.

"For vets, you want to feel like you're getting back to your game, where you're supposed to be," Vasquez said. "It's obviously going to be -- it's supposed to be your worst game of the year, and you're supposed to build on that, but as a vet, you want to be feeling where you're back on top of your game, you're getting back to where you need to be for opening week of the regular season."

On the other side of the ball, the defense was particularly stingy against the 49ers' offense. The defense saw three sacks from as many players, managed hold San Francisco to zero net passing yards in the first half and to just 11 first downs in the entire game.

Safety T.J. Ward says he thinks the team is in a good place at this point, but like always, there are things that need to be worked on.

“I think we played pretty well today,” said Ward. “[We’re] just looking to get better. We had a couple of busts that we capped out a few times in big situations, so just get better.”

Peyton's Take: Still finding an identity

By Christine Williamson

DenverBroncos.com

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In his second appearance this preseason, Peyton Manning went 14-for-21 for 124 yards. Early mistakes caused the offense to fail to capitalize on three trips into the red zone. While Manning recognizes the offensive struggles, he feels the unit still has time to grow as the season goes on.

"I think it's important for us to improve through the season," Manning said. "Would we like to be a finely tuned machine going into week one? Sure.

"[There is] some newness of some different players and some different things that we're doing -- and that's what we're working toward, certainly -- but I think the key is for us to improve through the season."

With WR Emmanuel Sanders still out with a hamstring injury and the young line up front still being developed with G Evan Mathis working to be ready for the regular season, the offense has some kinks that it needs to work through. However, Manning feels the offense can still produce and find its identity as it develops.

"Now, we're not making the excuses," Manning said. "You can still win games as you're still finding your identity and figuring out things that you can hang your hat on.

"We've got some starters out potentially with Emmanuel and obviously going to have good competition there with Evan [Mathis] and Max [Garcia] and whatever the rotation ends up at the offensive line. So we're still very much kind of figuring out who we are and kind of what we're going to be as far as the things we can really hang your hat on. And I think we'll develop those still throughout the season. I still think we can win games as we are developing that identity."

The defense shined. Sacks from DeMarcus Ware, Von Miller and Shane Ray increased the Broncos' preseason sack total to 15. While Manning hopes the offense finds its identity as the season progresses, going against a tough defense daily in practice gives the offense the competition it needs in order to improve.

"It's been good work for us going against them throughout training camp, going against their linebackers and our guys up front trying to block their front [and] trying to get open against their secondary," Manning said. "It's been a good test and I think that will make us better, as well, throughout the season."

Danny Trevathan shakes rust off in return

By Ben Swanson

DenverBroncos.com

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After months of patient recovery and rehabilitation following a difficult season plagued by injuries, ILB Danny Trevathan made his return to the football field in a game setting for the first time since Dec. 14, 2014.

Though he finished with a single tackle and didn't play an entire half, the return was triumphant. He regained the confidence that he consistently displayed with in years past, made some plays, stayed healthy and helped the defense refuse to give up a single net passing yard in the first half to go with only three 49ers first downs.

"It felt good," Trevathan began. "I had to get the little nervousness out of my system. But I felt good being out there and getting that thump out of the way and just getting ready for the regular season. It was a good game for me to go out there and give it a shot."

With Trevathan joining Brandon Marshall on Saturday night, it meant that this game showcased the expected starting lineup for the interior linebacking corps for the first time.

Marshall, who made his return from injury a week earlier in Houston, knew exactly what Trevathan would encounter in his first game back.

"We just talked about getting on the field and not thinking about our injuries," Marshall said. "If we're going to be out there, just play with confidence and knowing that everything's going to be all right. That's all I really talked about. I didn't really give him any advice or anything."

"It's just about him getting comfortable again, playing on that knee and getting comfortable with the defense and he'll be lights out," Marshall concluded.

Amid all the weight of the evening, of the return and what it meant, Trevathan ultimately was able to free his mind with the philosophy of Defensive Coordinator Wade Phillips.

"I love the way Coach Wade gave it to us," Trevathan said. "He just told us to go out there, play and have fun. He says just have fun and play ball, and that was just a burden lifted off me because I like to go have fun and be full speed."

Broncos vs. 49ers: First-half sacks and safety set tone

By Ben Swanson

DenverBroncos.com

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The Broncos took a 8-3 lead into halftime, led by a sack by DeMarcus Ware for a safety on Colin Kaepernick.

Defense was the name of the game in the first half for the Broncos, allowing the 49ers to reach only three downs in the first half, and none in the first quarter. At the end of the first quarter, San Francisco had negative-10 yards passing, due to Von Miller's sack and no complete passes for Kaepernick.

Miller's sack came on the first passing play of the game for the 49ers.

Early in the second quarter, the Broncos would get their second sack, this one by Ware to add two points on the board. Kaepernick sensed the hit was coming, but he couldn't get the ball out of the end zone.

With 10 yards lost to Miller's sack and three to Ware's sack, the 49ers' 13 total first-half passing yards matched the yards lost to sacks.

In the second half, defense continued to dominate with Shane Ray racking up sack number three for the Broncos. In the fourth quarter with 6:29 left, Ray took down Blaine Gabbert for a loss of four yards.

Three Things to Watch: Broncos-49ers

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
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For many years, the Broncos and 49ers had a preseason rivalry -- as absurd as that collision of words may be. It was called the "Battle of the Best in the West," and the sides competed for a trophy that sits in the front lobby of the headquarters building at what is now called the UHealth Training Center.

The plaque at the trophy's base has not been updated since 2000, when the Broncos defeated the 49ers 28-24 to close that year's preseason at 4-0. They've met in the preseason seven times since then, with the Broncos winning four, but never again has the winner of the preseason series been called the "Best in the West."

Nevertheless, the connections between the clubs have never quite faded. And now, with former 49ers quarterbacks coach Gary Kubiak now guiding the Broncos, the clubs will spar Saturday, capping a four-day period that included two joint practices.

What are the storylines worth watching on Saturday?

1. GETTING THE OFFENSE INTO RHYTHM.

Last week, two penalties and two dropped passes were the blown fuses that kept the offense from working as intended. The infractions helped contribute to the long-yardage situations the Broncos faced: first-and-20, second-and-17 and third-and-10, among others. The drops, both of which came on third down, scuttled drives and ensured that the No. 1 offense would average just 4.75 plays per series, including two three-and-outs.

"I just want to see us continue to get better," Head Coach Gary Kubiak said. "Last week, we were poor on third downs. We were poor in short yardage. One thing about this league, it's probably always something every week. We need to go make some plays. We've been moving the ball. We need to stay on the field better."

That being said, Executive Vice President/General Manager John Elway knows that there will be some hiccups before the offense reaches its potential.

"It's going to be a work in progress through the year, too. We're not going to be kicking on all cylinders. We'd like to, but ... we know it's a work in progress for this offense and people are going to continue to get more and more comfortable with it, even after we start the regular season. I think the progress of where we are right now is good."

Individually, the Broncos would like to see continued growth from young offensive linemen Ty Sambrailo, Max Garcia and Matt Paradis. Even though Garcia is expected to be supplanted by Evan Mathis after he's up to speed, these snaps will help Garcia, who still projects as a long-term starter.

WR Cody Latimer could also use a breakout game after his involvement was mostly limited to blocking last week, when he caught one pass for eight yards.

"You just want to see him making plays," Kubiak said. "He's a hard worker. He does the right thing. He's in the right place, but it's time for him to start making plays on the ball, coming up with big plays. The good news with him is he has worked as basically a starter from OTAs through camp and everything. Everything's in place for Cody to grow up and have a big year. I like the way he works. [He] just needs to keep coming."

2. DEALING WITH A MOBILE QUARTERBACK.

One of the most valuable aspects of this week's work was the exposure to 49ers QB Colin Kaepernick, a fleet-footed passer who can extend plays and leads an offense that utilizes the zone-read option to catch foes off-balance.

"It's something our guys obviously don't see from us," Kubiak said. "You're always trying to put yourself through those situations."

Denver's defense is blessed with speed, particularly on the edges. Sometimes that leads to over-pursuit and getting caught out of position. But the Broncos' linebackers were savvy enough to avoid that during practices Wednesday and Thursday, and similar success Saturday will help them in the regular season, when four opponents will likely be led by quarterbacks who were among the NFL's top 10 rushers at the position (Alex Smith in both ends of the Chiefs series, Minnesota's Teddy Bridgewater and Indianapolis' Andrew Luck.

3. AVOIDING INJURIES.

With the starters expected to play to at least halftime, the hold-your-breath period of the game will last longer than at any other point this month. The Broncos have not hit this point unscathed; Ryan Clady's torn ACL means that their man-games lost to injuries by starters this year will be no fewer than 16, and Emmanuel Sanders and Chris Harris Jr. missed time with hamstring injuries in the last three weeks.

But Harris played last week and was back at practice this week before sitting out Thursday's work. Sanders' target is Week 1, and he could see some practice time next week. Inside linebackers Danny Trevathan and Brandon Marshall will line up together in a game for the first time since last Dec. 14; Trevathan is expected to see approximately 20 snaps of work.

Nothing matters more than the health of the team. Emerge with no further injuries, and the team can call the night a success to some degree, no matter what the scoreboard reveals.