

Kiszla: Behind Von Miller's jokes, there's a serious way he's changing the violent game of football

By Mark Kiszla
Denver Post
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Von Miller, an NFL quarterback's worst nightmare, delivers sacks with a smile.

What in the name of Dick Butkus is going on here? Aren't intimidating defenders supposed to eat glass and be as prickly as a rusty barbed wire?

Miller is intense. But not so intense he's blind to the fact that football is a brotherhood. And brothers take care of one another.

"As a player, you've got to be able to flip it on and off. During the game, when the ball is snapped, I'm intense. But right after, I can joke and dance," Miller told me, walking briskly past the locker room, so not to be late for a meeting in preparation for the AFC West showdown against the Oakland Raiders.

Miller breaks the mold of the mean and nasty defensive star. He dances with stars. During a new Old Spice commercial, when his toughness is questioned, the Vonster replies, "Coach, I'm delicate."

After Dallas receiver Noah Brown recently cut down Miller with a cheap shot to the linebacker's left knee, the victim responded philosophically instead of angrily. "I've always tried to take care of my players on my football team and opponents as well, whether it's the quarterbacks, receivers or running backs," Miller said. "When it's the other way around, it's just baffling."

Heck, during Denver's recent loss in Buffalo, when a video of a costly unsportsmanlike conduct penalty was replayed in the press box, an entire room of curmudgeons erupted in laughter as Miller pulled his hand away with a classic too-slow prank on Bills quarterback Tyrod Taylor.

An NFL linebacker with a sense of humor and humanity?

Do not adjust your set. That's just Von being Von. Like most innovators, Miller is so far ahead of the curve the rest of the world must play catch-up. He is Dave Chappelle in shoulder pads. As Chappelle once said, "Comedy is a very approval-oriented field." And that's why Miller got penalized 15 yards in Buffalo. Referee Carl Cheffers didn't get the joke.

"It's all in good fun, man," Broncos defensive end Derek Wolfe said. "The whole world is so sensitive that it makes me want to throw up."

Hey, I get why Broncomaniacs were mad at Cheffers. But a comedian has to know his audience before taking the stage, or even the best joke bombs. "Story of my life," said Miller, taking full blame for the penalty. "I can only learn from it and just keep moving."

In an era when brain damage is on the mind of every thinking person who cares about the future health of football, President Donald Trump has declared attempts to curb excessive violence are bad. "Today if

you hit too hard – 15 yards! Throw him out of the game,” Trump said, during the same speech in Alabama that ignited a firestorm over anthem protests. “They’re ruining the game.”

Football has gone soft? The president’s rant disturbed Broncos president Joe Ellis. “I don’t think anyone can speak to what (Trump) was thinking when he said that,” Ellis told me after Denver’s 26-16 loss in Buffalo. “Commissioner (Roger) Goodell and everybody in the league have put player safety at the front of their list of issues and concerns that need to be addressed.”

The NFL now must answer to both widows of old pros and fathers of pee-wee players if the scariest words in the sport’s lexicon, Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, are potentially fatal to football’s standing as America’s favorite sporting pastime.

For all his silly pranks, here’s where Miller’s approach to the game just might make a serious difference. He sent a bottle of wine last Christmas to every player on every team in the AFC West. Yes, even to the hated Raiders. That’s respect.

Miller treats football as a fraternity, instead of a clash of gladiators, as was romanticized back in the days of Butkus, with big, nasty hits saluted in the big, booming voice of John Facenda.

“It’s a brotherhood on the field,” Miller said, “You’re out there, trying to take care of guys, whether it’s trying to help a teammate develop, or making sure a player doesn’t get hurt.”

Remember when intimidating defenders were given nicknames like “Mean Joe” Greene? Miller starts every conversation with the same friendly greeting: “Howdy.”

Welcome to the new face of the NFL. Miller is changing the way a fierce pass-rusher goes about his business.

This is Vonster, Inc. Delivering sacks with a smile.

Kickin' it with Kiz: The Broncos will stand tall during national anthem, then make a stand against Oakland

By Mark Kiszla
Denver Post
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Can we just get back to football and have debate about the national anthem after the game?

— *Chuck, Air Force vet*

Kiz: Yes, Raiders week did get hijacked by a debate between true American patriots and protesting Broncos. Now there's an argument where there actually are some very fine people on both sides. But as defensive end Derek Wolfe said, this is a must-win game for Denver. Look, there's probably not a field goal difference between the talent levels of the Raiders and Broncos. But I'll go with the more-desperate-team theory and predict: Denver 27, Oakland 23.

I am a four-year veteran of the illustrious 82nd Airborne Division of the United States Army and now a high-school history teacher. I appreciate your attempts to help fans understand why NFL athletes feel the need to protest. I fight this same fight daily, attempting to have my students understand the social injustice many of them do not experience. Many only see the kneeling as disrespect to veterans or the military. I make attempts to get them to wrap the mind around the idea that by kneeling these athletes are in fact honoring our great country. They honor it by expressing the most important right we as Americans have: the freedom of speech and expression.

— *Chad, vet and educator*

Kiz: We all pledge allegiance, but not necessarily blind faith, to the flag.

I read your column on calling the bluff of Broncos fans disgruntled about the anthem flap. I am a season-ticket holder, and my daughter is using all my seats this year. I did have a personal streak of missing only one game in 22 years, whether I attended in person, watched on television or listened to the radio. I even endured the quickly eroding broadcast skills of Ron Zappolo and the zero focus of Brian Griese during preseason games. My TV was off last Sunday and will so the rest of the year. This is my protest during this whole nauseating and disrespectful ordeal.

— *Gerald, won't even peek at final score*

Kiz: You are protesting against the NFL protesters, and want to alert the free press about your grievance. That's great. That's as American as apple pie. In wanting your voice heard, maybe you have more in common with NFL players than you think. But the staff here at Kickin' It Headquarters has flagged you 15 yards for unsportsmanslike conduct, for gratuitous shots on Zappolo and Griese, who always stand for the anthem, as best we know.

And today's parting shot suggests the real reason a sportswriter supports a kneeling NFL player is the free hot dogs in the press box.

Want to give up your free access, paid parking (or is it limo service?), your free meals and your unending series of freebies as a sports reporter? You can spit on someone who thinks the privileged and coddled Broncos you suck up to every day might actually be expected to show some respect to the flag? I'll call your bluff on that every day, Kiz.

For 5 Broncos starters, undrafted status has provided fuel in making mark this season

By Nick Kosmider
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Shaquil Barrett leaned forward in his locker and stared ahead, his broad shoulders parallel to his feet. He paused. The question stirred a memory and the memory brought pain.

The Broncos outside linebacker leaned back, angled his head to the side and let out a sigh. The image playing in his mind in that moment took Barrett back to May 10, 2014, the final day of that year's NFL draft. There were 255 names that had been announced. Then came No. 256: Mr. Irrelevant, Lonnie Ballentine, a safety out of Memphis.

The draft was over. Barrett's desire to play pro ball had begun with a blow to the gut.

"You really don't get over it," Barrett said, his voice catching ever so slightly. "Thinking about it brings everything back up again and makes you upset about it all over again."

Barrett refused to let disappointment that day end his dream. The former Colorado State star is in his third season as a full-time member of the Broncos and has catapulted himself into a starting role on Denver's vaunted defense. He has eight sacks, 55 tackles and five forced fumbles in 35 career games, and the 24-year-old has set himself up to earn financial security for his growing family when he becomes a restricted free agent after this season.

But the emotion that bubbled in Barrett at mention of the word "undrafted" speaks to the weight that designation carries for NFL players and the motivation it provides. Barrett is one of five Denver starters who began their careers as undrafted free agents. Only three teams in the league — the Jaguars (7), Chargers (6) and Vikings (6) — are starting more undrafted players this season, according to Denver Post research. Cornerback Chris Harris, running back C.J. Anderson, wide receiver Bennie Fowler and inside linebacker Todd Davis have traveled the same path. And other players such as Zaire Anderson and Kasim Edebali are key reserves.

And whether they are winning Super Bowls, earning all-pro honors or signing big contracts, the common thread among these players is that they never forget the "un" label. It's what guides every step they take in the NFL.

"A lot of guys get drafted and then you don't? It's a slap in the face," said Broncos coach Vance Joseph, who began his own brief NFL career as an undrafted free agent in 1995. "Most guys do carry that through their career."

Reasons for "un" vary

Harris had to wait three months for a phone call. For some players who don't get drafted, they get pursued the minute the draft ends.

Harris wasn't so lucky. He came out of Kansas in 2011. That was the year of the last NFL lockout. Once the draft was over, the league went dark. Teams were forbidden from contacting free agents or conducting any other league business.

So Harris, who didn't earn an invitation to the NFL scouting combine, had three months to ponder why he wasn't drafted and wondering whether he'd ever get the chance to prove himself.

"It was difficult. I had (41) starts in the Big 12, so I was confused," Harris said. "I didn't understand seeing dudes from Idaho and smaller D-II colleges getting drafted over me. Plus, I had to wait forever with that lockout. That made it even harder. I didn't know anything until the end of July."

Harris voluntarily moved to safety midway through his senior season at Kansas to help the team's pass defense. As a result, some NFL teams had Harris labeled as a safety prospect, even though he was always destined to be a cornerback at the next level.

"I played every position in college, so I guess they didn't know where to fit me in," Harris said. "I definitely should have had a chance at the combine, at least, to be able to show what I could do."

For Barrett, teams formed impressions based on his body type. They looked at a 250-pound frame with 24 percent body fat and figured he didn't have the makeup to be an impact edge pass rusher, despite his 12 sacks as a college senior.

"Shaquil came from Colorado State with a real natural rush ability, a real natural feel for the game," said Oakland Raiders coach Jack Del Rio, who was the Broncos' defensive coordinator when the team signed Barrett after the 2014 draft. "He just needed to really work his body. He's done that. (Broncos strength and conditioning coach) Luke Richesson has done a great job helping him develop. But he's paid the price himself."

The stories are similar for many undrafted players, whose impressive numbers in college didn't outweigh some perceived weakness teams placed upon them. Other times, being undrafted simply comes down to numbers.

"That really speaks to (general manager) John (Elway) and his staff and (director of player personnel) Matt (Russell) and those guys. They do a great job," Joseph said. "A couple of those guys we had draftable grades on. You can't draft everyone. So when you see a free agent out there playing, it doesn't mean he didn't have a draftable grade. ... Just because they're a free agent doesn't mean they can't play."

Removing the stigma

Harris used to do the math. As players lined up for individual drills in practice, he'd slot himself in line to match up against the Broncos' top receivers in training camp.

When Demaryius Thomas or Brandon Lloyd came up to run a route during training camp in 2011, it was the fearless undrafted cornerback out of Kansas, in camp on a \$2,000 signing bonus, stepping up to combat them.

As Harris saw it, there was no time to waste. He wasn't going to be granted an extended chance to make an impression.

"They are always waiting to see when you're going to look like an undrafted player," Harris said. "I think that's what always kept that chip on my shoulder, to always show that I should have been a first-round player, top-10 player. That's my motivation."

Harris insists, even after signing a five-year, \$42 million contract extension three years after entering the league and becoming an all-pro player, the undrafted stigma still persists. Evidence is found in his No. 63 ranking in the NFL Network's preseason top 100, a list voted on by players.

"It's a popularity contest," Davis said. "He's one of the top corners in the league. He should definitely not be No. 63. Sometimes it does stick with you. That's one of the key examples of how it can."

Barrett occasionally checks in on the linebackers who were drafted in his class. Some are already out of the league. Some high draft picks have yet to produce big numbers.

Anderson, meanwhile, is fond of saying he isn't supposed to still be in the league. It's one thing to make a team out of training camp as an undrafted free agent, as 20 Broncos players have done since 1997. It's another to become a focal point of an offense and a team leader. Only three running backs drafted in 2013 — Le'Veon Bell, Eddie Lacy and Latavius Murray — have more career rushing touchdowns than Anderson's 18.

"Me being an undrafted guy, I take advantage of all of my opportunities," said Anderson, who signed with the Broncos as a free agent out of California. "I wasn't supposed to be in the league five years and I'm trying to make it another five."

Paying it forward

Harris thinks he may have bought a PlayStation 4 video-game console with some of his \$2,000 bonus six years ago. Some of it may have gone to clothes. He can't remember for sure.

"I know it went fast," he said with a laugh.

Harris has kept the Chevy Avalanche SUV he was driving as a college free agent in 2011. It's a four-wheel reminder of the road he's traveled.

It's Harris himself who has served as a reminder to Denver players attempting to follow his path. He's a reminder that the only limits that can be applied to an undrafted player are the ones he puts on himself.

"We all want to be in this league for a long time," Harris said. "I think them seeing me, I try to give them a little motivation with how I did it. When they go through their contracts, they kind of ask me advice. It's a big bond."

Broncos Ring of Fame member Rod Smith, the franchise's all-time leading receiver, remains Denver's shining example of the legacy an undrafted player can leave. Harris, Anderson, Barrett, Fowler and Davis have joined that fraternity as Super Bowl champions and impact starters overlooked in the draft.

“We’re the ones who, technically, aren’t supposed to be here,” Davis said. “We’re going to give it everything we have.”

Undrafted, not unable

A look at how the Broncos’ five undrafted starters have impacted the team this season:

Player	Pos.	Year
Chris Harris <i>2017: Has one INT and is leading a top-10 pass defense.</i>	CB	2011
C.J. Anderson <i>2017: His 235 yards rushing rank sixth in the NFL.</i>	RB	2013
Shaquil Barrett <i>2017: Has a sack and 10 tackles filling in for Shane Ray.</i>	OLB	2014
Todd Davis <i>2017: Ranks fourth on the team with 13 tackles.</i>	ILB	2014
Bennie Fowler <i>2017: Tied for the team lead with two TD catches.</i>	WR	2014

Private services Thursday for Red Miller

By Mike Klis

9 News

October 1, 2017

There will be a private visitation for Ring of Fame Broncos head coach Red Miller on Wednesday and private services on Thursday.

Miller died Wednesday from complications of a stroke one month before his 90th birthday and seven weeks before he was to be inducted into the Broncos' Ring of Fame.

In his first season as Broncos' head coach, Miller led the team to first-ever playoff and Super Bowl appearance in 1977. His Broncos made the playoffs again in 1978 and '79.

In lieu of flowers, Miller's family asks that contributions be made to his college alma mater, Western Illinois University, Sherman Hall, One University Circle, Macomb, Ill. 61455, Attn: Brad Bainter, VP, Advancement & Public Services.

Bolles goes from junior college to Khalil Mack in a hurry

By Mike Klis

9 News

October 1, 2017

To think that when Khalil Mack was destroying the Denver Broncos' right tackle on his way to five sacks in a game 21 months ago, Garrett Bolles was in junior college.

A juco called Snow College, to be exact. On Dec. 5, 2015, Bolles led the Snow College Badgers past Dodge City Community College in the Salt City Bowl. Eight days later, Mack beat right tackle Michael Schofield for four of his five sacks in a surprise 15-12 Raiders victory against a Broncos team that went on to win Super Bowl 50.

Mack is still the defensive star for the Raiders while Bolles will be the Broncos' starting left tackle as a first-round rookie when the two sides meet Sunday afternoon at eventually-to-be-renamed Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

"Crazy," Bolles said in a sit-down interview with 9News this week. "But the world works in mysterious ways and you've got to trust the process and every day put a smile on your face and continue to work and that's what I've done.

"I have a wife and a son who rely on me every single day. So, I've got to work hard. And I've got brothers to left and right of me and a great organization that relies on me every single day.

"It's going to be fun to watch this Sunday against our rivalry. It's a rivalry game so everyone is going to be pumped up. Fans are going to be pumped up. Players are going to be pumped up. That's how it's going to be. So, it's going to be a dogfight and I'm excited to see what happens."

Whoa there, Garrett. The energy you just read in his response there helps explain why Bolles went from Ephraim, Utah to the University of Utah, to hoisting his son in Philadelphia after the Broncos called his name with the No. 20 overall draft pick to studying up on Mack and Bruce Irvin, the Raiders' edge rushers, this past week.

That Bolles has been the Broncos' left tackle from Day 1 of training camp is a more significant feat than people may realize. Jack Conklin, Laremy Tunsil, Germain Ifedi, Brandon Scherff, Andrus Peat, Cedric Ogbuehi, D.J. Humphries, Greg Robinson, Taylor Lewan and Ja'Wuan James were first-round offensive tackles going back to 2014 who have started somewhere other than left tackle as rookies.

Bolles has been so solid at left tackle, he got no time off after taking a cart ride off the stadium field with an apparent serious injury in a blowout win against Dallas two weeks ago, only to play every snap last week at Buffalo.

"The coaches believe in me. My teammates believe in me. And I believe in myself," he said. "I think that's the biggest thing knowing that you can handle the job. You get the best pass rushers every single day. We've got great people here. Von Miller, Shane Ray and Shaq Barrett and those guys push me every single day from OTAs all the way till now. Every single day I get work and I watch them, they teach me things. And they make me a better player. I've definitely improved from when I first came here to where

I'm at right now. I'm a completely different player. I feel calm out there. I feel relaxed. I feel like that's my position. I own that position. I'm just excited to see in the next couple years where I'm heading and the guys next to me go."

Bolles is also a quick healer. He didn't know that two weeks ago because he was unaccustomed to injury. He got banged up on a goal line play two weeks ago when he got kicked near the left ankle by a Dallas defensive linemen.

Bolles was down on the field in pain and then was carted off. As he waved to the crowd, it seemed like goodbye.

It turned out to be a bone bruise in the leg just above the left ankle.

"It was scary. I had never been injured in any of the sports I've played," said Bolles, who was also a pretty fair lacrosse player in his youth. "So that was new to me. When I went down I tried to put pressure on my leg and I fell down. And then they told me some things. It was more of a protocol type of thing. They said let's get some x-rays and make sure everything is OK. Because we thought my femur or my leg was broken.

"I didn't feel anything and I went through the worst-case scenario. When I went off I thought it was going to be the last playing in that stadium for the season.

"By the luck of the draw and the good Lord took care of me and didn't give me the worst injury that we all thought and I heal quick and my leg feels great. And I'm ready for the rest of the season."

The hope for the Broncos today is Bolles and the Broncos' physical offensive line can wear down the Raiders' front with the help of Denver's key home-field advantage component – 5,280 feet above sea level.

"They've got a great defense," he said. "You've got Irvin and then you've got Khalil Mack who is one of the best players to ever play the position. But I also have the best on my team, Von Miller. They learned from Von. When Von had that pass camp earlier in the season he had all those guys come together in the summer so he helped those guys get better. And he helped me get better.

"They're great. They've got big guys up front. They move fast, they flow to the ball fast. That's our offense. We like to control the game, put points on the board and score fast. We're up in the altitude and we're used to it. That's our biggest advantage when teams come to Denver knowing we're at a high altitude and it's harder for teams to catch to us if we start fast. That's what we plan on doing."

Von Miller, Khalil Mack headliners in key AFC West matchup

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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With their second AFC West game in the first four weeks of the season -- against the Oakland Raiders -- staring the Denver Broncos in their collective face, coach Vance Joseph took on the idea of "must-win" games. His list is fairly easy to make.

"Every game we play is a must-win game," Joseph said Friday. "It's only 16 opportunities. How we approach every game is with that mindset. They're all must-wins. Obviously, being at home and it being a divisional game, you would think you would up your details and focus. Every game we play is a must-win game. Last week was. It doesn't affect our mindset each week. It's the same."

The AFC West figures to be the tightest of races all season, and the Kansas City Chiefs currently lead the way at 3-0, with both the Broncos and Raiders at 2-1. Last season in the game Raiders quarterback Derek Carr started against the Broncos, Oakland won easily 30-20, and the Broncos won the game Carr didn't start because of injury 24-6 in the season finale.

With all that in mind, here are some things to watch in Sunday's game:

Game-wreckers: The players who finished 1-2 in the league's Defensive Player of the Year voting last season -- the Raiders' Khalil Mack and the Broncos' Von Miller -- definitely are the headliners in this one. And a marquee player who has a marquee game can tip the scales. Mack likely will spend plenty of his day against Broncos right tackle Menelik Watson, a former Raiders teammate. Watson is a power player who can match Mack's ability to bull rush, but when Mack uses that power to Watson's inside shoulder, there could be trouble. Already this season, some rushers have lured Watson into a shaky pass set and then powered to the inside shoulder to get to quarterback Trevor Siemian. As for Miller, he was hit with an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty last Sunday that he said "killed the game," so he is poised for a big day.

Beast mode: Running back Marshawn Lynch's presence in the Raiders' offense changes the unit's personality at least some. A team that always has coveted speed above almost all else on that side of the ball has now made a power back a key piece of the game plan. Lynch, who did not play last season before coming out of retirement for his hometown team, has shown flashes of his best tackle-breaking work, but overall, he has averaged 3.9 yards per carry to this point. The Broncos didn't have their best tackling day, especially at key moments, in last weekend's loss to Buffalo; another spotty outing would not bode well. The Raiders have been most effective running into the middle of the formation, at 6.7 yards per carry on runs over the center and just over 5 yards per carry over the left guard -- the defensive right.

Clean it up: Yes, it is just Week 4 of the season, but if the Broncos have any real interest in being the team they believe they are, they cannot turn the ball over at their current rate, especially Siemian. The Broncos have had two turnovers in each of their three games this season, and opponents have turned those turnovers into points five times, including four touchdowns. Last season, the Broncos were minus-

2 in turnovers in a 30-20 loss to the Raiders in November and plus-2 in the win over the Raiders in the season finale.

Be patient: This past Sunday against the Raiders, the Redskins found plenty of room to work in the short and intermediate passing game, as quarterback Kirk Cousins finished 25-of-30 passing for 365 yards and three touchdowns. The Redskins isolated Raiders cornerback David Amerson in coverage at times and sent plenty of action his way. The Broncos are itching to make some plays down the field, but they have to keep their composure in how they go about their business Sunday. There is a line between a bold play and a game-changing mistake. The Broncos have to stay on the proper side of that line and make some plays underneath before looking for their shots up the sideline.

Raiders WR Michael Crabtree doubtful to play vs. Broncos

By Staff

Associated Press

October 1, 2017

The Oakland Raiders leading receiver Michael Crabtree is doubtful to play this week against Denver because of a chest injury.

The Raiders announced Saturday that Crabtree had been downgraded from questionable to play Sunday against the Broncos. Crabtree got hurt last Sunday in Washington and missed Friday's practice. He had been limited earlier in the week.

Crabtree has 13 catches for 170 yards and a team-high three touchdowns through three games but is coming off his worst performance of the season when he and Amari Cooper were each held to one catch in the Raiders' 27-10 loss at Washington last week.

Crabtree has played in all 35 regular-season games since signing with Oakland in 2015.

Trump tweets anew about NFL players, national anthem protest

By Staff

Associated Press

October 1, 2017

President Donald Trump on Saturday night stoked the controversy over his call for punitive action against NFL players who take a knee or otherwise protest during the national anthem, tweeting anew that they should remain standing out of respect for the nation and its flag.

Trump took time from a Twitter rant against criticism of the federal response to hurricane damage in Puerto Rico to tweet: "Very important that NFL players STAND tomorrow, and always, for the playing of our National Anthem. Respect our Flag and our Country!"

@realDonaldTrump

Very important that NFL players STAND tomorrow, and always, for the playing of our National Anthem. Respect our Flag and our Country!

4:26 PM - Sep 30, 2017

44,538 Replies 21,316 Retweets 90,628 likes

Protesting during the playing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" began last season when Colin Kaepernick, then a quarterback with the San Francisco 49ers, declined to stand as a way to bring attention to police treatment of blacks and to social injustice.

During a wide-ranging speech at a political rally in Alabama on Sept. 22, Trump called for NFL owners to fire players who engaged in such a protest. In the days that followed the president issued a series of tweets reiterating his views and calling for a boycott of games by fans.

Criticism from players, owners and fans — and some praise — greeted Trump's remarks. The controversy boiled for days and seemed to overshadow other issues facing the Trump presidency, including the failure of congressional Republicans to repeal and replace the nation's health care law, the primary loss in Alabama of Trump's favored candidate, a turbulent hurricane season and the back-and-forth between the U.S. and North Korea over missiles and nuclear weapons.

Relatively few players had demonstrated before Trump's remarks. Last Sunday, more than 100 NFL players sat, knelt or raised their fists in defiance during the national anthem.

Renck: Denver7 keys to Broncos victory over Raiders

By Troy Renck

KMGH

October 1, 2017

If the Purple Haze lifts from over the city, the Broncos will play Sunday. It's kind of a big deal. The Broncos host the Oakland Raiders in what defensive end Derek Wolfe called "a must-win game."

A sense of urgency exists for this reason: It's hard to see the Broncos claiming the AFC West crown with a division loss at home. If you don't believe it, understand the Chiefs have dominated the West the past two seasons. This game sets up as a rebound. Why?

Let's look at my Denver7 keys to a Broncos victory:

1) Ground control

The Broncos lead the NFL with rush defense. In order, they have stymied Melvin Gordon, Ezekiel Elliott and Shady McCoy. Marshawn Lynch is up next. He is a handful. He is also 31 and fighting a clenched-fist brawl with Father Time. Lynch's rushing production has dropped each week: 76, 45, 18. That's a good sign for the Broncos.

2) Press up

It is becoming increasingly unlikely Oakland's Michael "No Chains" Crabtree will play, listed as doubtful with a chest injury. The Raiders' passing game fizzled last week, and it's hard to imagine a bounce back without Crabtree. Washington muzzled Oakland with a Cover 3 zone. Don't look for Denver to use that technique. The Broncos will go man outside and stuff eight in the box. The Dallas game serves as the blueprint.

3) Charles in Charge

Throw on Washington film, and it screams this should be a breakout game for Jamaal Charles. He is a weapon as a receiver out of the backfield. Oakland struggles with running backs in space. Charles posting fewer than 50 yards receiving would be a shock.

4) Get loose

Emmanuel Sanders has not been himself, plagued by multiple drops. He is due to post his best game given his track record and the favorable matchups in the secondary.

5) A better Trevor

Trevor Siemian continues to show he can win in the NFL if the offense achieves balance. Throwing to set up the run has backfired repeatedly over the last season-plus. Go with the punches to the rib cage with Charles and C.J. Anderson, then use both out of the backfield on screens and wheel routes. The Broncos won't lose if they win the turnover battle.

6) Turnover chain

The Broncos' defense has been salty, but not as opportunistic as hoped. Derek Carr remains difficult to sack. To prevent going down to the ground, he will take chances. Chris Harris Jr. is a strong candidate for a pick.

7) Score early

Denver's defense is monstrous when playing with a lead. The crowd drives opponents bananas, and it allows Von Miller and Shaq Barrett to race to the backfield.

Renck's prediction: Broncos 30, Raiders 20

Woody Paige: The Broncos rivalry is again alive with the Raiders, expect a Sunday show

By Woody Paige

KMGH

October 1, 2017

The rancorous rivalry returns.

The Broncos vs The Raiders, as it should be.

For 45 years this has been the best and the biggest, the brightest and bitterest.

Since 1972, the two original American Football League teams have played 91 games. The Broncos have won 47, the Raiders 43, and one was tied.

Since 1960, each has won 15 division titles and three Super Bowls.

Both have had long, successive runs, and long, lean, losing times.

Now, they are back together as able adversaries. In 2015-16, the Raiders won two, the Broncos two. Here they are in the first of two on Sunday afternoon. Both began 2-0 and lost last weekend. And, in the AFC West, both are one game behind "That Other Team" – the 3-0 Chiefs – and two games ahead of The Lost Team – the 0-3 Chargers.

It's a shame that Al and Pat, hostile foes, won't be at Mile High to enjoy another critical game in a series of astringent matchups.

There are several eras in the Denver-Oakland history – before Al Davis, during his reign, after the arrival of John Ralston, the decline and fall of the Raiders empire, the rise of the Broncos to the top, following the death of Davis (and the takeover of his son Mark) and the official announcement that Pat Bowlen was suffering with Alzheimer's and no longer would oversee the operations of the Broncos, and, finally, the new era as the Broncos won a Super Bowl and, a year later, the Raiders got back to the postseason.

In the first three years of the AFL, the Broncos were superior to the Raiders. Denver won four of six in 1960-1962. Then, as Davis assumed control in Oakland, the Broncos hit the skids for several seasons.

The Raiders won 17 of 18 games and became one of the AFL, then NFL powers. The Broncos were guttersnipes.

However, Ralston became general manager/coach of the Broncos, and, in 1972 in Oakland, the Broncos prevailed 30-23.

In 1973, the Broncos and the Raiders tied 23-23.

And Oakland-Denver had reached a real rivalry.

Yet, until 1977, the Broncos still were looking up at the Raiders.

On Oct. 16 of that season, in Oakland, the Broncos pulverized the Raiders, 30-7, intercepting quarterback Ken Stabler seven times, and scoring on a fake field – a pass from backup QB/holder Norris Weese to kicker Jim Turner.

The Raiders were humiliated, and John Madden was outcoached by Red Miller.

Red died on Wednesday after succumbing to complications from his second stroke. Red posthumously will be inducted into the Broncos' Ring of Fame in November during the 40th anniversary celebration of the Broncos' first Super Bowl season. Miller changed the culture and the challenge of the Broncos in '77, and should never be forgotten for his achievements.

The Broncos, appropriately, defeated the Raiders 20-17 in a controversial AFC Championship to reach Super Bowl XII.

That 1973 tie was the inaugural Monday night game in Denver. The Raiders and the Broncos have played 15 more times on Monday night, four games on Sunday night.

But this one is on Sunday afternoon, when the vast majority of the previous 113th have been played.

The tie, the '77 victory in Oakland, the AFC Championship and that Coming of Age triumph in '72 may be the most memorable. But there have been so many other of significance.

In the 1993 season, when John Elway was the quarterback and a fellow named Wade Phillips was the head coach, the Broncos played the Raiders three times, and in back-to-back weeks in the last regular-season game and a postseason game. The Raiders won all three.

There were three consecutive meetings in 1984-85 that were forced into overtime, and the Broncos lost the last two. Overall, there have been nine overtime games.

In 1988 the (then Los Angeles) Raiders had a young rookie coach – Mike Shanahan, who had been lured away from the Broncos, for whom he served as offensive coordinator. In the first quarter the Broncos and John Elway waxed the Raiders for 24 points. But Shanahan's force would respond to win in OT 30-27.

Shanahan was soon fired, and ultimately would become the Broncos head coach in 1995. He hated Davis because of the firing and the owner didn't pay off his full contract. Shanahan was determined to beat the Raiders badly. He did. The Broncos won 11 of 12. While the Broncos became an annual division champion, the Raiders drifted into obscurity.

However, with the Raiders' hiring of another Broncos coordinator, Jack Del Rio, the Raiders have been resurrected. Last year the Broncos missed the playoffs while the Raiders and the Chiefs tied and went to the postseason.

The Broncos win on Sunday, but just barely. How about an overtime?

The rivalry is alive and, well, fierce and competitive and toxic once more. Good.

Where Are They Now: Haven Moses

By Jim Saccomano
DenverBroncos.com
October 1, 2017

Haven Moses was and remains one of the great gentlemen ever to play for the Denver Broncos.

He was inducted into the Ring of Fame in 1988 along with quarterback Craig Morton, with whom he teamed in 1977 to form the “M and M Connection” that helped lead Denver to the first of its eight Super Bowls.

Moses had perhaps the greatest game of his career in the 1977 AFC Championship Game, a 20-17 win that propelled the “Orange Crush” into Super Bowl XII.

Years later, he spoke about the team’s mindset going into that Oakland game.

“We really realized the impact of what was going on,” Moses said. “The history we were about to make was not lost on us.”

Morton threw two touchdown passes to the always reliable Moses. The wide receiver caught his first score of the game on a 74-yard play down the east sidelines.

The second came on a 12-yard touchdown on a diving scoop catch by Moses for what turned out to be the deciding points.

He finished with five receptions for 168 yards and 33.6 yards per catch in a championship game win that forever changed the way Denver would be regarded in the NFL and among the nation’s football fans.

The Broncos and their fans had been vindicated by winning that first AFC championship.

“You can’t replicate that,” Moses said. “That game was representative of the entire 1977 season. The whole place was just orange. It is hard to express what a special season, year and game it was. The fans were on the field with us that day, and we respected their patience and their loyalty. To be able to give them something for the first time, at that moment in time, it was the highlight of my life.”

“Teams are not entirely comprised of guys who just grab the headlines; there are other individuals who make just as much of an impact on the game,” he said. But he was both—a high impact, skilled position player with a complete concept of team first, team always.

“In reflection, it was all just unbelievable,” he said.

Moses played 10 seasons in Denver from 1972-81 as an outstanding wide receiver, back in the day when the running game dominated in pro football.

He finished his Broncos career ranked third in receptions with 302 (including his first four years in Buffalo, he had 448), and he closed out his career first in receiving touchdowns for Denver with 44.

Moses had a per-catch yardage average of 18.0, still the highest career mark in Broncos history, and he was a key component of three playoff teams (1977-79), two AFC West winners (1977-78) and of course, that berth in Super Bowl XII.

It's less frequently noted, but he was a key member of the first winning season Denver ever had. In that 1973 season, in which the Broncos went 7-5-2, he caught a career-high eight touchdown passes to earn Pro Bowl honors.

He has always given a lot of credit for that 1973 season to quarterback and fellow Ring of Famer Charley Johnson, saying, "Charley taught us how to win."

One thing that separated the No. 1 draft choice Moses from many other players was that he had an off-season job.

"My values were such that I thought it important that I always had a job," he said. "Denver was so receptive to [my wife] Joyce and me that it was a big priority to not just play football but to work in the community, to repay these wonderful fans."

In his last four years with the Broncos he worked for Samsonite, the international luggage company headquartered here. Then, upon retirement, Moses spent 15 years working for the Adolph Coors Company, seven with the Archdiocese of Denver, and his final five working years with the Denver Health Foundation.

"Working in our community has always kept me involved," Moses said. "We have two generations of our family born here."

He and Joyce already had their son Chris when they arrived in Denver, but their son Bryan was born in the Mile High City, as was Bryan and his wife Janet's son, Chase.

"Joyce retired four years ago, I retired one year later, and we still live in downtown Denver," Moses said.

"It is always family first, and we are truly blessed. It all fell into place for us here in Denver — family, friends, football and community — with a little golf rounding it out. It all seems like a wonderful dream."

Three Keys to Broncos-Raiders

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
October 1, 2017

It's Raiders Week. It's also a week after the Broncos' first loss of the 2017 season. The Broncos are on an urgent edge, and that can be a healthy thing.

"We had a great week of practice. A great week," cornerback Aqib Talib said. "A great walk-through [Friday]. You see a lot of guys leaving the building late. You can feel the urgency in this building."

That was exactly what Head Coach Vance Joseph wanted to see -- players who were "more focused and detailed in their jobs." But at the same time, Joseph didn't want his team to dwell on last Sunday's defeat.

"My philosophy on that is: When you have adversity, you just have to get back to work and not overact, not ruin the week," he said. "The Bills can't beat us twice. That's my mindset this week. We're moving on. Let's go play."

"We had a great week of work this week and it's a big game on Sunday."

A "must-win" game? Yes, but that makes it no different than the others.

"They're all must-wins," Joseph said. "Obviously, being at home and it being a divisional game, you would think you would up your details and focus. Every game we play is a must-win game. Last week was. It doesn't affect our mindset each week. It's the same."

The mindset is the same, but each game is different. So what are the keys to Sunday's contest?

1. Make the Raiders one-dimensional

Oakland's offense was effective in its first two games when it was able to achieve balance that kept the Titans and Jets off-balance. In those two games, Raiders running backs Marshawn Lynch and Jalen Richard combined to average 100.5 rushing yards per game and 4.90 yards per attempt.

Raiders quarterback Derek Carr and wide receivers Amari Cooper and Michael Crabtree are capable of dicing up defenses, but Broncos cornerbacks Chris Harris Jr. and Talib have held Cooper and Crabtree to an average of 54 yards per game in the three games the cornerback duo has played against those two wide receivers.

2. Win the turnover battle

Two giveaways in each of the Broncos' first two regular-season games did not cost them victories. Against the Bills, it was a different matter. Furthermore, five of the Broncos' six turnovers have set their opponents up in Denver territory; four of those five drives ended in touchdowns that represent more than half of the touchdowns allowed by Denver's defense this year. If the Broncos can eliminate giveaways and force the Raiders to work with long fields, the defense should be able to capitalize.

And if the Broncos can force the Raiders into giveaways, they'll have them where they want them. The Raiders are 0-8 when Carr throws at least two interceptions, and 24-16 when he does not. Since 2014, the Raiders are 2-18 when they have a negative turnover margin, compared with 22-9 when the margin is even or better.

3. Contain Khalil Mack

It's quite simple: The Broncos have faced Mack six times. He's had seven sacks against them. Denver is 4-0 against the Raiders when Mack fails to record a sack and 0-2 when Mack gets into the sack column. When he's posted sacks at the Broncos' expense they've come in bunches -- five in a Dec. 13, 2015 game and two on Nov. 6, 2016.

Mason's Mailbag: On special teams, the buck stops with Brock Olivo

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
October 1, 2017

What can the special teams do to get past the mistakes of last Sunday in Buffalo?
-- James Garcia

Work on attention to detail to ensure that the mistakes -- particularly an illegal-formation penalty that effectively led to a 37-yard field-position swing on a second-quarter punt and the breakdown on the third-quarter fake punt -- do not happen again.

These were the moments to which Special Teams Coordinator Brock Olivo pointed. During his press conference Friday, he put the finger of blame squarely on himself, saying, "That's on me," multiple times. In doing so, he channeled the philosophy of a famous fellow Missourian, President Harry Truman, who had a sign with the words "The buck stops here" on his desk in the Oval Office from 1945-53.

So that's how Olivo handled it. The next step was in addressing the miscues and ensuring that they don't happen again.

"You come in and you lay down the tone from meeting one of the new week," he said. "You roll up your sleeves and you get back to work."

That means not only emphasizing technical details, but dealing with each player individually, knowing that each one might need various styles of feedback to improve their play.

"Everyone reacts differently to that stuff. Some guys you can come down real hard on, some guys you have to admonish and so you kind of have to figure out what kind of players you have in front of you," he said. "It's back to work, [saying,] 'Get your game face back on, fellas, because I let the team down this week and we can't let it happen again.' We have to get back to work and make plays for our team moving forward."

"I know my guys will react well," Olivo added later. "They're good pros."

How can a loss help this team?

-- John Morton

It's pretty simple: Losses can be cathartic -- especially when they are preventable. Late-season two-game losing streaks for the 1997, 1998 and 2015 Broncos helped bring those teams together and get them back on point for their title runs. You never want to fall, but if defeat is used properly, it can help, and the examples of this could fill an encyclopedia.

Sunday in Buffalo, the defeat involved some circumstances beyond the Broncos' control -- a tip-drill touchdown, Tyrod Taylor completing a long pass despite being crushed by Shaquil Barrett -- but also witnessed penalties and other miscues that are fixable.

"It wasn't as bad or as terrible as you would think it was after a loss," said running back C.J. Anderson on Monday. "There are just some things that we need to clean up as an offense that we know we can clean up."

Still, Head Coach Vance Joseph expected to see more urgency from his players throughout the week than he witnessed last week. He got it.

"It's natural when you don't win a football game. It's our team's first loss this year," he said Friday. "It's natural to bring guys back and to get more focused and more detailed in their jobs. So, yes, it's been that way all week."

Do you think there will become a division in the team over some players kneeling and some not?

-- Sam Stephenson

No, and I think the players' message issued Thursday in which they announced that they would stand together for future national anthems put an end to the discussion revolving the issue as it regards the Broncos.

It also emphasized that players want to do their part to "continue driving that positive change" in areas they want to address away from football. The issues that drove the decision of players to take a knee last weekend haven't gone away. But a player like Brandon Marshall stands an example of how to take a protest to the next level, to turn it into action and increased engagement and involvement in community endeavors in Denver and his hometown of Las Vegas.

"To make true change you have to get out there and do it," Joseph said Thursday. "Taking the knee obviously has brought some attention to some issues in the country, but what's the end game? You have to go out there and make true change."

I have a question regarding teams with tough schedules and how their players hold up against injuries. I think it's a strength for the Broncos to have the toughest schedule in the NFL this season, since upon making the playoffs, they will be tough as nails and ready to step on throats.

A friend said 'true, unless they get beat down by injuries.' It made me think about stats on such things. Do teams with a higher rate of games against teams with winning records from the previous or current season suffer more injuries than those that have 'easier' schedules?

My initial thought is that players may play slightly lighter against perceived 'easier' opponents, on the whole (the best teams won't but maybe the mean leans this way) but is this true? And, does that equate to more injuries against winners or losers?

My counter-thought is that injuries come mostly from physical circumstance more than the skill-level of opponents. What do the numbers say?

-- Bruce Wilson

It's a fascinating question. Getting to those numbers would require going through years of data and injury reports, and the hours required for such a project are prohibitive during football season. So this is not something that can be reasonably researched at this time.

I agree more with your counter-thought, though -- I don't think the rate of injuries has anything to do with the quality of the opponents on a team's schedule. Other factors, ranging from the ability of an individual player to play through and recover from injuries to the training staff's work to the condition of the fields on which teams must play to the inherent physicality of the sport to luck play far bigger roles than the quality of the opponent.

Paul Klee: Good on Broncos for standing against Raiders; NFL protests during anthem are self-defeating

By Paul Klee
Colorado Sports Gazette
October 1, 2017

The Broncos want to take politics out of football.

“They don’t mix,” coach Vance Joseph said Thursday.

Too late.

It’s changed so often, the explanations so vague, it’s tough to say from day to day what protesters are protesting. First, it was the American flag — quite literally — no matter how woke Aaron Rodgers tried to sound Thursday night when he told reporters, “It was never about the national anthem.”

You sure about that?

“I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color,” former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick said in August 2016, when this whole debacle got its start.

I don’t know how much clearer the genesis of these NFL protests can be than that, right there. But the protests evolved. They evolved from protests of the flag and what it stands for (see: above), to protests of perceived police brutality (see: Seahawks star Michael Bennett), to protests of Donald Trump’s childish, pandering name-calling (see: last Sunday across the NFL).

“The (president’s) comments kind of forced guys to kneel who hadn’t kneeled in the past,” Joseph said. One thing hasn’t changed: the protesters are only hurting themselves, and their cause. The distorted message, and its anthem platform, is self-defeating.

They lost support from millions of flag-waving Americans when Kaepernick chose to make it about the flag. (His words, not mine.) They lost security in the very neighborhoods they seek to improve. (Violent crime increased again in 2016 — the FBI’s facts, not mine — arguably a byproduct of police being less inclined to get involved in dangerous situations out of fear of racist accusations — a Pew Research poll, not mine.) Peaceful protests are cool, but a false narrative can endanger more people than it hopes to save.

They lost more credibility Friday when Las Vegas police exposed Bennett, the Seahawks star and social activist, as a race-baiting liar. Back in August, Bennett said he had been detained by Las Vegas police with “a gun near my head” and “facing the real-life threat of being killed.” Bennett said he “feared for my life.”

Las Vegas sheriff Joe Lombardo on Friday explained an entirely different account. After reviewing over 800 pieces of video, he said, the sheriff’s office concluded that “the incident was not about race” and

“officers acted appropriately.” Oh, yeah, and the officers involved were Hispanic and black.

Video footage — it’s online; you can see it, too — showed Bennett even shook an officer’s hand when he was released. Don’t know about you, but if I fear for my life, I’m probably not shaking hands. Who looks worse now: Bennett, or sports media who bought and ran with his propaganda at face value?

It's not helping. Feelings over facts, Trump's ridiculous pep rallies, Bennett's dramatics. None of it.

"It's almost like people want there to be division," Broncos defensive lineman Derek Wolfe said. Doesn't it, though?

The Broncos announced last week, in a statement through the players council, a collection of 20 team leaders and veterans, that they would stand for the national anthem on Sunday. It wasn't a unanimous vote.

"Changing the platform should help us make positive change," Joseph said.

NFL players are free to continue protesting, if they want.

"It's their right," as Joseph said. The coach believes in standing. He's smart.

And NFL fans should protest the protesters by staying home when the Broncos host the Raiders at Mile High, if they want. That's their right, too.

But it was the NFL and its players who put politics at the forefront of football. Good luck taking them out.

Woody Paige: Mike McCoy should best Jack Del Rio, this time

By Woody Paige
Colorado Sports Gazette
October 1, 2017

In regard to life and football, some people don't know Jack. Mike does.

The paths of Mike McCoy and Jack Del Rio have intersected frequently over 16 seasons.

The last game Jack and Mike coached together lives in ignominy.

They must share in the blame for The Debacle in Denver that probably prevented the Broncos from reaching another Super Bowl.

In two years (33 games), a decade apart, McCoy and Del Rio were assistant coach mates - with the Panthers (2002) and the Broncos (2012). In eight other seasons they were on opposite sides once, twice, even three games.

As adversarial head coaches, Jack is 5-0 vs. Mike.

On Sunday afternoon McCoy and Del Rio will be on the same field for the 46th time in 38 combined seasons of coaching.

Who has the advantage - McCoy, the Broncos' offensive coordinator and former quarterback, or Del Rio, the Raiders' head coach and ex-linebacker?

"We both know a lot about each other," Del Rio once said of McCoy. "I think from that standpoint it's a wash."

Wash, as being equal.

McCoy is with a team that depends on defense, while Del Rio leads a team that is reliant on its offense. Perhaps the emphasis should be on Broncos' defensive coordinator Joe Woods and Raiders offensive coordinator Todd Downing. Or, more so, Bill Musgrave, the guiding hand for Derek Carr in 2016 and Trevor Siemian's mentor this season.

Del Rio and McCoy have been around ... and back.

Jack and Mike are from Northern California (Del Rio Castro Valley, McCoy Novato) and played college ball in Southern California (Del Rio at USC and McCoy at Long Beach State). They are April-born guys. Jack is 54, Mike 45.

They met in 2002 in Charlotte, N.C., as members of new coach John Fox's staff. Del Rio was the Panthers' defensive coordinator, McCoy a young offensive assistant. That team lost eight straight.

Del Rio went on to the Jaguars as head coach, and McCoy became the Panthers' offensive coordinator.

After all three eventually were fired, they reunited with the Broncos in 2012 - as head coach, defensive coordinator and offensive coordinator. And they were fortunate to have two of the NFL's greatest quarterbacks ever - John Elway as the executive VP of football operations and Peyton Manning as the

new QB. Although the Broncos lost three of the first five games, they didn't falter once the rest of the regular season (13-3) and were considered Super Bowl favorites.

McCoy was being squired by a half dozen teams as potential head coach, and Del Rio was on a fast track to return to head coaching.

Then, the playoff game, and the Ravens, happened.

The Broncos and Baltimore were tied at 28 after three quarters, but Manning threw a touchdown pass for the lead, and the Broncos had possession late in the fourth quarter. McCoy (and Fox) chose to run Ronnie Hillman five consecutive plays - lastly, on third-and-7 - and should have passed. The Broncos punted. And, on third down, Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco threw a prayer. It was replied to. Del Rio's defense (particularly Rahim Moore) was burned badly for a touchdown with 31 seconds left.

Fox (presumably with McCoy's input) elected to have Manning take the most ostracized knee in Broncos history (until lately during the national anthem).

The Broncos were knocked out in the second overtime.

Because of the collapse, interest in Del Rio dissipated, but the Chargers hired McCoy, anyway.

In 2013, Mike and Jack confronted each other as top guns. Del Rio had become the interim head coach while Fox recovered from heart-related surgery. The Broncos won - and would win again in a playoff game.

At the conclusion of 2014, Fox was gone to the Bears and Del Rio to the Raiders.

In the past two seasons Del Rio's Raiders nudged McCoy's Chargers four times. McCoy was fired, and wound up back with the Broncos.

The Broncos lost to ex-offensive coordinator Rick Dennison last week.

This time, the former and current offensive coordinator beats the former defensive coordinator - just barely.

But Mike and Jack will be matched again Nov. 26 - and maybe in early January.

They know each other.

Five player matchups to watch in NFL Week 4: Raiders get gut check vs. Broncos

By Michael Middlehurst-Schwartz

USA Today

October 1, 2017

In one game, the Oakland Raiders saw how quickly everything can become unraveled.

Behind a floundering offensive line and one of the worst performances of Derek Carr's career, the Raiders' formerly fine-tuned offense went haywire last week in a 27-10 loss to the Washington Redskins. The numbers were alarming: 128 total yards, 0-11 on third down, and a 52.9 passer rating for Carr.

The harsh lessons served to the Silver and Black were all the more alarming given the need to address them before Sunday's showdown with the Denver Broncos and one of the league's most vaunted defenses.

Yet Oakland has proven before it has an answer for its AFC West rival, and a similar formula could get the offense back on course.

Lost in the dissection of the passing attack's woeful outing was the Raiders' run game, which gained just 32 yards on 13 carries. But in a season-shaping 30-20 win against Denver last season, the Raiders racked up 218 yards on 43 carries. Carr, meanwhile, took a backseat and had his second lowest passing total (184 yards) of the year.

Denver's defense, however, has shored up its efforts against the run and is allowing a league-low 2.6 yards per carry. But the Raiders can't afford to fall into the same trap as the one that ensnared the Dallas Cowboys, whose offense became one-dimensional and gained just 40 rushing yards in a lopsided Week 2 loss to the Broncos.

Carr, of course, will have to bounce back to keep Oakland afloat. But a steady dose of Marshawn Lynch and the run game could help keep the play-action threat alive while reining in a pass rush led by Von Miller. With Michael Crabtree listed as doubtful, wide receiver Amari Cooper also will be counted on to step up after recording only one catch last week. Cornerbacks Aqib Talib and Chris Harris Jr., however, could force Oakland into finding other offensive threats.

Here are four more matchups that could define Week 4 in the NFL:

Dallas Cowboys' offensive line vs. Los Angeles Rams DT Aaron Donald

After his holdout extended through the summer and into the regular season, Donald served notice of his return to form last Thursday with a game-clinching sack against the San Francisco 49ers. Now the disruptive defender could reveal the true state of the Cowboys' thus far disappointing front.

By almost any measure, Dallas' offense hasn't met the standards of last year's incredibly efficient group. The 22nd-ranked rushing attack in particular is lagging, as Ezekiel Elliott has averaged just 3.5 yards per carry. Many of the offensive shortcomings can be traced back to the line, where left guard Chaz Green

and right tackle La'El Collins have been disappointments as starters next to all-pros Tyron Smith, Zack Martin and Travis Frederick.

Donald looms as an immense challenge for Dallas, especially if matched up against Green or Jonathan Cooper. But the rest of the Rams' defense still has to rise to the occasion. The group has given up 139 yards rushing per game (29th in the NFL) and could be in trouble if it allows Elliott to set the tone for Dak Prescott and the rest of the Cowboys' offense.

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Pittsburgh Steelers QB Ben Roethlisberger vs. Baltimore Ravens' secondary

Patience is at a premium in Pittsburgh, where grumbles about the offense grew louder after last week's 23-17 loss to the Chicago Bears. Faltering in any form against their AFC North rivals could kick the Steelers' concerns into overdrive.

Though running back Le'Veon Bell has lamented his lack of big plays so far this season, Roethlisberger has also accepted blame for the slow start. His 6.2 yards per attempt is a career low, and Pittsburgh is tied for 25th in third-down conversion percentage (32.4). Roethlisberger and the rest of the attack need to find some kind of spark beyond Antonio Brown, who leads the NFL with 354 receiving yards.

The Ravens enter their matchup at their own crisis point after a 44-7 dismantling by the Jacksonville Jaguars in London. Baltimore's defense has kept opposing passers to a league-low quarterback rating of 58.5, but the unit has relied on its league-best eight turnovers to swing games. Turnovers could once again be key, but addressing the missed assignments that plagued the team last week will be essential. With their offense averaging a league-worst 263.7 yards per game, the Ravens can't afford to get into a shootout.

Detroit Lions OT Greg Robinson vs. Minnesota Vikings DE Everson Griffen

Griffen drew attention to this showdown on Wednesday when he said Robinson is "pretty lazy" and can be beaten on the inside. Detroit's blindside protector opted not to respond, but he'll have to provide some kind of answer with his play.

Ranked the second-worst offensive tackle through Week 3 by Pro Football Focus, Robinson has been the weak link on an otherwise respectable line. With center Travis Swanson and guard T.J. Lang both hobbled, the group could be under fire. Matthew Stafford has been adept at evading the rush at times, but he has taken 11 hits in the last two games.

Minnesota will surely be looking to exploit Robinson's matchup with Griffen, who has four of the team's five sacks this season. Yet the Vikings have given up an uncharacteristic 278 passing yards per game (27th in in the NFL), and Stafford could find opportunities against a secondary susceptible to lapses.

Kansas Chiefs WR Tyreek Hill vs. Washington Redskins' secondary

A transformation has taken place in Kansas City, where a once-plodding offense now has scored a touchdown of 50 yards or more in the last nine regular-season games. While rookie Kareem Hunt has been one of the key catalysts for the change, Hill is responsible for six of those plays in that span.

With the Chiefs facing the Redskins' No. 2 ranked rushing defense on Monday night, Hill could play a big role in determining whether the attack can maintain its pace. A deep threat that can stretch opposing defenses, he also has thrived on generating yards after catch on short throws thanks to Andy Reid's creative play calling.

After boasting of his shutdown performance against the Raiders' receivers last week, Josh Norman could find himself in the spotlight yet again with an AFC West foe. Norman likely will remain on the defensive left side of the field as he has done throughout the season so far, but he'll have to be disciplined both in coverage and as a tackler when he does line up against Hill.

Denver Broncos will 'stand together' before Sunday's NFL game

By Bob D'Angelo

WPXI

October 1, 2017

The NFL's Denver Broncos announced that team members and coaches would stand together before Sunday's game in respect for the national anthem, the country and its veterans, Fox News reported Saturday. The Broncos will be hosting the Oakland Raiders in a nationally televised game on CBS.

In a joint statement that also was posted to the team's Twitter account, the 52-member squad said its actions last week were "in no way a protest of the military, the flag or those who keep us safe."

The statement comes a few days after Broncos executive John Elway -- who led Denver to victory in Super Bowl XXXII in January 1998 -- said he believes in standing for the anthem.

"Take the politics out of football," Elway said.

The team's statement also explained its demonstrations from the past week:

"Last week, members of our team joined their brothers around the NFL in a powerful display of unity. As controversial as it appeared, we needed to show our collective strength and resolve," the Broncos said.

The team said its locker room is very diverse, but that being members of the same squad unite them as a team.

"No matter how divisive some comments and issues can be, nothing should get in the way of that," the team said, appearing to reference President Donald Trump's comments in Alabama last week about NFL players taking a knee during the national anthem. The president suggested that players who took a knee should be fired from their teams, Fox News reported.

Broncos outside linebacker Von Miller, who helped lead the team's demonstrations last week, said after that game that Trump "assaulted" their freedom of speech and that "we had to do something."

Devontae Booker's potential return complicates Broncos' depth chart

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
October 1, 2017

Broncos running back Devontae Booker has returned to practice after weeks away, and he could be a day away from returning to game action. That likely will result in the running backs who have been playing getting fewer reps.

"We're going to play them all," offensive coordinator Mike McCoy said Friday, via Nicki Jhabvala of the Denver Post. "C.J. [Anderson] had a number of touches a couple of weeks ago and it was cut down this week, but [running backs/assistant head coach] Eric [Studesville] is going to rotate. There is going to be a certain flow of the game and what we're doing and our plan. They're all going to play. We really don't have a set number of plays [for each runner]."

Carving into Anderson's playing time has been veteran Jamaal Charles (pictured), who had nine carries for 56 yards last Sunday at Buffalo.

"He's one of the best to ever play the game at his position," McCoy said. "Look at the yards per carry he's had, right? He's up there on the leader board. It doesn't surprise me at all with what he's doing. Having played against him for a number of years, whether it's here or being in San Diego, you know what kind of talent he is. It's a great addition to our team. Just the way he works. The adversity that he has fought through. . . . You can see, he's starting to get back to the old Jamaal, which is great to see."

It's great for the Broncos to have so many options in the running game. Through three games, Anderson has 53 carries and six receptions, and Charles has 28 carries and two receptions. But Charles has averaged 5.1 yards per carry; Anderson is at 4.4.