

Broncos' first victory shows potential, possible revival of one key positional group

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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The Broncos watched their 17-point lead nearly fade away in about a minute's time. The momentum shifted. The thunderous roar of the crowd tapered. The rhythm of the offense sputtered behind a pair of turnovers that led to two Chargers touchdowns.

It was midway through the fourth quarter late Monday when the Broncos turned into spectators with front-row seats to their own unraveling.

And then it turned again.

Quarterback Trevor Siemian, on first-and-10, lined up in the shotgun at Denver's 25-yard line and chucked the ball up field, over the shoulder of Chargers linebacker Kyle Emanuel and into the hands of tight end Virgil Green.

"We ran a play action, and as soon as the ball was snapped, it was a track meet," Green said. "I ran past the linebacker and I won. We made it work out. I wished we could've scored on that drive, but I think it did spark us a little bit."

The 44-yard completion was Siemian's latest connection with a tight end up the middle. In the first quarter, he hit Jeff Heurman for a 20-yard strike that helped set up the Broncos' first score. In the second quarter, he found A.J. Derby for a nine-yard grab on a third down en route to a touchdown.

Green's catch was the longest by a Broncos tight end since November 2013, when Julius Thomas caught a 74-yard touchdown from Peyton Manning, and it was a sign that maybe, just maybe, the positional group that has lagged for the past two years is experiencing a revival under offensive coordinator Mike McCoy.

Heurman, Derby and Green combined for five catches and 98 yards. Broncos tight ends averaged only 36.9 yards per game last season.

"That's Mike McCoy's offense," coach Vance Joseph said. "Everyone gets an opportunity. Facing a cover-three team, that was the game plan, to expose the schemes of the cover-three system. It worked. Virgil made a huge play. That was a huge play to get us down into the field-goal range. We missed the field goal, but that play he made was huge."

The expectation when McCoy was rehired in January and later joined by tight ends coach Geep Chryst was that the group would get a jump-start it sorely needed. Variations and emphasis on a more attacking offense, as Joseph has described, were at the crux of the plan.

The tight ends certainly hoped for such as they reviewed film of Chargers tight ends Antonio Gates and Hunter Henry, who combined for 1,026 receiving yards and 15 touchdowns last season, when McCoy

was their head coach. They heeded the early teachings of Chryst, whose time as a play-caller helped to paint the full picture of Denver's new offense. And they turned to 2009-12, McCoy's first stint as Denver's offensive coordinator, as a reminder of what could be.

"I remember games where we would go no-huddle the entire game and stay in 11 personnel (one running back, one tight end, three receivers) all the way through and let Peyton Manning do his no-huddle show and put up a bunch of points," former Broncos tight end Joel Dreessen recalled this year. "And then there were games where he would run the ball. We'd get in 22 personnel (two RBs, two TEs, one WR) and grind away the clock, and he'd really manage the game.

"When he says he's going to play to the strengths of his players and attack each defense on a week-to-week basis, I really believe him."

On Monday night, McCoy did. Receiver Demaryius Thomas played 60 snaps, or 87 percent of the offense, and Emmanuel Sanders played 53 (77 percent). The intent was twofold: Joseph has said he wants his receivers on the field to both make plays and create them.

"Having D.T. and having Emmanuel outside, you're going to see a bunch of shell coverage, where they're doubling those guys with two high safeties and two low corners, so obviously, the one-on-one matchup is going to be inside versus the backers," Joseph said Tuesday. "So having Virgil and Heuerman and Derby all catch balls last night inside in the seams, that's going to be huge for us."

Green played 45 snaps, the most of Denver's tight ends, and received an 86.4 run block grade by Pro Football Focus, third-best among NFL tight ends in Week 1.

Afterward, he credited a new outlook from Chryst, who encouraged him to not overthink the process and "have fun." The win helps with both. So do the numbers.

"I think over the last few years, that's been my biggest issue. I've tried too hard to show people what I can do in the pass game," Green said. "(Monday), I went out there and had fun. I let the opportunities come to me. Collectively, I think we did a great job, not just in the pass game but the run game as well."

Jhabvala vs. Kiz: Against Cowboys, is Dak Prescott or Ezekiel Elliott the bigger threat for Broncos?

By Nicki Jhabvala and Mark Kiszla

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Does Dak Prescott or Ezekiel Elliott present the bigger challenge for the Broncos D on Sunday?

Kiz: And now it gets real. The Broncos held on by Shelby Harris' fingertips to beat the Los Angeles Chargers Monday night. That was a must-win at home against the worst team in the AFC West. Now Denver gets a real test, against the Dallas Cowboys, who are legitimate Super Bowl contenders. So what's the biggest chore for the Broncos: shutting down quarterback Dak Prescott or running back Ezekiel Elliott?

Jhabvala: Given the way the Broncos' defense played last season, I would imagine most would say Elliott poses the bigger problem. The Broncos' run defense tanked to No. 28 in the league and the pass defense ranked No. 1 for the second year running. It's a pick-your-poison debate, but after Week 1 this year, when the Broncos' run defense held its own against Melvin Gordon, I'm inclined to say Prescott poses the bigger challenge. The Broncos' secondary and pass rush held Philip Rivers to only 192 passing yards, but they had their mistakes, and some of them could have been much more costly than they ended up being.

Kiz: Let's take a stroll down memory lane to the 2016 NFL draft. Oh, nevermind. I thought Paxton Lynch was a better choice than Prescott, too. My bad. My excuse: I was too far away to measure a QBs dedication to craft. Prescott has the drive to keep getting better. And the smarts to know he better not mess with Denver cornerbacks Aqib Talib or Chris Harris, Jr. But Prescott is what makes the Cowboys' offense go.

Jhabvala: Agree. While we're on the topic of the 2016 NFL draft, just a friendly reminder that the Cowboys tried to get Lynch but were outbid by the Broncos. They "settled" on Prescott in the fourth round after failing to get Lynch or Connor Cook. Everyone whiffed on Prescott. He showed out in Year 1 then began Year 2 Sunday with an impressive performance: 24-of-39 passing, 268 yards, one touchdown. One advantage the Broncos do have this year is Ron Leary, the Cowboys' former guard who surely has some intel on Prescott and their offense.

Kiz: Denver's run defense was the most impressive aspect of the win over the Chargers. The Elliott case reminds us NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell is a pro at making money, but a total amateur as judge, jury and executioner. So, barring another twist in his legal case, Elliott will be on the field against the Broncos. Hold him under 75 yards rushing, and Denver's chances of winning increase to better than 50 percent. But if Elliott goes for 100 on the ground ...

Jhabvala: If Elliott goes for 100 on the ground most any team would be in trouble. He's rushed for 100-plus in nine games, playoffs included, in his career. The Cowboys have won seven of those. Prescott has passed for at least 245 yards in 11 games. The Cowboys have won 10 of those. On the flip side, the Broncos were 1-1 when allowing a 100-plus-yard rusher last season and 2-2 when allowing at least 245

passing yards. Prescott and Elliott are both dangerous, and even more lethal together. But the Broncos' run defense showed improvement Monday and if they can contain Prescott, I think they have a chance.

Multiple former Broncos among Pro Football Hall of Fame nominees for 2018

By Nicki Jhabvala
Denver Post
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Multiple former Broncos are in the running for the Pro Football Hall of Fame's Class of 2018.

Receiver Rod Smith, center Tom Nalen, linebacker Karl Mecklenburg, defensive linemen Neil Smith and Michael Dean Perry, cornerback Ty Law, coach Dan Reeves, and safeties Steve Atwater, John Lynch, Brian Dawkins and Dennis Smith are among the 108 modern-era nominees announced Tuesday evening.

The group includes 53 offensive players, 38 defenders, five special-teams players and 12 coaches.

The list will be pared to 25 semifinalists in November and then 15 finalists in January. Those 15, plus senior finalists, Robert Brazile and Jerry Kramer, and contributor finalist, Bobby Beathard, will be presented to the Hall of Fame's selection committee for a final vote on the eve of Super Bowl LII in Minnesota, on Feb. 3, 2018.

The full list of 2018 nominees:

(* – finalist in 2017; italics = first year of eligibility)

Quarterbacks: Randall Cunningham, Rich Gannon, Donovan McNabb, Steve McNair, Phil Simms

Running backs: Tiki Barber, Earnest Byner, Roger Craig, Corey Dillon, Eddie George, Edgerrin James, Lorenzo Neal, Fred Taylor, Herschel Walker (also KR), Ricky Watters

Wide receivers: *Isaac Bruce, Donald Driver, Henry Ellard (also PR), Torry Holt, Chad Johnson, Randy Moss, *Terrell Owens, Sterling Sharpe, Jimmy Smith, Rod Smith, Steve Smith, John Taylor, Hines Ward

Tight ends: Mark Bavaro, Ben Coates, Ferrell Edmunds, Jay Novacek

Offensive linemen: Willie Anderson (T), Matt Birk (C), *Tony Boselli (T), Lomas Brown (T), Ruben Brown (G), Ray Donaldson (C), *Alan Faneca (G), Bill Fralic (G/T), Jay Hilgenberg (C), Chris Hinton (G/T), Kent Hull (C), Steve Hutchinson (G), *Joe Jacoby (T), Mike Kenn (T), *Kevin Mawae (C/G), Tom Nalen (C), Nate Newton (G), Bart Oates (C), Jeff Saturday (C), Richmond Webb (T), Steve Wisniewski (G)

Defensive linemen: La'Roi Glover (DT/NT), Leonard Marshall (DE/DT), Keith Millard (DT/NT/DE), Leslie O'Neal (DE), Michael Dean Perry (DT/DE), Simeon Rice (DE), Richard Seymour (DT), Neil Smith (DE), Greg Townsend (DE/NT/LB), Kyle Vanden Bosch (DE), Bryant Young (DT)

Linebackers: Carl Banks, Cornelius Bennett, Tedy Bruschi, Seth Joyner, Ray Lewis, Greg Lloyd, Wilber Marshall, Clay Matthews, Willie McGinest (also DE), Karl Mecklenburg, Sam Mills, Joey Porter, Darryl Talley, Zach Thomas, Brian Urlacher

Defensive backs: Eric Allen (CB), Steve Atwater (S), Ronde Barber (CB/S), LeRoy Butler (S), *Brian Dawkins (SS), Rodney Harrison (S), *Ty Law (CB), Albert Lewis (CB), *John Lynch (S), Dennis Smith (S), Everson Walls (CB), Darren Woodson (S)

Kickers/punters: Gary Anderson (K), Sean Landeta (P), Nick Lowery (K)

Special teams: Brian Mitchell (KR/PR also RB), Steve Tasker (ST also WR)

Coaches: *Don Coryell, Bill Cowher, Tom Flores, Mike Holmgren, Jimmy Johnson, Chuck Knox, Buddy Parker, Richie Petitbon, Dan Reeves, Marty Schottenheimer, Clark Shaughnessy, Dick Vermeil

Coach Vance Joseph says Broncos must fix pass protection issues

By Nick Kosmider
Denver Post
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As tight end Virgil Green streaked down the right seam and hauled in a deep pass from Trevor Siemian on Monday night, it appeared as if the Broncos were about to end the scare.

Back-to-back Denver turnovers in the fourth quarter had given the down-and-out Chargers life. Philip Rivers had thrown two touchdown passes in the span of 70 seconds, cutting a 17-point deficit to three points with seven minutes remaining.

That's when Siemian found Green and absorbed a roughing-the-passer penalty in the process, moving the Broncos all the way down to the Los Angeles 16-yard line.

Then the offense's most glaring weakness Monday night came to the forefront. Back-to-back sacks by Melvin Ingram and Joey Bosa pushed the Broncos back to the 32-yard line, forcing Denver to settle for a 50-yard Brandon McManus field-goal attempt that he pushed right.

The hits on Siemian were consistent throughout the game, causing concern for a quarterback who absorbed too many blows last season.

"The pass protection was not that good," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said bluntly Tuesday. "Again, we're facing two elite rushers in Ingram and Bosa, so we knew it was going to be a chore, but we have to do better there. It was too much pressure on Trevor. It was too many whiffs as far as blocking those speed rushers. We've got to be better."

Rookie left tackle Garrett Bolles and fellow right tackle Menelik Watson had their hands full. The Chargers had four sacks (Ingram and Bosa combined for three), with much of the pressure on Siemian originating from the outside.

Joseph said the Broncos have to get better with the pass protection before hosting the Cowboys on Sunday. Dallas had three sacks of quarterback Eli Manning in its 19-3 victory over the New York Giants on Sunday night.

"We were facing two elite edge rushers last night, and most people don't have two," Joseph said. "But in our division, every team has two. We've got to improve there. There is no excuses there. We've got to play better on the edge as far as blocking speed rushers."

Eye on the Cowboys: Broncos set to host Dallas in Week 2

By Nick Kosmider
Denver Post
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Dallas at Denver, 2:25 p.m., Sunday, KDVR-31

For the record: After a 19-3 victory over the Giants in their opener, the Cowboys have won 14 of their last 16 regular-season games. Dallas, though, did lose its last two road games of 2016, at the Giants and Eagles.

Who's hot: Ezekiel Elliott. The second-year running back opened the season with 104 yards rushing on 24 carries. Elliott, who was awarded an injunction last week that has delayed a six-game NFL suspension, rushed for at least 100 yards in eight games as a rookie, including the postseason.

Who's not: Alfred Morris. It's nitpicking after the Cowboys dominated nearly all facets of the game against the Giants, but the veteran backup had only one yard on four carries, production that underscores the importance of Elliott to the Cowboys.

Key stat: 11,947. That's the number of career receiving yards for Dallas tight end Jason Witten, who surpassed Michael Irvin to become the franchise's leader in that category Sunday. Witten had a team-high seven catches for 59 yards against the Giants, proving he's still a dangerous target in his 15th season.

FYI: Witten's 1,096 catches are the second most for a tight end in NFL history and the second most overall among active NFL players behind Arizona wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald (1,131). Tony Gonzalez holds the record for career catches by a tight end with 1,325.

Streaking: The Broncos have won their last five games against the Cowboys, and they haven't lost to Dallas at home since 1992. Elliott and Cowboys quarterback Dak Prescott weren't even born the last time Dallas won in Denver.

Playerspeak: "You just enjoy the journey. I'm just trying to devour where I am at this moment. It's a great time in my life." — Witten, on setting the Cowboys' career receiving yards record.

Adam Gotsis, Shelby Harris earn praise for play on Broncos defensive line vs. Chargers

By Nick Kosmider
Denver Post
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The Broncos limited the Chargers to just 64 yards rushing on 2.9 yards per carry during their heart-pounding 24-21 victory Monday night.

That result left head coach Vance Joseph praising the work of his defensive lineman Tuesday — two defensive ends in particular.

“I thought Shelby (Harris) played, again, really, really solid,” Joseph said. “I thought (Adam) Gotsis played well. Gotsis played the point of attack very strong on double-teams. You could see his quickness; you could see his length and size. I think Gotsis is coming along. If he stays healthy, he’s what he should be for us. He could be a starter for us. He can rush the passer and he can play the run game.”

Gotsis played on 31 of Denver’s 59 defensive snaps. He faced 11 run plays and made four stops, according to Pro Football Focus. That run stop percentage of 36.4 was the highest among interior defensive lineman in Week 1.

“We just did a great job of not losing our heads and not losing our cool,” Gotsis said. “We just sat in there and played our defense and did what we had to do.”

Injury update. Offensive guard Ron Leary suffered a concussion Monday night and is in the league’s protocol program. Players in the program must pass specific steps before they are allowed to return to the field.

“There’s no time limit on it,” Joseph said. “It’s a protocol we have to follow as far as certain requirements he has to pass before he can play on Sunday, but there’s no time limit.”

Safety Darian Stewart suffered a right groin injury in the fourth quarter. Joseph said he was told by the Broncos’ training staff late Monday night that the injury was “nothing major,” but he expected a more detailed update on Stewart later Tuesday.

Cornerback Brendan Langley suffered a right knee injury.

“He’s walking this morning,” Joseph said. “But we’ll know later (Tuesday) and (Wednesday).”

Von’s playing time. Joseph issued a challenge to Broncos all-pro pass rusher Von Miller to be on the field for more snaps this season. That was the case in the opener Monday night, when Miller played in all but six of the Broncos’ defensive snaps.

Still, Joseph conceded that it’s a balancing act for the Broncos when it comes to monitoring snaps for their best player.

“I know Von wants to play more,” Joseph said. “That was my challenge to Von when I came here. I want him on the field more. Sometimes it can be too much, especially when he’s being chipped by tight ends and backs for 60 snaps. We have to figure out how we can spell him out more.”

Philip Rivers falls short in comeback at Denver Broncos: “This was as loud as I can remember this place”

By Kyle Newman
Denver Post
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Philip Rivers had just thrown an interception on the Chargers’ first drive of the second half, and he immediately raced down to the side judge nearest the play, yelling and gesturing for a defensive pass interference call.

His histrionics elicited only deaf ears from the referee, and the Broncos used the Bradley Roby pick as a momentum boost toward a 24-21 victory at Sports Authority Field at Mile High that dropped the Los Angeles quarterback to 6-7 all-time in Denver on a night in which Rivers was never able to comfortably settle in until it was too little, too late.

“It just felt like we didn’t have any rhythm (in the first half),” Rivers said. “It wasn’t that we were playing terrible. It was just that we weren’t making any plays.”

Following Rivers’ 11-yard touchdown pass to Melvin Gordon late in the second quarter that tied the game at 7-7, the Denver defense consistently leveraged its will upon Rivers in the pocket. The quarterback’s line entering the third quarter — 8 of 14 for 60 yards and a 61.6 rating — demonstrated as much.

BOX SCORE: Broncos 24, Chargers 21

Throughout the first half and into the third quarter, Rivers could be seen pulling his linemen aside after missed blocks and consistently changing the play at the line amid the thunders and rumbles of a near-capacity, orange-crazed crowd. One of those audibles — on Los Angeles’ second possession of the second half — led to a monstrous sack by Shaquil Barrett that punctuated the difficulty of competing in Denver for opposing quarterbacks, who, coming into this season, had a collective 32.8 winning percentage at Sports Authority Field since it opened in 2001.

“This was as loud as I can remember this place,” Rivers said. “I felt like we handled it — we had a false start the first play of the game, but we didn’t have any more silly penalties like that. But it was definitely a home-field advantage, and noise was definitely a factor. It was as hard to communicate as I’ve ever had here. That’s what makes it both so awesome and so challenging.”

The quarterback known for his fiery emotion began to rally the Chargers in the fourth quarter, throwing his second touchdown of the night on a 5-yard strike to Keenan Allen that cut the Chargers’ deficit to 24-14 following the lone interception of the night by Broncos’ QB Trevor Siemian.

A Jamaal Charles fumble on the Broncos’ preceding possession led to another Rivers’ touchdown strike, this time a 38-yard pass to Travis Benjamin that further quieted the home crowd. But Rivers wasn’t able to complete what would have been his 23rd career fourth-quarter comeback, as Los Angeles’ final drive ended with a blocked field goal by Shelby Harris to seal the Broncos’ win.

“He settled us down real good, and the line started picking up the blitzes and the blocks,” said Allen, who finished with five catches for 35 yards and a touchdown. “We finally started moving the ball in the fourth, I think it just took us too long to get moving on offense because we could have made a lot more plays early on.”

Rivers finished 22 of 33 passing for 192 yards with three touchdowns, an interception and a 99.6 rating.

Notes: Broncos run game, on both sides, show game 1 improvement

By Mike Klis

9 News

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Even if it's difficult to draw definitive overall conclusions on the 2017 Denver Broncos based on their near fourth quarter collapse but 24-21 season-opening win Monday night against the Los Angeles Chargers, there were two encouraging signs.

One, they ran the ball and two, they stopped the run.

Both were weaknesses last season. The Broncos rushed for 140 yards against the Chargers, the league's 5th-best week 1 total. Last year, the Broncos ranked 27th in the 32-team NFL with 92.8 rushing yards per game.

The Denver D also allowed just 64 rushing yards on 2.9 yards per carry Monday night, which is tied for 10th in the league. Take away that first-play, 21-yard gain by Melvin Gordon and the Broncos allowed just 43 yards on 21 carries – 2.05 yards per.

What did old coach John Fox used to say? You get what you emphasize.

Broncos general manager John Elway fortified both fronts, especially on the offensive side, during the offseason and offensive coordinator Mike McCoy opened with a commitment to the run.

For starters, it does appear many, if not most of the Broncos' offensive linemen are better run blockers than pass protectors.

"I thought our offensive line really played physical in the run game on double teams, moving those guys out and just getting movement up front," head coach Vance Joseph said Tuesday. "Our backs ran north-south and found some open space to run. That part was very impressive as far as the running game.

"The pass protection was not that good. Again, we were facing two elite rushers in (Melvin) Ingram and (Joey) Bosa. We knew it was going to be a chore, but we have to be better there. It was too much pressure on Trevor (Siemian). There were too many whiffs as far as blocking those speed rushers. It's got to get better."

Von sack skid

Make that five consecutive games, dating back to last season, Von Miller has not had a sack. It's the longest drought of his career. Previously, he had never longer than three games without a sack.

That doesn't mean he hasn't had an impact. With the Chargers so focused on not allowing Miller to beat them, a conservative game plan restricted Philip Rivers to just 60 yards passing entering the fourth quarter.

“We went into the game with a clear game plan to free Von up, but they wouldn’t let us,” Joseph said. “They double-chipped both sides. They chipped both rushers (Miller and Shaq Barrett). When that happens, in my opinion, the coverage has got to take over. Now they are down to three-man routes. We’ve got six defenders on top of three guys. The coverage has to take over when they are chipping both sides and we can’t get pressure. That is going to be the way it is all year.”

“In the past, there has been a great pass rush here. But now we’ve got to kind of reverse it. We’ve got to play tighter coverage to get the rush home more often.”

McManus contract details

9news has obtained details on kicker Brandon McManus’ new four-year, \$14 million contract.

Until his new deal, he was going to draw a \$2.746 million salary as a second-round tendered restricted free agent.

That salary was reduced to \$1 million. To make it up for it, the Broncos gave him a fully guaranteed \$5 million signing bonus -- \$3 million to be paid out now and \$2 million in March.

McManus then makes a \$2.25 million salary in 2018, \$2.75 million in 2019 and \$3 million in 2020.

Because his current year payout was altered, it is technically a new four-year deal rather than a three-year extension. His \$3.5 million annual average ranks 5th among NFL kickers.

Find Wolfe some shoes

Denver standout defensive end Derek Wolfe is frustrated. He’s having trouble finding a size 15-wide pair of game shoes he likes.

“I went through three pair of cleats tonight,” he said after the Broncos’ 24-21 win Monday against the Chargers. “I don’t know, Nike’s not making good cleats this year. I rolled my ankle because of their cleats (during practice August 12). I had to wear cleats that I’ve never worn (Monday). This is the second year in a row I can’t find a cleat. It’s driving me nuts.”

In the end, there was no meltdown as Broncos are 1-0

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 13, 2017

It was a strange vibe for victory around Denver Broncos headquarters here Tuesday.

The Broncos beat the Chargers on Monday night, yet no one felt good about a near total collapse.

Still, thanks to Shelby Harris, the Broncos are undefeated going into their week 2 showdown – that’s right, a showdown -- with the Dallas Cowboys.

“I’ll say this: It’s a hard league,” Broncos head coach Vance Joseph said at the first post-regular season game press conference of his career Tuesday. “Every (win) you get, especially at home in the division, it’s a good win.

“Absolutely, we want to finish better than that. That was sloppy and not who we want to be, but ultimately it is a win first against a really good opponent. Philip Rivers is a special quarterback. You give him a chance from half the field, it’s going to be a tough chore for you. A win is a win. We’ll take it. No apologies for that—none.”

You had to like what you saw from the Broncos offense. For three quarters. You had to like what you saw from the Denver D. For three quarters.

We all thought we would know what kind of team the Broncos have after game 1. But we still don’t know.

More should be known in five days.

Yes, the Cowboys were 13-3 last year and have so much star power in Dak Prescott, Ezekiel Elliott, Dez Bryant and Jason Witten. And Jerry Jones.

But the Broncos have the magic of Mile High. Bring on them Cowboys.

Shelby Harris saves Broncos in 24-21 defeat of Chargers

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 13, 2017

It was late, really late, and Shelby Harris figured the game would get later.

Los Angeles Chargers' kicker Younghoe Koo, in his NFL debut, had just made a 44-yard field goal to tie the score, 24-24, and send the season opener thriller with Harris' Denver Broncos into overtime.

BUT WAIT! Time out. Hold on. Just before Koo kicked, Broncos' head coach Vance Joseph pulled a Gary Kubiak and called a timeout. Koo would have to kick it again. The score went back to 24-21 Broncos with 5 seconds left.

"No clue he called timeout," said Harris, a journeyman defensive end who went from player least expected to make the Broncos' season-opening, 53-man roster to unexpected season-opening hero. "No clue at all. I figure the game's tied. The next thing you know they're waving us back and I was like, "was there a flag? We called time? All right, cool."

Koo kicked it again and this time Harris got deep penetration and his right hand on the ball.

"Right hand is the smart hand," Harris said.

He and fellow defensive end Derek Wolfe were lined up across from the Chargers' right guard, rookie Dan Feeney.

"Me and Wolfe got a great push, we both blew that man up, it hit my three fingers. Where did it fall?" Harris asked his teammates Wolfe and Adam Gotsis.

Even with Harris' paw on the ball, the kick travelled some, but only got to the end line. Harris' block secured the Broncos' 24-21 win and averted what might have been one of the most spectacular single-game collapses in franchise history.

Thanks to the stellar play of quarterback Trevor Siemian and the Denver defense, the Broncos were leading 24-7 with less than 11 minutes remaining. The only way the Broncos could lose was if they self-destructed. They tried. A Siemian interception on a missed pass-interference play and a Jamaal Charles fumble -- both turnover occurred on the Chargers' side of the field -- were followed by back-to-back touchdown throws by Chargers' quarterback Philip Rivers.

In a 70-second span, it went from 24-7 Broncos to 24-21.

"We got too comfortable," Wolfe said. "That's what happens when you get too comfortable. We were thinking, 'we've got this,'" and then all the sudden you see turnovers. If we don't have those turnovers it's a blowout. That's how quick things can turn in the NFL. It's so hard to put your foot on the throat in this league. Especially, Philip Rivers. He don't give up."

The Broncos had a chance to put the game away one more time when a 44-yard completion from Siemian to tight end Virgil Green, followed by a tacked on, roughing-the-passer penalty gave Denver the ball at the Chargers' 16-yard line, first and 10, with 6 minutes and 24 seconds left.

But then Siemian was sacked on back-to-back plays for combined losses of 19 yards. Instead of McManus kicking a gimme field goal, he missed from 50.

At the 2-minute warning, Rivers drove his team from his own 38 to the Broncos' 26, setting up Koo's game-tying field-goal attempt.

Joseph came up with a final-second strategy, much as his mentor Kubiak did for the Broncos in the opener last year.

Call a timeout just before the fateful field goal. Kick it over again. Celebrate victory. Kubiak did it as Graham Gano was making a winning field goal for Carolina, only to be negated by the timeout. Gano then missed his next kick.

The Chargers thought they rallied for overtime as Koo booted a 44-yard field goal as time expired. But Joseph, the Broncos' first-year head coach, called timeout just before the kick.

"I had two timeouts," Joseph said. "I didn't want to leave with those two in my pocket. Just iced the kid and see how he reacted."

Koo reacted fine. Harris just got enough fingers on the ball.

The late-arriving crowd of 74,892 at eventually-to-be-renamed Sports Authority Field at Mile High went bonkers. Late because the game kicked off at 8:21 p.m. Denver time. It ended at 11:15 p.m. But Harris made sure it didn't carry on towards midnight.

"We can't let it get like that," said Broncos' linebacker Brandon Marshall. "We'll take the win, but that can't happen again."

Perhaps, The Great Quarterback Competition steeled Siemian more than most.

After battling with Paxton Lynch for seven months before winning the No. 1 quarterback job, Siemian was ready for the season opener Monday night against the Chargers.

Ready and lucky. After an early pick six was dropped by Chargers cornerback Casey Hayward, Siemian regrouped and led the Broncos to victory.

Siemian threw two touchdown passes to Bennie Fowler III and scored another on a 1-yard run. The Broncos were up 24-7 in the fourth quarter but then turned the ball over twice. Siemian was picked off on a botched screen pass intended for Fowler and Jamaal Charles fumbled.

Siemian completed 17 of 28 for 219 yards and two touchdowns. He also scrambled 19 yards rushing. Rivers was 22 of 33 for 192 yards but with three touchdown throws and an interception.

Football can be a funny game. After both teams exchanged punts to finish their first series, Siemian started the Broncos' second possession by throwing a sideline pass – right to Chargers' cornerback Casey Hayward. The ball landed in Hayward's arms as he was clear of intended receiver C.J. Anderson.

Hayward dropped it. Flat out dropped a pick six.

"He sat on it and, yeah, got lucky there," Siemian said. "Got unlucky on the screen late so you're going to get yours either way."

Siemian not only survived the Hayward scare, he led the Broncos on a 70-yard march. A mix of Anderson runs – he had six carries for 29 yards on the drive – and Siemian passes – he completed 4 of 7 for 41 yards – allowed the Broncos to score their first offensive touchdown of the season.

It was capped when Siemian first drew Chargers' defensive end Joey Bosa offside, then with a free play rolled right and threw a perfect pass to Bennie Fowler III, who broke off into a scramble route, in the back of the end zone.

Instead of 7-0 Chargers on the Hayward pick six, it was 7-0 Broncos on the Siemian pass to Fowler. A 14-point, first-quarter swing.

"Yes, a pick six," said Chargers' first-year head coach Anthony Lynn. "Casey makes those plays all the time. He just did not make it in the game."

Rivers led the Chargers back on their next possession. The big play came on third-and-8 from the Chargers' 39 when Rivers threw a deep pass to Keenan Allen, who was well-covered by Broncos' nickelback Bradley Roby. Only Roby tackled Allen before the ball arrived and was flagged for a 40-yard pass interference penalty.

With the ball at the 21, Chargers' running back Melvin Gordon rushed for 10 yards and then after flipping the field with the change of quarters, caught an 11-yard pass from Rivers for a game-tying touchdown.

The Broncos' go-ahead score was set up by speedy rookie Isaiah McKenzie's 31-yard punt return. With the ball at the Broncos' 47, Siemian converted a third-and-7 with a 9-yard completion to tight end A.J. Derby.

Anderson then ran for 18 yards and the Broncos were in business at the Chargers' 26. Charles had a couple nice runs – his first action in a Broncos' uniform after nine seasons with the Kansas City Chiefs – and then Derby caught a 13-yard strike to the 1.

Siemian rolled right and decided to run it in for the go-ahead score.

To start the second half, Roby atoned for his early penalty by intercepting a Rivers' pass across the middle intended for Allen. The turnover was caused by a safety blitz. Justin Simmons hurried Rivers into his errant throw. Rivers heatedly complained Roby held up Allen on the play but it wasn't called and the Broncos had the ball at the Chargers' 43.

One play after Broncos receiver Demaryius Thomas dropped an easy pass from Siemian, he made a difficult catch down the right sideline for a 29-yard gain setting up first and goal at the 10. Siemian made

it 3 of 3 in red-zone conversions by throwing a 6-yard touchdown to Fowler, their second scoring hookup in the game.

The Broncos were up 21-7 early in the third quarter. After driving down to first-and-goal at the 1, the Broncos couldn't put the game away, settling instead for a short Brandon McManus field goal. Earlier in the day, McManus and the Broncos agreed on a three-year contract extension that included a \$5 million signing bonus.

The only the Broncos could lose a 24-7 lead midway through the fourth quarter was if they gave it away. On third down, Siemian attempted a screen pass into coverage. Fowler was thrown down on the before the pass got to him but there was no call. The ball bounced in the air and safety Adrian Phillips intercepted.

Rivers finished the short-field drive with a touchdown pass to Allen. On the next series, Charles fumbled after a 4-yard run. On the next play, Rivers hit Travis Benjamin for a 38-yard touchdown pass and it was suddenly 24-21 with 7:07 remaining.

Bronco Bits

Broncos star Von Miller awarded Joseph with the game ball for his first head coaching win. ...

Right guard Ron Leary left in the second half with a concussion. He was replaced by Connor McGovern.

...

rookie cornerback Brendan Langley suffered a right knee injury during Cody Latimer's 36kickoff return.

...

Safety Darian Stewart strained his left groin in the fourth quarter. ...

Charles had 10 carries for 40 yards but his fourth quarter fumble nearly marred his Broncos' debut. ...

Anderson finished with 81 yards on 20 carries in a solid performance coming back from last year's season-ending knee surgery.

Why the Broncos MNF game counted as a sell-out, despite empty seats

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 13, 2017

The Denver Broncos had enough empty seats at Mile High on Monday night to accommodate every man, woman and child from Keenesburg, or Elizabeth, or Georgetown.

There were 1,432 unused tickets, but the game was considered a sellout, extending the Broncos' NFL best-single city sellout streak, dating back to 1970.

Sporting events don't typically sell every seat, even for what's considered a "sellout."

Patrick Smyth ✓ @psmyth12

Including tonight, the Broncos have sold out 388 consecutive home games in Denver dating back to 1970. That's the longest streak in the NFL.

9:17 PM - Sep 11, 2017

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Tickets that are distributed, or given away, count as tickets "sold," under the NFL's rules. These tickets could be given to players, the media, other partner organizations, and the allotment given to the other team.

The team tells Next that, on average, 97 percent of tickets are sold, and 3 percent are distributed. The Chargers returned hundreds of tickets from their distributed allotment. Those tickets went up for sale, but even if they didn't sell, they counted toward the sellout because they'd been originally distributed.

If ticket scalpers end up sitting on tickets they can't re-sell, those still count as sold tickets for the purpose of a sellout.

The Broncos correctly point out that they voluntarily announce the number of unused tickets.

Shelby Harris turned optimism into a game-saving play

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

September 13, 2017

Maybe Shelby Harris has just built up callouses for the whole thing.

But minutes after he blocked a Los Angeles Chargers field goal attempt with one second remaining in the Denver Broncos' 24-21 win Monday, nobody had a bigger smile than Harris.

"This is what you want, I'm happy to be 1-0, happy to help the team win," said Harris -- an optimist who has had his optimism tested plenty in his football career. "And happy to finally be part of a great defense, so whatever I can do is what I want to do."

Broncos coach Vance Joseph has said repeatedly that Harris has "earned his way" to get to this point. For his part, Harris has certainly shown vocational stubbornness after being waived six times in his career -- four times by the Oakland Raiders alone -- before he landed with the Broncos on a "futures" contract this past January.

Harris did have some history with Broncos' defensive coordinator Joe Woods when both were with the Raiders in 2014, but he still faced some long odds at a crowded position in the Broncos' defensive line in training camp.

However, Harris did what guys who have been waived once, twice or even six times have to do: He got noticed. In practices and in the preseason games, when Harris was moved up in the rotation because of injuries elsewhere, he made one play after another.

He led the Broncos with three sacks in the preseason. With Jared Crick (back) and Zach Kerr (knee) out of the lineup on Monday night, Harris started at defensive end. He played 33 snaps in all as well as four on special teams, including the blocked kick.

"Shelby has earned his way from the first day of OTAs to training camp," Joseph said. "Through the preseason games, he's earned his way. It's the perfect example of a guy coming into camp and having an outside chance of making the football team, but he really earned his way."

Asked, as he was being congratulated by several teammates, if in July he could have envisioned making the roster let alone a play that decided the Broncos' season opener, Harris paused for a moment and flashed another smile.

"Yeah, I did, can I say that? I can say that, right?" Harris said. "But I think that way, you have to believe and I pride myself going out there to make plays. I feel like every week in the preseason I was showing them why I deserved to be here. But [Monday] was about helping the team win, anything to help the team win."

Things will get crowded again in the defensive front when Crick, who played more snaps than any other Broncos defensive lineman last season, and Kerr return. And Harris knows, as a guy who has bounced

between rosters, practice squads and waiting for a call as an unsigned hopeful, the new week starts almost as soon as the game ends.

"That's how I think now," Harris said. "I just want to be here, contribute, do whatever they need me to do. I'm just happy to get three fingers on that ball."

Broncos intent on getting Von Miller loose in the pass rush

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

September 13, 2017

Von Miller had 73.5 sacks in his first six NFL seasons, so he knows the kind of attention that brings and he also knows sometimes there would be days like Monday.

Miller didn't have a sack in the Denver Broncos' win over the Los Angeles Chargers Monday night, but he impacted almost everything the Chargers wanted to do on offense. Miller finished with four tackles and a hit on Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers.

But it was clear from the first time Rivers dropped back to pass that the Chargers were intent on preventing Miller from getting to Rivers with a steady diet of extra blockers sent his way. And it was exactly what Miller had predicted could happen just days earlier.

"In the National Football League, if a team doesn't want you to get a sack, that's top on their agenda, that's their primary goal -- don't let Von get a sack, don't let him ruin the game, 90 percent of the time, it's not going to happen," Miller said. "You have to find other ways to change the game. You have to find other ways to impact the game. That's what I try to do."

That's all well and good, and Miller certainly has flashed an all-around game when he isn't getting to the quarterback, but Miller and sacks need to go together in the Broncos' defense. Coach Vance Joseph and defensive coordinator Joe Woods said they had some things planned to enable Miller to face more one-on-one blocking and to prevent offenses from ganging up on Miller.

Those things did not quite materialize against the Chargers.

"We went into the game with a clear game plan to free Von up, but they wouldn't let us," Joseph said. "They double chipped both sides."

There were times when Miller looked like he was wading through a subway car to get to the door at rush hour. Joseph said more thought will go into the matter with plenty of games still on the docket.

But Joseph added the team's "No Fly Zone" secondary will have to be even more stingy in those situations. That's saying a lot for a defense that surrendered 115 total yards to the Chargers through three quarters Monday.

Rivers finished with 192 yards passing by night's end. By comparison, the Broncos were the only team to hold Rivers to fewer than 200 yards passing in a game last season -- 178 yards last Oct. 13.

Joseph, though, wants a little more from the secondary, which featured one new starter in Justin Simmons at safety, to make life more difficult for opposing quarterbacks, especially if offenses are forming a line in front of Miller. Shaquil Barrett had the Broncos' lone sack Monday night.

“When that happens, in my opinion, the coverage has got to take over,” Joseph said. “Now they’re down to three-man routes. We’ve got six defenders on top of three guys, so the coverage has to take over when they’re chipping both sides. ... We’ve got to get tighter in coverage, we’ve got to make the rush better by being tighter on receivers. ... Play tighter coverage to get the rush home more often.”

This week the Broncos try their luck against the Dallas Cowboys’ physical front. The Cowboys pounded out 129 hard-earned rushing yards in a win over the New York Giants Sunday night, while the Giants sacked Dak Prescott once in the game.

Miller, too, said he has to find a way, "no matter how guys are blocking me," and that he has to continue to force the issue.

“It’s like I’ve been saying, I just want to affect the game,” Miller said. “If the sacks aren’t coming, I have to be dominant other places. Our defense we can adapt – adapt and overcome – we’ll keep adapting.”

Broncos' pass protection 'was not that good' against Chargers

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

September 13, 2017

If it seemed Monday night, either from the seats inside Sports Authority Field at Mile High or on the sectional of your choice, as if Denver Broncos quarterback Trevor Siemian took too many hits, well you're not alone.

"I thought Trev played well, really, but he was under duress the whole game," said Broncos cornerback Chris Harris Jr. "(Joey) Bosa, (Melvin) Ingram had pressure on him the whole game."

In the big picture Broncos coach Vance Joseph said he would make "no apologies" for the 24-21 victory over the Los Angeles Chargers Monday night -- the Broncos led 24-7 in the fourth quarter -- and the Broncos did get a lot done they can file under quality play. But the pass protection enlisted to keep Siemian out of harm's way didn't make the list.

"The pass protection was not that good ... we have to do better there," Joseph said. "It was too much pressure on Trevor and too many whiffs as far as blocking those speed rushers."

Siemian was sacked four times in the game, took a helmet-to-helmet hit that was flagged as roughing the passer and lost his helmet in a crowd on another play. Not exactly the start to the season the Broncos were hoping for with a quarterback who had offseason shoulder surgery for the pounding he took last season and for a team that expended plenty of money and energy to re-vamp the offensive line this offseason.

Siemian, who said throughout the offseason he would have to do his part by managing the hits he took by "getting the ball out," was able to escape some trouble Monday night with more willingness to pull the ball down and run than he showed last season in his first year as a starter. He scored his first career rushing touchdown against the Chargers when he escaped the pocket, finishing the play with a nifty move around Bosa.

However, Bosa then steamrolled Siemian on another scramble later in the game to show the other side of the coin.

"I think Joey got me one other time so we'll call it even," Siemian said. "We'll see him again (this season) so I'm sure I don't want to see myself in that situation where it's me and him too often."

Joseph said he wanted to see Siemian slide, feet first, before he takes a hit once he leaves the pocket. Monday night Siemian dove, head first, several times to finish plays.

"Obviously you want to be smart but you want to win too," Siemian said. "Whatever it takes. You're thinking about protecting yourself a little bit but shoot, if you're trying to get a first down or you're trying to score, that's all you're thinking about."

The Chargers certainly pressed the issue plenty against rookie tackle Garrett Bolles and right tackle Menelik Watson. Both had difficult moments Monday night, especially when the Broncos left the two to fend for themselves when they were in a bevy of three-wide receiver sets.

It also won't take long for the Dallas Cowboys, the Buffalo Bills, the Oakland Raiders and right on down the line in the Broncos' schedule to decide to do the same. The Broncos' 140 yards rushing against the Chargers will give opposing offenses at least some pause, but it's an issue that won't go away until the Broncos themselves find a solution.

Especially since guard Ron Leary suffered a concussion in the opener and is in the concussion protocol. That forced Connor McGovern into the lineup Monday night, another spot an opposing defensive coordinator would take a long look at to find a path to Siemian. Joseph has also already mentioned several times that each of the Broncos' divisional opponents have two "quality edge rushers."

"Absolutely, again the pass protection was not where it's got to be for us to be a good football team," Joseph said. "... Got to improve there, no excuses there, we've got to play better on the edge as far as blocking speed rushers."

Broncos plan to see a lot of Ezekiel Elliott in the Cowboys' offense

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

September 13, 2017

The legal briefs are for others to worry about, but the Denver Broncos will plan for Sunday's matchup with Dallas Cowboys as if running back Ezekiel Elliott will be every bit as busy against Denver as he was against the New York Giants in Week 1.

"Teams are going to use their best players, and we have to approach like they're going to have their best players," said Broncos linebacker Von Miller.

The NFL had announced a six-game suspension for Elliott on Aug. 11 for a violation of the league's personal conduct policy -- a former girlfriend accused Elliott of domestic violence on separate occasions in July 2016. He was not charged criminally, but that isn't a benchmark for NFL discipline.

However, U.S. District Judge Amos Mazzant blocked the suspension last week. The NFL has appealed the decision, so Elliott may still serve the suspension. Even though the league has asked the appeals court for an expedited decision on Mazzant's ruling, Elliott is expected to be on the field against the Broncos.

Cowboys owner Jerry Jones said Tuesday during his weekly appearance on a Dallas radio station that he expects Elliott to play against the Broncos. Jones did not say whether he expects Elliott to play beyond Week 2.

Broncos coach Vance Joseph was asked Tuesday -- hours after the Broncos' season-opening 24-21 win over the Los Angeles Chargers -- if uncertainty over Elliott's availability would impact how the Broncos prepare.

"It does not," Joseph said. "He's a part of their football team. We watched the tape from last week; he's out there, so that's who we're preparing for."

The tape from the Cowboys' win over the Giants showed Elliott was on the field for 60 of 74 snaps on offense. Alfred Morris, the only other Dallas running back to appear in the game, had just eight snaps. The Cowboys also played two fullbacks in the game for a total of four plays.

Elliott had 24 of the team's 31 carries against the Giants; Morris had four, and quarterback Dak Prescott ran three times. Those 24 carries were more than Elliott had in all but three games last season -- when he romped to 1,631 rushing yards and won the league's Offensive Rookie of the Year Award.

Run defense was a weakness last season for the Broncos, who finished 9-7 and missed the playoffs for the first time since 2010. It was a big part of the offseason emphasis for Joseph and first-year defensive coordinator Joe Woods.

The Broncos also invested some money, signing nose tackle Domata Peko and nose tackle/defensive end Zach Kerr in free agency. The early returns were good for the Broncos as they held a Los Angeles

Chargers team intent on running the ball Monday night to 64 yards on 22 attempts -- an average of just 2.9 yards per carry.

Twenty-one of those yards came on Melvin Gordon's first carry of the game, but he managed just 33 more yards on 17 attempts the rest of the night.

Peko, in his 12th season, played just under half of the defensive snaps (27 of 59 overall), so the question will be how the Broncos stay stout up front against the Cowboys when he's not in the lineup.

What if the Cowboys go to a three-wide receiver look and the Broncos answer with their package of six defensive backs? In that scenario, Broncos safety Will Parks is near the line of scrimmage, essentially as a weakside linebacker. The Broncos stymied the Chargers' run game in that look, for the most part.

Gordon had a 5-yard run and Branden Oliver had a 6-yard run against the lighter formation, but the Broncos consistently prevented the Chargers from spreading things out and pounding away. Elliott's size-speed combination, however, is a different task entirely.

"I feel like they brought me here to stop the run," Peko has said. "It's important, we know that. Every week that's always going to be important, week after week, great back after great back. You have to enjoy the challenge of that."

Vance Joseph endures tense ending to win Broncos debut

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
September 13, 2017

Vance Joseph watched his team go from cruising along to a nearly colossal collapse over a nightmarish fourth quarter.

In the end, the newest Denver Broncos head coach was presented the game ball to go with all that unexpected late-game stress.

Joseph and the Broncos walked away a 24-21 winner over the Los Angeles Chargers on Monday night when Shelby Harris sliced through and blocked kicker Younghoe Koo's 44-yard field goal attempt with a second left.

"It's a hard league," said Joseph, whose team led 24-7 heading into the final 11 minutes.

No arguments from Anthony Lynn, who also was making his head coaching debut for the Chargers. It marked the first time two black head coaches worked their first NFL game against each other.

This was more of the same for the Chargers, a team that had five losses by four points or less last season.

"There are some things we could've done better to help ourselves," Lynn said.

Philip Rivers caught fire in the fourth quarter and guided the Chargers into range for a game-tying field goal.

Koo nailed it — but Joseph called timeout just before he kicked. The rookie coach wanted to ice the rookie kicker.

Koo made good contact on the second attempt as well, but Harris was right there to block it with the right side of his hand.

"I'm going to be real with you: I have no clue what happened," Harris said. "I felt it. I just couldn't tell you where I felt it. It just happened."

The Broncos held Rivers and the Chargers offense to 115 total yards heading into the final quarter. But the Broncos didn't do themselves any favors with drives down the stretch ending like this: Interception (bounced off a defender's foot), fumble (Jamaal Charles), missed field goal (Brandon McManus, who just signed a new deal) and a punt.

That opened the doors for Rivers.

"We just waited too long to get started but then you could feel it," said Rivers, who threw for 132 of his 192 yards passing in the final 15 minutes. "You could feel it in the place."

Joseph kept his team focused by imploring them to remember it wasn't over. He was right.

"Everybody in the stands was getting ready to leave," Broncos receiver Emmanuel Sanders said. "We thought it was over and then the next thing you know it's a three-point game and they're getting ready to tie ... and it's about to go into overtime."

Harris' heroics saved the Broncos from blowing a 17-point fourth-quarter lead for just the second time in their history.

FOWLER'S TDS: Bennie Fowler doubled his career touchdown total with a pair of TD grabs, hauling in Trevor Siemian's passes from 5 and 6 yards out.

"It was amazing. It felt great to go out there and get two touchdowns. I had two touchdowns in my career coming into the game so it feels good. I'll continue to build on that," Fowler said.

Fowler was put on notice when the Broncos drafted wide receivers Carlos Henderson and Isaiah McKenzie, but he earned the job as Denver's No. 3 pass catcher behind Sanders and Demaryius Thomas.

"I've been on the same page with Trev now for three years. He's part of the reason I made the team as an undrafted rookie so I appreciate him," Fowler said.

TIGHT END TRIO: The Broncos got the most out of their tight ends, who combined for 98 yards receiving.

A.J. Derby had three catches for 34 yards, Virgil Green one for 44 and Jeff Heuerman two for 20.

"Awesome," Joseph said. "All three guys caught balls for (nearly) 100 yards. That's Mike McCoy's offense. Everyone gets an opportunity."

DUD OF A DUO: Antonio Gates is still tied with Tony Gonzalez for most touchdowns (111) in NFL history by a tight end. The Broncos limited him to two catches for 17 yards and held him out of the end zone. They also held Hunter Henry without a catch.

"We have to get those guys targets as coaches," Lynn said. "We have to do that. They were double-teaming Antonio, but we have to find those guys. We have to find those guys and dial up plays for them. They're too good of players not to get targeted, so that was on us."

REPEAT PERFORMANCE: This game was reminiscent of last season's opener, when the Broncos beat Carolina as Graham Gano missed a 50-yard field goal with 4 seconds left.

"That's how they're going to be — going to be like that all season," Broncos cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said. "We know we're a better team than we displayed in that third and fourth quarter. We'll fix that and be able to finish the game even better."

Broncos' 7 takeaways from win over Chargers

By Troy Renck

KMGH

September 13, 2017

For football fans locked into fantasy results and bragging rights, NFL games demand rapid reactions. There is no marinating. Another game looms six days away. The Broncos won their opener, locking into a three-way AFC West tie for first place with the Chiefs and Raiders.

Monday was not a must-win game, but as multiple players admitted to me afterward, it was a game they could not lose. So Broncos' fans, let your hearts sink back into your chests and allow the Tums to settle in your bellies. Denver won, and there were promising signs of progress with doses of concern. My Denver7 takeaways as the Broncos begin preparation for the Dallas Cowboys:

1) Trevor is better.

The idea Trevor Siemian reached his potential last season was always unfair. He played with a compromised left shoulder and behind an offensive line that couldn't protect him or create holes in the running game. Monday, Siemian displayed more versatility. He extended plays, and showed a dangerous penchant for running the ball. The Broncos had 14 passing first downs, and converted 8 of 15 third downs after succeeding only 36 percent of time in those situations last season.

2) The Broncos showed balance

The key to a better Siemian is improvement around him. The Broncos showed commitment to the run, and achieved balance. Siemian dropped back 32 times (including four sacks). The Broncos ran 36 times. Denver produced 3.9 yards per carry. Not special, but adequate enough to keep the Chargers off balance. The Broncos ran play action on Monday almost twice more than they averaged a year ago. It will be key this week to slowing Dallas' improved pass rush.

3) Hello, Gotsis and Harris

When teams achieve special goals, it means roster contributions run deep. Defensive end Adam Gotsis, who was overmatched a year ago as a rookie, showed off his added 15 pounds of muscle and strength at the point of attack. And Shelby Harris continued to build off a terrific preseason. The Broncos allowed 117.8 yards rushing per game last year. San Diego collected 64 yards, and 21 came on the first carry of the game.

4) Virgil was right

OK, maybe Virgil Green (pictured above) did not show he was more athletic than Antonio Gates and Hunter Henry, but the Broncos' tight ends outplayed the Chargers group. Consider it one of Monday's biggest surprises. A.J. Derby (3-for-34), Jeff Heueman (1-for-20) and Green (1-for-44) all delivered first down grabs. It was a reaction to the coverage, but it also creates optimism about a third passing game weapon emerging.

5) Von center of attention

The Chargers refused to allow Von Miller to wreck their game plan. They doubled him. They chipped him. According to Pro Football Focus, Miller finished with one quarterback hit and four hurries. His relentless pursuit opened the way for Shaq Barrett to deliver a sack. However, Barrett tired from extensive playing time (54 of 59 snaps, one more than Miller). Going forward, the Broncos will need Kasim Edebali to spell Miller and Barrett to keep them fresh until Shane Ray returns for the seventh game. Edebali appeared on only five snaps.

6) Watson has to improve

The Broncos pass protection, as coach Vance Joseph admitted Tuesday, was "not good." Right tackle Menelik Watson continued to struggle. It bears watching since it will be difficult for right guard Ron Leary to return on a short week from a concussion. Siemian absorbed too many hits. Watson needs to improve. His backup is Donald Stephenson, and he slumped in the preseason finale.

7) Special teams boost

The Broncos special teams actually helped win a game. Too often last season, the group contributed to losses by contributing little in the return game. Isaiah McKenzie produced a 31-yard punt return, better than any a year ago. And Harris blocked a kick, learning from intel provided by Derek Wolfe and the scouted knowledge that the kick would likely have a low trajectory.

Woody Paige: Broncos vs. Chargers, Week 1 report card

By Woody Paige

KMGH

September 13, 2017

For the season opener, the Broncos deserve a passing grade.

Overall, they get a "B" (as in Broncos) for winning over, er, holding off the Los Angeles Chargers 24-21 Monday night.

If new coach Vance Joseph hadn't pulled off an old trick — originated by former coach Mike Shanahan, who was off smiling somewhere — the Broncos would have gone into overtime tied at 24.

And the NFL's revised rule would have gone into effect — a shorter, 10-minute overtime. Considering how the game played out in the fourth quarter, the Broncos might have ended up with a tie, ye gads, or even a loss. After all, the Chargers had outscored the Broncos 14-0 in the final quarter.

But the Broncos were able to keep alive their franchise streak of now having won 176 games without a loss when they lead by 17 points entering the last period. (One was tied.) However, they almost turned a sure thing into a bad thing.

Now, the rushing, receiving, returning, blocking, defensive and coaching grades:

Quarterback — Trevor Siemian gets a B. He was most efficient and certainly looked like a starting quarterback. Imagine if Paxton Lynch had been the starter. I can imagine a defeat. In 12 possessions, Lynch guided the Broncos to four scores — three touchdowns and a field goal — and set his offense up for another field goal, a 50-yard attempt that was missed by Brandon McManus, the possessor of a new four-year extension signed earlier Monday.

The Broncos touchdown drives of 70, 56 and 78 were very impressive in comparison to last season. Yet Siemian threw a bad interception and should have had enough, and he was sacked four times for 38 yards (two were his fault). He didn't, however, seem out of place. Based on 219 yards and two touchdown passes, he's on pace for 3,500 yards and 32 touchdowns, which would be sufficient if the Broncos can run and stop.

Running backs — Speaking of running, C.J. Anderson and Jamaal Charles get a B+. They would have been awarded an A if Charles hadn't fumbled in the fourth, and that turnover produced a touchdown for the Chargers. Both healthy, Anderson had 81 grinding yards (4.1 per average) and Charles 40 on 10 carries. Siemian was rather nifty and evasive with another 19 yards on scrambles, and scored on one rush. If the Broncos can rush for 140 yards every game, everybody in Orange will be very pleased.

Receivers — B, as in Bennie. Bennie Fowler had a breakout bonanza with two touchdown receptions. Some had speculated he would be cut. Instead, he was one of three stars of the game. After a drop and a dud, Demaryius Thomas finished spectacularly with five catches for 67 yards. He made one great leaping grab and one very good 29-yard gain. Emmanuel Sanders could, or should, have pulled in a touchdown toss, but he managed three catches in six targets.

But I'm saving the most remarkable: Broncos tight ends were in Witness Protection last season, but they emerged from hiding Monday night. Virgil Green had a 44-yard play; A.J. Derby caught three passes; and Jeff Heurman even had a 20-yard reception. They also blocked with some skill.

Offensive linemen — B-. Welcome to the NFL, rookie. Garrett Bolles was matched against Pro Bowler Joey Bosa for much of the evening, and held his own — and didn't get called multiple times for holding. He graded out better than Menelik Watson, who was beaten like a rented mule on the other side. Matt Paradis is recovered from two hip surgeries, and his replacement for the summer and most of training camp, Connor McGovern, did nicely at right guard when Ron Leary went into concussion protocol. The line did provide enough lanes for the two running backs, yet it had four bad marks — those sacks. Bolles was the best.

Defensive linemen — A-. The best unit on the field for the Broncos, even with the loss of Derek Wolfe to another injury, and the absence of Jared Crick with back spasm, and with Tyrique Jarrett pulled off the practice squad Monday. The Broncos permitted Melvin Gordon and Branden Oliver a measly 64 yards on the ground and kept them under three yards per attempt. The Chargers' running game was no factor in the entire game. Adam Gotsis, who had to play the majority of the game, was excellent, and Shelby Harris, a late addition to the roster, came through with the blocked field goal that won.

Linebackers — B-. Brandon Marshall was involved in eight tackles, and the linebackers were serious contributors to stopping the run game (especially Todd Davis on a crunching tackle to prevent a first down), but the pass rush was nominal. The Chargers were intent on double- and triple-teaming Von Miller, and they succeeded. He won't be the defensive player of the year because every other team will follow that blueprint. Shaq Barrett was OK, with the Broncos' lone sack, but nothing special.

Defensive backs — C. So-so. Bradley Roby came up with the one interception, but he also was jammed with a pass interference call that was costly. Justin Simmons and Darian Steward didn't let the Chargers tight ends do any damage, but Chris Harris Jr. and Aqib Talib were just even against Philip Rivers and some average receivers.

Special teams — B+. The blocked kick and one great return by Isaiah Henderson, and one good kickoff return by Cody Latimer (who was exception again as a gunner). Riley Dixon punted superbly (48-yard average), but McManus missed that field goal.

Coaching — B. Joseph seemed unsure of what exactly to do as a head coach at times, but made the key icing call. Mike McCoy did an extremely creative job of calling the offense, and Joe Woods mixed in more blitzes than expected, and he didn't seem to be much of a dropoff from Wade Phillips.

The Broncos were a solid B in the season's grand opening, but a B won't B sufficient Sunday in the Cowboys & Horses game.

Despite dementia, these Broncos fans are still ready for the season

By Jason Gruenauer
KMGH
September 13, 2017

Miles away from the roar of Mile High, there is a different kind of roar coming from the common room at Chelsea Place in Aurora.

"It's game night!"

"Woo!"

"Go Broncos!"

But this isn't a raucous tailgate. It's a room of seniors.

"I'm 90 years old and I'm proud to be a Broncos fan." Fred Hall said.

"I've always loved them," Mary Billehus said. "So many years. I can't even count them."

The afternoon ahead of the Broncos season opener meant something special on the exercise calendar.

"We put on our orange and blue and we do our touchdown signs and our false starts. It gets them excited and connected to what's going on and its movement and exercise with purpose," Jenni Dill, of Chelsea Place, said.

But love for the hometown team isn't the only thing these seniors have in common.

"Everyone that is living here is living with dementia," Dill said.

They may struggle with short-term memory, but according to experts at the specialized memory assisted living facility, there is a silver lining.

"Their long-term memory is intact," Dill said with a smile. "They may not remember what they're eating for dinner right now, but they sure as heck remember that they're deep down Broncos fans and that never changes."

"The football has put me back in the 'rah rah rah' stage," Fred Hall said, sitting in his wheelchair draped in a Broncos coat.

"Because our team is going to win again," Mary Billehus added in her tie dye Broncos shirt.

Even if the game was on past their bedtime, they still celebrated. They just did so on Tuesday morning.

Mason's Power Rankings: Three AFC West teams in top 10

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
September 13, 2017

1. GREEN BAY (1-0)

One of two teams (along with Denver) that ranked in the league's top five in third-down offense and third-down defense, the Packers throttled the Seahawks in a game that wasn't as close as the 17-9 margin indicated.

2. PITTSBURGH (1-0)

Time will tell, but the unexpectedly close win over the Browns probably said more about the collection of talent Cleveland has put together than any weaknesses in the Steelers.

3. KANSAS CITY (1-0)

In their 42-point deluge at New England, the Chiefs showed a pick-your-poison attack that will cause myriad problems for teams that have coverage issues.

4. NEW ENGLAND (0-1)

Yes, this was the Patriots' first Week 1 home loss since 2000, Bill Belichick's first season, and yes, they did finish 5-11 that year. But their three Lombardi Trophies in their last three seasons in which they lost in Week 1 regardless of venue show how effective Belichick and his staff are at making corrections and adapting to a team's ever-evolving strengths and weaknesses.

5. ATLANTA (1-0)

They're still ironing out the rough spots on offense as they make the transition from Kyle Shanahan to offensive coordinator Steve Sarkisian, but given the Bears' recent tendency to give elite teams fits at home, a 23-17 win was a solid result.

6. DALLAS (1-0)

Although the Cowboys only finished with one touchdown, they were the only team that did not go three-and-out in Week 1.

7. OAKLAND (1-0)

Sleep-deprived thought: Following the year off, could Marshawn Lynch become this generation's John Riggins? He skipped the 1980 season in a holdout, reported back to the Redskins in 1981 by proclaiming, "I'm broke, I'm bored and I'm back," and then had a four-year renaissance that took him to a Super Bowl MVP trophy and the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

8. DENVER (1-0)

New horizons can open up for the offense if the Broncos can continue utilizing the tight ends as they did Monday night (five catches, 98 yards). For this offense, think of Week 1 as an appetizer, serving enough tasty morsels to tantalize your taste buds and make you hungry for more.

9. MINNESOTA (1-0)

The Vikings hammered away at the Saints on Monday night, and they finished Week 1 with a league-leading 61.5 net yards and 3.6 net points per possession.

10. TAMPA BAY (0-0)

The feared knockout punch from Hurricane Irma was only a "glancing blow," in the words of Tampa mayor Bob Buckhorn, and the Bucs will return to normal this week, with their home game against the Bears going off as scheduled on Sunday.

11. SEATTLE (0-1)

Too low? Perhaps. But the Seahawks are 4-5 since last Thanksgiving and have been held to 10 or fewer points in three of their last five road games.

12. MIAMI (0-0)

As a result of the hurricane-caused postponement of their Week 1 game against the Bucs, Miami will not play at Hard Rock Stadium until Oct. 8. Dolphins owner Stephen Ross told The Miami Herald that he asked about moving an Oct. 1 game from London -- which is a Dolphins home game in name only -- back to Miami, but had his request denied.

13. DETROIT (1-0)

Sixteen teams did not go for two as often in the entirety of the 2016 season as the Lions did Sunday alone (three times, failing on all of them).

14. NEW YORK GIANTS (0-1)

It will get better when Odell Beckham Jr. returns, but on Sunday night, it was ugly.

15. TENNESSEE (0-1)

The on-side kickoff to open their loss to the Raiders -- and their season -- was a surprise coming from a team that tied for a division crown last year and probably didn't need such a gambit to stay with the Raiders.

16. LOS ANGELES CHARGERS (0-1)

Chargers head coach Anthony Lynn said after the loss to the Broncos that he "should have been more patient" and "stayed true to the run game" when the Chargers fell behind by two scores in the second half. But at that point, Denver's defensive line was controlling the line of scrimmage, so would that have been the best play? Still, their fourth-quarter comeback and their opportunistic play demonstrates that this is a team that should hang around for a while.

17. PHILADELPHIA (1-0)

Young quarterbacks sometimes come out firing, then struggle as defenses adjust. Their long-term success ends up being determined by how they respond to the defense's counter-moves. Carson Wentz appears to be in the start of that response phase; in his last two regular-season games, he's 43-of-82 for 552 yards with four touchdowns and just one interception.

18. CAROLINA (1-0)

With the Bills and Saints up next at home, a 3-0 start would come as no surprise.

19. JACKSONVILLE (1-0)

Ten-sack games, like the one the Jaguars posted in Houston have always been special. But in the 1980s and 1990s, there were an average of 1.3 10-sack games league-wide per season, according to pro-football-reference.com. Since 2000, there have been just eight 10-sack games in 18 seasons, with the Jaguars becoming the first team to hit double digits in nearly three years.

20. BALTIMORE (1-0)

Four takeaways, including two interceptions inside the Ravens' 30-yard line, helped produce a shutout that evoked the Ravens' salad days.

21. LOS ANGELES RAMS (1-0)

Wade Phillips has never failed to improve his defense in his first year on the job, so his work on that side of the football will ensure that the Rams are more competitive no matter whether Jared Goff takes the next step in his development.

22. HOUSTON (0-1)

According to Pro Football Focus, the Texans' pass protection surrendered 22 quarterback hurries to the Jaguars.

23. WASHINGTON (0-1)

If the Redskins narrowly miss the postseason, they will lament the missed opportunities Sunday as a reason why.

24. ARIZONA (0-1)

Without David Johnson for at least two months and with Carson Palmer struggling with interceptions -- he now has 25 in his last 20 starts, including 12 in his last 10 -- the trends are not promising for the Cardinals.

25. CLEVELAND (0-1)

Rookie quarterback DeShone Kizer "gives us hope," Browns coach Hue Jackson said as he reflected on the Browns' near-upset of the Steelers. But their chances at pulling off the biggest surprise on Lake Erie's shoreline since the 1989 Indians of "Major League" renown rest just as much on an offensive line that had some solid moments and occasional moments of brilliance from young players like rookie defensive tackle Larry Ogunjobi, who flashed in rotational work.

26. NEW ORLEANS (0-1)

With some teams, Week 1 feels like an aberration. For the Saints, it was numbingly familiar -- a defeat like so many in the last three seasons, in which Drew Brees carried the team on his arm, but could only take it so far as the ground game sputtered and the defense collapsed.

27. CINCINNATI (0-1)

After becoming the first home team to suffer a Week 1 shutout in 11 years, there's nowhere to go but up.

28. BUFFALO (1-0)

Their Week 2 game against Carolina will provide a far better measuring stick than the Jets did.

29. CHICAGO (0-1)

The Bears being feisty at home is not a surprise. They lost one-score games at Soldier Field last year to the Titans and Packers, just as they did a year earlier to the Packers, Vikings, Broncos and Redskins, all of whom made that season's playoffs.

30. INDIANAPOLIS (0-1)

After Sunday's performance, Scott Tolzien has a career 2-to-9 touchdown-to-interception ratio. But no matter who is the quarterback, if it's not Andrew Luck, it's a big problem; since the start of the 2015 season, the Colts average 25.5 points per game with Luck at the helm and 17.4 points per game without him.

31. SAN FRANCISCO (0-1)

In the second quarter, with their game still competitive, the 49ers went for it on fourth down twice after crossing midfield -- on fourth-and-4 from the Carolina 44 and fourth-and-1 from the Carolina 45. Both attempts failed. What is interesting is that on the 49ers' first series, they elected to punt on fourth-and-2 from the Carolina 46. Such tactical choices and how head coach Kyle Shanahan evolves in his first year on the job could be the most fascinating aspects of this 49ers season as they start their long climb back.

32. NEW YORK JETS (0-1)

As a kid, I grew up cheering for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers during their run of 14 consecutive losing seasons. I know what it feels like to see even the faintest hope drain away in Week 1. So when I saw Juston Burris' potential pick-6 evaporate when teammate Marcus Maye was pushed into him, I cringed, with 10 bad flashbacks floating through my mind.

Steve Atwater, John Lynch, Rod Smith among Broncos' 2018 modern-era Hall of Fame nominees

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
September 13, 2017

The Pro Football Hall of Fame announced on Tuesday the names of 108 former NFL players and coaches considered modern era nominees for the class of 2018. Of the 108, 13 played or coaches for the Broncos at some point in their career.

S Steve Atwater

Years with Broncos: 1989-98

Denver accolades: two First-Team All-Pro selections (1991-92), one Second-Team All-Pro selection (1996), eight Pro Bowls (1990-96, '98), NFL 1990s All-Decade Team, two-time Super Bowl champion (XXXII, XXXIII), Ring of Fame inductee (2005)

S Brian Dawkins

Years with Broncos: 2009-11

Denver accolades: two Pro Bowls (2009, '11), one Second-Team All-Pro selection (2009), NFL 2000s All-Decade Team

LB Seth Joyner

Years with Broncos: 1998

Denver accolades: Super Bowl champion (XXXII)

CB Ty Law

Years with Broncos: 2009

S John Lynch

Years with Broncos: 2004-07

Denver accolades: four Pro Bowls (2004-07), Ring of Fame inductee (2016)

LB Karl Mecklenburg

Years with Broncos: 1983-94

Denver accolades: four All-AFC and All-NFL selections (1985-87, '89), six Pro Bowls (1985-87, '89, '91, '93), Ring of Fame inductee (2001)

C Tom Nalen

Years with Broncos: 1994-2008

Denver accolades: two First-Team All-Pro selections (2000, '03), one Second-Team All-Pro (1999), five Pro Bowls (1997-2000, '03), NFL Offensive Lineman of the Year (2003), two-time Super Bowl champion (XXXII, XXXIII), Ring of Fame inductee (1994-2008)

DT/DE Michael Dean Perry

Years with Broncos: 1995-97

Denver accolades: one Pro Bowl (1996)

Head coach Dan Reeves

Years with Broncos: 1981-92

Denver accolades: Ring of Fame inductee (2014), second in most overall wins in franchise history (117), .596 overall win percentage, five division titles, seven playoff wins, three Super Bowl appearances

DE Simeon Rice

Years with Broncos: 2007

S Dennis Smith

Years with Broncos: 1981-94

Denver accolades: Four All-NFL selections (1985-86, '89, '93), six Pro Bowls (1985-86, '89-91, '93), Ring of Fame inductee (2001)

DE Neil Smith

Years with Broncos: 1997-99

Denver accolades: one Second-Team All-Pro (1997), one Pro Bowl (1997), NFL 1990s All-Decade Team, two-time Super Bowl champion (XXXII, XXXIII)

WR Rod Smith

Years with Broncos: 1994-2007

Accolades: Three Pro Bowls (2000-01, '05), holds franchise records in career receptions, receiving yards and receiving touchdowns, Ring of Fame inductee (2012)

The Broncos' 1983 first-round pick, guard/tackle Chris Hinton, is also a nominee. Denver selected Hinton fourth overall before trading him to the Colts in the deal that sent John Elway to Denver.

Next-Day Notebook: Joseph aggressive from the coin toss

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
September 13, 2017

Even in the moments before his first regular-season game as head coach, Vance Joseph showed he would not approach this game with an overabundance of caution.

The Broncos won the coin toss, but instead of deferring the choice to the second half as a majority of coaches do, Joseph instructed his captains to take the ball to start the game. His choice also represented a change from 2016, in which the Broncos tended to put their defense on the field first.

"I want to attack defenses," Joseph told media Monday morning. "And the best time to attack a defense is in your first 15 plays, right? That's the best plays that you've watched all week that's available for you to make plays. So why not get them off the [play] sheet early? So in my opinion, with our defense, playing at home, taking the ball, getting an early score — that makes our team better, in my opinion: not playing defense first and they're punting the ball back to us and now we have to go 80 [yards]. Let's get a return off, let's go score points and let's go hunt the quarterback. That's my mindset."

Though the Broncos couldn't score on the opening drive, they held the Chargers to a short possession and received the ball with better field position and marched 70 yards for a touchdown.

Big snap counts for big-time players

Two players Joseph challenged this offseason were two of his biggest stars: Von Miller and Demaryius Thomas.

With Thomas leading the Broncos in receiving and Miller playing more snaps than usual and being disruptive in spite of facing multiple blockers on most plays, it seems Joseph's challenges had their intended effect.

"I know Von wants to play more, and that was my challenge to Von when I came here: 'I want you on the field more,'" Joseph said. "But sometimes it can be too much, especially when you're getting chipped by tight ends and backs for 60 snaps. So we've got to figure out how we can spell Von more. D.T., I want him out there. He's a receiver. I want him out there, and when he's out there, we get a fair look at the defense. If he's not out there, we can get a lot of single-high [safety formations] and the run game's not working. If 88's out there, we force them to play single-high, it's one-on-one out there. So I want him out there every snap, if he can."

Gotsis, Green among standouts to Joseph

Almost 12 hours after the game, Joseph didn't have the time to fully break down the tape from Monday night, but he did know a handful of the players who stood out to him.

He began with two young defensive linemen who needed to step up with defensive ends Jared Crick and Zach Kerrout.

"D-line-wise, I thought Shelby played, again, very, very solid," Joseph said. "I thought [DE Adam] Gotsis played well. Gotsis played at the point of attack very strong on double-teams. You could see his quickness. You could see his length and size. So I think Gotsis is coming along. If he stays healthy, he's what he should be for us. I mean, he can be a starter for us. He can rush the passer. He can play the run game. So obviously I was pleased with Gotsis, I was pleased with Shelby. I thought Darian Stewart played very solid, very well, having two young guys with him on the back end. He played solid. Offensively, I thought Virgil Green blocked [and] caught the ball very well. I thought Trevor played well, outside of the one interception. D.T. [and] Emmanuel [Sanders] both played well last night."

Licking their wounds

Joseph also updated the statuses of three Broncos who suffered injuries during the game.

He had no timetable estimation for guard Ron Leary, who suffered a concussion and is now in the league-mandated concussion protocol.

"It's no time limit on it," Joseph said. "It's a protocol we'll have to follow, as far as certain requirements he has to pass ... before he can play on Sunday. But there's no time limit. It's just protocol in place that he has to pass."

Cornerback Brendan Langley came out of the game with a knee injury, but Joseph said the training staff is still examining the rookie.

Joseph also couldn't offer a concrete update on Stewart, who suffered a right groin injury.

"We don't know a lot about it right now," Joseph said. "I should know more later, but speaking last night to our training staff it wasn't major, but I'll know more later today and tomorrow for you guys."

Under the Headset: Q&A with Brock Olivo

By Ben Swanson

DenverBroncos.com

September 13, 2017

Ben Swanson: How did Isaiah McKenzie win the punt-returner job so quickly?

Brock Olivo: Isaiah's had a really good camp. We drafted him for that purpose, to vet him as a punt returner. From what we saw in college playing in the SEC, he came in here, confident, and did a really good job catching the football. So he's done everything we've asked him to do up to this point. And I think Vance and I kind of feel the same way about him: 'Hey, let's vet the kid right now. Let's see what he's made of. Let's throw him in the fire and try to hit the ground running.' Now, having said that, he [had] not played in a game yet, so you've got to see, but that depth chart is always fluid, as you know. And we're fortunate; we have a stall of good returners here, so there's a lot of good competition there. We're going to roll with Isaiah right now and see how it goes and take it from there.

BS: Head Coach Vance Joseph said Cody Latimer has the chance to be an All-Pro gunner. How did he position himself for that?

BO: Cody does. Coach said it; he hit the nail on the head. He has got all of the tangibles that you're looking for. He's big, he's fast, he's strong, he can be nasty. I agree wholeheartedly with Coach when he says that. If Cody wants it, he can be that guy. There's no question. So I'm excited about him. I've coached about him for the past, what, three years now, I guess, in Kansas City, so I know what kind of player he is. We hated playing against him.

BS: How have things changed for you on a daily basis at a practice as the coordinator and not the assistant?

BO: You have a lot more on your plate, obviously. Your organization responsibilities increase tenfold. And everything that happens on the field, special-teams-wise, is a reflection of your system. Now, having said that, I'd go out on a limb and say that I have by far one of the best special-teams coaches in the NFL as my assistant. Chris Gould is an awesome coach, 360 degrees, be it the specialists, be it the core phases. So I'm really fortunate to have Chris. But yeah, the responsibilities increase, obviously. It's also more exciting because you get to implement your system and call the game, so it's awesome, in a word.

BS: How difficult is it keeping 11 guys organized on a play like a punt return where they have to block players as they track the ball and try to set up a return?

BO: Very. That's the challenge: getting 11 guys in that amount of space on the same page. On offense and defense, everything starts in a much smaller area. Special teams spans the entire field sometimes. So it is a challenge, but that's the beauty of it, because it's a game of angles. It's geometry at the end of the day. If your players get the geometry of the game and they have some instincts and the timing piece of it, you can be really good. I think that a lot of the responsibility, though, falls on us as coaches to implement a system that's, for lack of better terms, simple enough that they can do that while running full speed, while under pressure, while knowing that opposition is flying down the field 100 miles per hour at them. So there's a lot of stuff to put together, but when it comes together, it is an awesome

thing. It's a beautiful sight, man, because when a big play happens on special teams, there are so few of them, the plays. There are much more opportunities on offense and defense to make big plays. We have fewer shots on goal.

BS: There's also a sense that one dynamic player can occasionally drive an offense, but special teams really needs all 11 players working on the same page.

BO: That's very accurate. It's one thing to have a superstar returner, for example, but if you don't have 10 guys who are willing to lay it on the line and block for him, you're not going to have much success. You're going to have a great punter, but if you don't have guys who can cover or protect to begin with, you're going to have issues. It is the epitome of teamwork, special teams is. And we always talk about, 'Hey, the star of our unit is the unit. There's no individual star in our room.' So that's how we talk and that's how we work. It's fun.

BS: Back in your playing days at Missouri, what kind of rep did you have as a player?

BO: I was just known as a hard-working guy who showed up and did his job every day, probably a good leader by example. That's probably what I was known for.

BS: Can you tell me how you came to find yourself in Italy?

BO: I've always been fascinated with my Italian heritage, from the time I was a little boy growing up, hearing my grandparents speak Italian in the house during Christmas.

BS: Were they the first generation to immigrate here?

BO: No, they were not, but they were born to first-generation Italians and that was their mother's tongue until they went to school. That's just what they heard in the house. And, at least on my grandpa's side. Now, my grandma ... both her parents are from Italy, as well, so she heard Italian growing up. Now when they went to school, obviously English was the primary language. But you would hear them speaking in this mix, this Italian-English mix. So when I was a little boy, it was interesting to me. It was something I would ask my dad about, or my uncle, and be like, 'What's that?' So my grandpa would teach me Italian and I became fascinated with that part of our family and wanted to become closer to it. So when I retired from the NFL as a player, I inquired about going overseas and coaching and playing in Italy, so I could get closer to my roots, my Italian roots, so that's what I did. And that's kind of how I discovered Italy and the Italian part of my family. And I made a lot of friends over there and ended up playing and coaching and from there it just kind of led to a second home for me.

BS: What is something you learned how to do or make there?

BO: When you think about Italy, one of the things you think about is the Italian food culture, but that encompasses a lot of stuff. It's food, wine, agriculture. Most of the stuff grown in Italy is organic by nature. They don't label it organic because it is organic; that's how they've always been and how they've maintained it. So I learned about that. I learned about winemaking. I learned how to harvest olives. I went and saw the olive-oil process and my wife being from there, Sicilian, I learned how to make bread, cannoli, various types of stuff. So cooking obviously has been something that I've learned. Now, I'm not really passionate about all that stuff — cooking and whatnot — but just being there and being part of

that culture, in a sense, you learn it. It's infectious. It really is. I'm fascinated by the way that they do things, the way they do things as they did 100 years ago. That fascinates me.

I really admire the way that they preserve traditions, if you will. I love the fact that you can walk into an Italian café and there's a real barista making real espresso, not some automatic push-a-button-and-it-comes-out [process]. No, he or she is grinding the beans, they're tamping it, they're pulling the shot for the right amount of time and they're serving it to you, as if every individual one was the only one they're going to make that day. I love that about the Italian culture. I love that you're at a table setting for hours at a time and you're taking the time to cultivate the human connection around the table. I love that. So those little things, I miss those little traditions when I'm here.

Having said all that, being Italian-American is awesome because you get the best of both worlds. You get the old world traditions of Italy but then you get the awesomeness of being American, all of our daily liberties and the opportunities here. I just feel really fortunate to be that and it's something I'm very proud of. I really am.

BS: What's your favorite Italian meal?

BO: That's really tough. It's hard to beat truffles. Anything with truffles — white truffles. I like black truffles too, but the white truffle is a little more ... that's a wintertime thing. And so you can only get it certain times of the year, fresh. Anyway, anything with white truffle shaved on top of it, or infused, is to die for. Black truffles are good, too. It's just not as pungent, and it's not as strong. It's a real delicacy. If you give me a plate of homemade linguine al tartufo and you've got me.

[This interview first appeared in the Sept. 11, 2017, Gameday Magazine. It has been edited for brevity and clarity.]

'No-Fly Zone' focused on improving communication after feeling 'growing pains'

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
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It's always preferable to correct issues after a win than after a loss.

On Monday night, the Broncos' secondary wasn't perfect. The unit had its share of struggles in its first regular-season game with Justin Simmons as a starting safety and Will Parks as the first-string dime back.

The team came away with a 24-21 win anyway, and the "No-Fly Zone" can continue to work out its kinks without the burden of a Week 1 loss.

In a way, that's all according to Head Coach Vance Joseph's plan.

"I kind of knew there was going to be a couple of mistakes there because the game is played so fast," Joseph said Tuesday. "What you see on tape in the NFL — vs. the good teams, you won't see that on Sunday. It's going to be different. I knew there were going to be some growing pains with Justin and Parks."

That's not to say the secondary didn't have its bright individual moments. Bradley Roby came up with an interception that led to a Broncos touchdown and added a key pass breakup late in the game. Chris Harris Jr. and Aqib Talib were largely their normal dominant selves on the outside. Darian Stewart, Justin Simmons and Will Parks all made key tackles in the run game.

"You could see the physical ability with Justin," Joseph said. "The first tackle he made in the open field on [Chargers RB Melvin] Gordon is a special tackle. That ball may run for 50 yards. It's one-on-one with 20 yards each way, and he makes that tackle."

As a unit, though, there was room to improve, specifically in regards to communication. Early in the fourth quarter, when Philip Rivers found Keenan Allen for a 5-yard touchdown, Harris appeared to expect help in the middle of the end zone.

Later, Travis Benjamin found a gap in the Broncos' defense on a busted coverage and reeled in a 38-yard touchdown.

Both of those plays nearly caused big issues for the Broncos. And they're also both fixable, Harris said.

"We can definitely work a lot on communication," Harris said. "My touchdown, that should never happen. The big touchdown to [Chargers wide receiver Travis] Benjamin should never happen. We've just got younger guys back there and they'll learn as the time goes. Hopefully we'll be able to fix it next week."

That process could take a few weeks, as both Harris and Joseph admit. As long as the Broncos keep winning, though, that learning curve doesn't seem quite so steep.

"That part we know we've got with those young guys," Joseph said. "The mistakes, I knew it was going to happen because it was his first time being a full-time starter in base and in dime. There are going to be growing pains, but I think at the end of this thing — Week 6, 7, 8, moving forward — he's going to be good for us."

Trevor Siemian Applying The Lessons He Learned from Peyton Manning

By Robert Klemko
MMQB
September 13, 2017

This is how it was supposed to look, more or less. It wasn't always pretty or high-flying, but Trevor Siemian got the job done. In his first start since winning the quarterback job for the second season over Paxton Lynch, Siemian was methodical, connecting with seven different receivers on 17 of 28 passes for 219 yards, three scores (two through the air, one rushing) with an interception in a 24–21 season-opening win vs. the Los Angeles Chargers.

Anything less, and you'd have a good chunk of Broncos Nation wondering aloud whether the coaching staff was right to hand the starting gig to a seventh-round pick from three years ago instead of former first-round pick Paxton Lynch.

Was Siemian perfect on Monday night? Hardly. Were it not for Chargers cornerback Casey Hayward's sudden butterfingers, a first-quarter throw might have gone the other way. And a second-half interception on a batted ball thrown into tight coverage facilitated a Chargers comeback that came down to a missed field goal which would've forced OT. If either Hayward holds on or the field goal connects, we'd be having a different conversation right now.

But after his handful of missteps, Siemian, 25, did what veteran quarterbacks do. He forgot about them. Or at least he appeared to in the eyes of his teammates. "That's the Trevor we know," Broncos running back C.J. Anderson said. "Calm and collected."

Siemian's apparent popularity in the locker room and current command of the starting job is the latest chapter in a professional journey that began in the summer of 2015, when the Northwestern alum was competing with Zac Dysert for the No. 3 spot on the depth chart behind Peyton Manning and Brock Osweiler. Limited by a knee injury for all of that rookie minicamp, Siemian gave coaches a clue that he might one day soon be the guy in his first interactions with Manning.

"I knew Trevor had a little moxie in one of the first quarterback meetings in the room with him," says Greg Knapp, Denver's quarterback coach from 2013–16. "I've been around a couple other guys in the room with Peyton who were college free agents or late draft picks, and guys get intimidated. Even for a coach it can be intimidating to be in a room with Peyton. He'll challenge you, and he's a bulldog about it."

"I won't say exactly what he said, but Peyton threw a zinger at Trevor, and it was incredible to hear how Trevor spit one back in Peyton's face. And I'm going, I love this. Mr. Manning, you've got a little bit of a challenge with this rookie. Trevor doesn't get intimidated easily."

Siemian laughed at the memory: "That's funny Knapp remembers that. We had a great room and a good back and forth. Maybe a little too much."

Siemian beat out Dysert that season, and won a Super Bowl ring as the third-string QB. Osweiler left for greener pastures, signing a four year, \$72-million dollar contract with the Texans, only to return to

Denver this month after a blip in Cleveland. In the meantime, John Elway, the former Super Bowl winning quarterback, drafted quarterback Paxton Lynch in 2016, only to concede in both '16 and '17 that Lynch wasn't as ready as Siemian.

How big was the gap? Depends on the year and who you ask.

The original decision to hand Siemian the keys in 2016, coaches say, was a tough one. Lynch had all the physical tools coming out of the draft, and Siemian was still catching up after backing up Manning and Osweiler in '15. "I think it came down to the wire," Knapp said. "Paxton's skillset is really impressive, but he came out of an offense that wasn't as much of a pro style offense. There's growing pains there."

And what about 2017? There's some disagreement. New offensive coordinator Mike McCoy, Manning's coordinator in 2012 before taking the head coaching job in San Diego, echoed head coach Vance Joseph in calling it a tough decision. "They all did a great job, all three quarterbacks," McCoy said. "The great thing about this business as coaches is you've got to make tough decisions from time to time."

But two team sources familiar with the coaches' evaluation of both quarterbacks said the competition in training camp wasn't close. Following OTAs, Siemian demonstrated a mastery of the playbook while Lynch lagged behind, the sources said.

If it came down to habits, Siemian benefited greatly from playing behind Manning in 2015, the veteran's last season. Siemian observed Manning taking copious notes on material simple and complex alike, so he, too, took up the habit and started filling up notepads with concepts he was already familiar with, in chicken scratch handwriting only he could read.

"It's something I still do," Siemian says. "Being in the same room with a guy that's done it really, really well for a number of years. If it worked for him, I figured it might work for me. You process things a little better when you put pen to paper. I still write down too much. It's just kind of a habit I've started myself."

When Siemian arrived at training camp in a competition with Lynch, he was able to direct teammates on the finer points while Lynch was still putting down a base of knowledge in a new offense. McCoy watched Siemian tutor teammates in meetings with a focus on being accountable to execute assignments on any given play.

"There are days you're with the ones, days you're with the twos, and he did a good job of leading in every situation," McCoy said. "In the meetings he's great, saying to guys this is what we're expecting on this play. This is where you need to be in this situation."

Fast-forward two months, and there's Siemian in the opener, barking out pre-snap instructions in the face of defensive alignments he'd never seen before. The Chargers had been careful to show very little in the preseason, and Broncos players say some of the fresh alignments and coverage disguises might have thrown a lesser quarterback for a loop.

Veteran running back Jamaal Charles came away impressed with his quarterback after a third-quarter goal line sequence in which San Diego offered an unfavorable look on the edge and Siemian audibled from pass to run, handing off to Charles for a third-and-one conversion that ended a yard away from paydirt.

“It was a great decision,” Charles said Monday night after the game. “I really should have scored. ... The good thing about him is that he’s more of a vet who understands the game. These guys who played with Peyton and are still here, they all have high football IQs.”

These are happy players, knowing that with Siemian, they’re being put in a position to win. And it’s what the staff envisioned when they made the competitive—if unsexy—decision to start him.

'Baby No Fly Zone': Broncos DBs Justin Simmons, Will Parks try to mask loss of T.J. Ward

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA Today
September 13, 2017

Almost since the time they were drafted together last year, Denver Broncos safeties Justin Simmons and Will Parks have called themselves the “Baby No Fly Zone.”

They weren’t old enough — and certainly not experienced enough — to be part of the team's vaunted secondary, which in 2015 started calling itself the “No Fly Zone” while leading the league’s top-rated pass defense. Yet after the surprising decision to cut veteran safety T.J. Ward at the end of the preseason, Simmons and Parks have been promoted.

Simmons has moved into the starting lineup to replace Ward, who's since signed with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Parks, meanwhile, plays in the “dime” package (two nickel backs). Parks also played in the base defense during the fourth quarter Monday night against the Los Angeles Chargers after starting safety Darian Stewart left the game with a minor groin injury.

The young safeties earned mixed reviews in Denver’s 24-21 win, much as head coach Vance Joseph figured they would. Simmons showed range and athleticism on several plays, like an open-field tackle of Chargers running back Melvin Gordon and a designed blitz on quarterback Philip Rivers that reinforced to Joseph why Simmons is now the starter.

“I knew there were going to be some growing pains with Justin and Parks. With that being said, you could see the physical ability with Justin,” Joseph said Tuesday. “That part we know we’ve got with those young guys.”

Indeed, the issues the young duo — and especially Simmons — had against the Chargers were mental mistakes. Too often he and Parks appeared out of sync with Stewart and the all-pro corner duo of Chris Harris Jr. and Aqib Talib.

Those three and nickel corner Bradley Roby took Ward’s release hardest. It isn’t that they don’t like Simmons or Parks personally or discount their potential. The Broncos veteran DBs simply loved Ward — as a player, teammate and leader. Over the course of three seasons together (two for Stewart, who signed in 2015), they built a close bond, and communication was almost never an issue.

But it was against the Chargers.

Harris was expecting safety help from Simmons when Chargers receiver Keenan Allen scored a 5-yard touchdown in the fourth quarter. Then the secondary allowed L.A. speedster Travis Benjamin to run uncovered on a post route for a 38-yard touchdown just a minute later.

“My touchdown, that should never happen. The big touchdown to Benjamin, that should never happen,” Harris Jr. said. “We just got younger guys back there. They will learn as time goes, and hopefully we’ll be able to fix it next week.”

Harris told USA TODAY Sports that fixing those communication issues will take extra time collectively in the film room to ensure similar errors don't occur Sunday against the Dallas Cowboys and in subsequent weeks.

"The mistakes, I knew it was going to happen because it was (Simmons') first time being a full-time starter in base and in dime," Joseph said.

"There are going to be growing pains, but I think at the end of this thing — Week 6, 7, 8, moving forward — he's going to be good for us."

That time Trevor Siemian got 'zinged' by Peyton Manning and he 'spit one back'

By Sean Wagner-McGough

CBS Sports

September 13, 2017

Trevor Siemian's unexpected rise from a seventh-round pick to the Broncos' starting quarterback has been nothing but shocking. For one, he's beaten first-round pick Paxton Lynch in two quarterback competitions. And two, he once trash talked Peyton Manning.

After the Broncos' season-opening win over the Chargers on Monday night, Sports Illustrated's Robert Klemko filed a story that detailed how Siemian is using the lessons he learned from Manning when the two shared the quarterback room in 2015 -- Siemian's first season and Manning's last. In that story, which you should go read, is an awesome nugget about how Siemian wasn't afraid to talk trash back to Manning.

"I knew Trevor had a little moxie in one of the first quarterback meetings in the room with him," Greg Knapp, Denver's quarterback coach from 2013–16, told SI. "I've been around a couple other guys in the room with Peyton who were college free agents or late draft picks, and guys get intimidated. Even for a coach it can be intimidating to be in a room with Peyton. He'll challenge you, and he's a bulldog about it.

"I won't say exactly what he said, but Peyton threw a zinger at Trevor, and it was incredible to hear how Trevor spit one back in Peyton's face. And I'm going, I love this. Mr. Manning, you've got a little bit of a challenge with this rookie. Trevor doesn't get intimidated easily."

Siemian remembers too.

"That's funny Knapp remembers that," he said. "We had a great room and a good back and forth. Maybe a little too much."

The funny thing is, Siemian probably would've been a better quarterback than Manning that season considering Manning posted a 67.9 passer rating and Siemian's career passer rating is 85.1. Still, though, Siemian needs to improve if the Broncos are going to make it back to the playoffs. In his career, which includes 16 games played and 15 starts, he's completed 59.5 percent of his passes, averaged 7.0 yards per attempt, and posted a 20:11 touchdown-to-interception ratio.

He played well on Monday night, though, going 17 of 28 for 219 yards, three total touchdowns (one rushing), one pick, and a 94.2 passer rating. Performances like that, with the kind of defense the Broncos have, could get them into the postseason. More important to Siemian, it should ensure that he keeps his job over Lynch. Considering Lynch is a first-round pick, the Broncos probably won't hesitate to throw him in there if Siemian struggles. They didn't invest a first-round pick in him so that he can sit on the sidelines.

Siemian can use the lessons he learned from Manning, but unlike Manning, Siemian doesn't have the kind of job security that Manning had throughout his Hall of Fame-caliber career.

Vance Joseph pulled no punches when evaluating one aspect of the Broncos offense

By Ryan Koenigsberg
BSN Denver
September 13, 2017

The Denver Broncos had one main goal for their offensive line this season—get nasty.

They did just that.

The additions of Garrett Bolles and Ronald Leary brought a new mentality to the line, a new grit, a newfound mean streak. In their first test, that toughness showed, as they carved out plenty of holes for running backs C.J. Anderson and Jamaal Charles, all to the tune of 140 yards on the ground.

“I thought our offensive line really, really played physically in the run game,” head coach Vance Joseph said Monday. “On the double teams, moving those guys out and just getting movement up front. Our backs ran north-south and found some open space to run. That part was very, very impressive as far as the running game.”

There was a “but,” though, there’s almost always a “but.”

“The pass protection was not that good,” the coach explained. “We were facing two elite rushers in [Melvin] Ingram and [Joey] Bosa so, we knew it was going to be a chore, but we have to do better there. It was too much pressure on Trevor, and it was too many whiffs as far as blocking those speed rushers. It has to get better.”

According to Pro Football Focus, the Broncos line averaged a 46.01 grade on a 100 scale in pass protection. Take out Ronald Leary, who graded more than 20 points higher than the rest of the line and left the game in the fourth quarter, and the line averaged a 39.8.

Despite taking nine hits and four sacks, quarterback Trevor Siemian actually put together a nice game, going 17-of-28 for 219 yards, two touchdowns, and one interception, but if the Broncos want to keep him out there, they’re going to need to do a better job taking care of him.

“Absolutely. Again, the pass protection was not where it has to be for us to be a good football team,” Joseph said. “We were facing two elite edge rushers last night, and most teams don’t have two but in our division, every team has two, so we have to improve there, no excuses there. We have to play better on the edge as far as blocking speed rushers.”

The new offensive line won’t be tested quite as vigorously this week as they take on the Dallas Cowboys, a 4-3 base team led on the outside by Tyrone Crawford, DeMarcus Lawrence and rookie Taco Charlton. They will have plenty of big challenges ahead, though, in a division that features players like Khalil Mack, Justin Houston, Dee Ford and Bruce Irvin on top of the Chargers’ speed guys.

The first step is admitting you have a problem. Fixing it is a whole other challenge.

NFL gets good news — and bad news — with ‘Sunday Night Football’ ratings

By Staff

New York Post

September 13, 2017

The NFL’s kickoff “Sunday Night Football” game on NBC was a hit with the sport’s base — but Hurricane Irma’s approach toward southern Florida seemed to pull away fringe viewers from the broadcast.

The game between the Dallas Cowboys and the New York Giants pulled in an 8.0 rating in the 18- to 49 - year-old demo — up 6 percent from the first SNF game last year, according to Nielsen.

The total audience for the Sept. 10 prime-time game totaled 21.65 million viewers, down 6.3 percent from the 23.1 million viewers who tuned in to last year’s SNF debut match-up.

Last year’s SNF ratings were down 16 percent from 2015’s first game.

The first game of the season, ESPN’s “Thursday Night Football,” was off 11.5 percent from the year earlier’s first game.

Some attributed the slide in total viewers to Irma, along with Hurricane Harvey, which started to rip through southeast Texas on Aug. 25 and wrecked havoc for days.

Roughly 300,000 were left without power and nearly 50,000 homes were damaged.

NFL ratings were down 8 percent last year.