

# Broncos list three players as questionable vs. Patriots; still weighing options at RT

By Nicki Jhabvala  
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The Broncos head into Sunday's game against the Patriots with three players listed as questionable to play: tackle Donald Stephenson (calf), inside linebacker Todd Davis (ankle) and receiver Emmanuel Sanders (ankle).

Stephenson and Davis practiced on a limited basis this week after missing the past two games with injuries. Sanders, who played last Sunday in Philadelphia, was limited Wednesday but practiced in full Thursday. All three participated in the team's walk-through Friday.

Defensive end Derek Wolfe (neck) and running back C.J. Anderson (sickness) are expected to play after missing Thursday's workout. Center Matt Paradis, who was held out of a practice this week because of his back, is also expected to be ready to go.

**Right tackle options.** With starting right tackle Menelik Watson on injured reserve for the remainder of the season, the Broncos are weighing three options to take his place Sunday: veteran Allen Barbre, who has split duties at left guard with Max Garcia and started at right tackle in the lone game Watson missed earlier this season; Stephenson, who should be healthy enough to play; and Elijah Wilkinson, a former practice squad player who was promoted to the active roster in Week 7.

"He's coming along well," coach Vance Joseph said of Wilkinson. "He's a young player, he's a physical player, he's a smart player. So if he had to play, I'd be OK with that."

**Military honors.** The Broncos will recognize the United States Military throughout their game against the New England Patriots. The Marine Corps Silent Drill Platoon will perform at halftime, and approximately 300 representatives from the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard will be celebrated before the game. During pregame introductions, 35 servicemen and women from the Colorado National Guard will run out of the tunnel with Broncos players.

The Broncos will also hold a moment of silence before the national anthem to thank veterans and active duty service members.

**Bennett plan.** The Patriots claimed tight end Martellus Bennett off waivers from Green Bay on Thursday and listed him as questionable to play Sunday because of a shoulder injury (Joseph said the Broncos were not interested in claiming him).

"Their system won't change," Joseph said. "He played with those guys last year so going back and watching the film from last year, they had more two tight end sets on third down. That could be a different deal than we've seen in the last couple weeks. We have a plan for that."

**Footnotes.** Trevor Siemian will again serve as Brock Osweiler's backup at quarterback Sunday. ... . ...  
Special teams coordinator Brock Olivo said running back Devontae Booker will continue to return  
kickoffs for the Broncos. Booker returned five kicks for 105 yards last Sunday in Philadelphia.

# Adversity is part of the job for a first-year head coach. Vance Joseph has faced more of it than he imagined.

By Nick Kosmider  
Denver Post  
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Halfway into his first season as an NFL head coach, Vance Joseph is piloting a team faced with an identity crisis.

“We have to figure out our brand of football to maximize our chances of winning,” Joseph said last week, less than 24 hours after the Broncos had been drubbed 51-23 by the Eagles in a fourth consecutive loss. “That comes from me. I have to figure out what’s our best formula to win as a team.”

Joseph didn’t expect to be in this position when he was hired by John Elway in January to become the head coach of a team that was, at the time, just one year removed from hoisting a Super Bowl championship trophy. Sure, Joseph anticipated having to dodge adversity. He knew he would have to stiff-arm the challenges that would inevitably come, even after an undefeated preseason and a 2-0 start to the regular season.

But this? A four-game losing streak, the franchise’s worst since 2010? The first shutout in 25 years? The most lopsided loss in seven seasons? Instability at the quarterback position? Did he fathom all this?

“No,” Joseph said simply. “It’s a good football team and it’s a good football staff. Obviously, there’s going to be some adversity, but it’s been four (losses) in a row. It’s not so much if you lost to an NFL team, it’s how you lose sometimes.”

The way the Broncos have lost during the past month has been ugly, a stretch unlike anything the vast majority of players on the roster have experienced in Denver — or anywhere else. They have been outscored 124-52 during the losing streak, including a 41-3 deficit in first quarters. Both marks represent the worst in the NFL over that period.

It’s a funk that has further complicated the already tricky waters a first-year head coach must navigate.

“When you’re a new coach and you’re putting your touch or your culture in place, if you’re winning, it helps to kind of spread the culture out because guys believe in it,” Joseph said three days before the loss to the Eagles in Philadelphia. “Players only buy cultures if it’s working and they’re winning. That’s what helps your culture grow. If you’re losing and not winning games, your culture kind of suffers because it speaks to us not working. I think winning games helps your culture grow.”

Now, with Denver’s season on the brink, Joseph faces a potentially defining crisis in his first year as a head coach. The season has been filled with potholes — from dealing with a national anthem controversy to benching a quarterback he believed would carry the Broncos through the season — and the 3-5 team is on the edge of a sinkhole heading into Sunday’s game against the defending champion Patriots.

In the visiting team's locker room after the Broncos' blowout loss to the Eagles, Joseph shifted his eyes from player to player and asked them to search their souls. On the plane ride back to Denver, the embattled coach did the same.

"I have to coach better," Joseph said a day later. "I have to coach better and get our coaches to coach better. Things in the football game that are happening are not by accident. We have to figure out a way to coach our players better and to have better game plans and to manage the games better from my perspective."

### **Learning on the job**

An internship in crisis came last season for Joseph.

He was in his first year as the defensive coordinator for the Dolphins. His boss was Adam Gase, the former Broncos offensive coordinator who was in his first year as a head coach. The Dolphins began the season 1-4.

Frustration stewed in the South Florida humidity. The fan base loudly voiced its doubts as to whether the new young head coach was the right man for the job. Gase, though, kept panic at bay, and Joseph absorbed those lessons.

"Trust the process," Joseph said of what he took from Gase last season. "You're going to have some adversity during the season. You can't simply stop doing what you believe in. Trusting the process and staying with it. Keep pushing the players and pushing the coaches and you'll come out of it."

The Dolphins exploded out of their skid, winning nine of their final 11 games — including six straight after the 1-4 start — to earn a playoff berth.

"He showed great courage in Miami," Joseph said of Gase, "making some tough moves during the season to put us over the top."

Still, Joseph didn't expect to face a similar fate when he arrived in Denver. The task of any first-year head coach is difficult, and blueprints for success vary. They also sway with the expectations, which remain high in Denver. Joseph knew the pressure on his seat would commence with his first day on the job.

"This job won't be a rebuild," he said upon being hired in January. "Most jobs that are taken by a first-time head coach or most jobs that are open, it's a rebuild. This job is not broken. It's a reboot. It's my job to find the small tweaks to make this team a winning team again. That's my call of duty right now and hopefully we can do that quickly."

### **Unique challenges**

Gase began his first season as a head coach with something Joseph didn't have: an unquestioned starter at the quarterback position.

Joseph, meanwhile, was handed a competition between the incumbent starter, former seventh-round draft pick Trevor Siemian, and the second-year, former first-round pick: Paxton Lynch. He was

attempting to plant his own culture and style while also facing a question mark at the most important position.

But when Siemian won the job, then played some of the best football of his brief career during the Broncos' 2-0 start, Joseph further believed he had the right quarterback in place.

Then the turnovers piled up. Siemian threw a pick-six in a perplexing loss to the Giants at home on national television. He failed to guide the Broncos to a score the following week against the Chargers, the first shutout loss for Denver since 1992. Then he threw three interceptions against the Chiefs — part of a five-turnover night for the Broncos — in a 29-19 loss at Kansas City's Arrowhead Stadium.

Two days later, Joseph announced he was benching Siemian in favor of Brock Osweiler. The decision weighed on the coach.

"When you pick your quarterback — it was a long, tough battle during the summer — we took our time and picked the right guy for our football team," Joseph said then. "It hasn't worked out."

Before he faced the growing quarterback controversy, Joseph was one of 32 NFL head coaches who had to address the national anthem protests that took center stage in the league this season. Thirty-two also was the number of Denver players who knelt during the national anthem before their Week 3 game at Buffalo, part of a wide response to President Donald Trump's comments two days earlier in which he said players who protested should be fired.

Throughout the following week, Joseph fielded questions about his team's handling of the protest. After 17 consecutive inquiries related to the topic ahead of the team's fourth game of the season, against Oakland, Joseph asked: "Does anyone have a question about the Raiders?"

Indeed, the national anthem controversy was consuming. Joseph met with a leadership council of players after the Buffalo game as he attempted to address their concerns, and players ultimately voted — though not unanimously — to stand going forward.

"This issue is behind us, I'm hoping," Joseph said then. "There's a football game on Sunday, and that's what's important."

### **Finding support**

The Broncos won that game, 16-10 over the Raiders, but cracks were beginning to show. More turnovers. Big plays given up in the passing game. Poor pass protection.

Those issues have become magnified over the last four weeks, and the seeds of frustration that were planted in the stunning loss to the Giants have grown. At the heart of the hair-pulling inside the Broncos' locker room is an unfamiliarity with the misery that losing brings.

The Broncos are like kids who routinely got to enjoy macaroni and cheese for dinner, only to have their parents swap that beloved cuisine for liver and onions.

"We figured out that, before this four-game losing streak, only two other guys in the locker room had been through it," tight end A.J. Derby said. "It's new for everyone."

That unfamiliarity has left the Broncos grasping for answers. Players have echoed Joseph's claims that practices leading up to increasingly perplexing losses have been productive. They have voiced support of the game plans that they've used to prepare for those games. All-pro linebacker Von Miller said Joseph has been "100 percent phenomenal" in dealing with players. And nose tackle Domata Peko said the locker room firmly has the back of its first-year head coach.

It's important support for a coach dealing with more adversity than he anticipated. But it's also no substitute for a win that could help lighten the dark clouds hovering over Joseph's first season with the Broncos.

"Vance is always asking us if there's something we need to tweak here or there, just to make sure we're comfortable in our job and make sure we're on point," Peko said. "It's on us, man. We're the ones playing the games. We've got to go out and execute. The coaches can only do so much. They put you in the best spots where they think you can be successful, but it's up to you to go out there and make those plays."

# Broncos seeking to create more havoc with pass rush. They've found success recently vs. Tom Brady.

By Nick Kosmider  
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Shane Ray sat at his locker Wednesday and moved his thumb and index finger toward each other until only a sliver of space existed between the two.

"That close," the Broncos linebacker said.

Ray was detailing his attempts at sacking Eagles quarterback Carson Wentz during Denver's 51-23 loss at Philadelphia, the fourth straight defeat for Denver. But the second-year quarterback eluded Ray, Von Miller, Shaquil Barrett and any other rusher bearing down on him throughout his three quarters of work.

There was always a safety valve Wentz could hit. A scrambling lane he could find. A sideline where he could ditch a play with a live-to-play-another-down throw.

It all meant frustration for a group of pass rushers who haven't met their own expectations this season, particularly during Denver's losing streak. The Broncos have compiled nine sacks during that stretch — the same amount they had during Weeks 6-9 last season — but the game-wrecking pressure early in games that could affect the outcomes has been largely absent.

"We still have the same guys who have been beating the (heck) out of other guys for the last three years. We're just making mistakes," said Ray, who is still searching for his first sack after missing the first six games of the season following wrist surgery. "We have to get back on board with figuring what we need to do, what's going to work for us, and we need to execute it."

Early deficits can be the enemy of a pass rusher. The Broncos have been outscored 41-3 in the first quarter during their four-game slide. There has been little pressure on opposing quarterbacks to hang in the pocket to make deep throws, Ray said, reducing the opportunities for Denver's edge defenders to provide pressure of their own.

"Our defense is based on our pass rush and our corners covering, but we have to get into a game where we can rush the passer and we can have our (defensive backs) make plays," coach Vance Joseph said. "That's always a positive for us to have a game like that, but we have to make it happen. In the last four or five games, there hasn't been a game like that. It's been more of a two-, three-score game late so our rush has been contained just by what kind of game we've been in. We have to make it a game, so we can rush the passer and make plays on the ball."

Although it may seem counterintuitive to call a meeting with Tom Brady — a quarterback Miller this called the greatest of all time — a chance for Denver to rediscover its QB-hassling ways, the Broncos believe it could be just that.

In his last three games against the Broncos, including the playoffs — all in Denver — Brady has completed just 50.8 percent of his passes and has been sacked nine times.

“We’ve shown that if we can get to him and hit him, we can disrupt his game,” Ray said. “When you play the Patriots, it’s always that emphasis on focusing on the little things because they’re a team that doesn’t allow a lot of mistakes from their guys. So we can’t allow a lot of mistakes from our guys. We just have to play aggressive and keep him from being able to set his feet and throw the ball. That’s when he’s most dangerous.”

Brady, 40, is authoring an MVP-type season. He is second in the NFL with 2,541 passing yards and fifth with 16 touchdowns. And he has thrown only two interceptions.

Yet, Brady has been sacked at a higher rate than at any time in his 18-year career. He has been brought down 21 times in eight games, leaving him on pace for a new single-season high.

Avoiding the two- and three-score deficits that the Broncos have faced during their losing streak could help them add to Brady’s rising number of sacks taken. To do that, Ray said, the defense has to get back to basics.

“We’re trying to make it to where our coverage works on the back end, and it allows our front-end guys to get there with the rush,” he said. “We haven’t been able to do that all season. Even with me being back, we haven’t been able to do it. We really got to control what we can control. We trust in our offense to figure out what’s going on over there. I can’t worry about what’s going on over there. (If) they fix it, cool. But we just got to keep fighting. That’s the mentality of our defense.”

# To date, Patriots have decisive turnover advantage on Broncos

By Mike Klis

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On paper, the NFL's most lopsided mismatch is within the fundamental of ball protection between the New England Patriots and Denver Broncos.

The Tom Brady-led Patriots' offense has ranked No. 1 in fewest turnovers the previous three consecutive years while posting records of 14-2, 12-4 and 12-4, and winning two Super Bowls.

They are 6-2 this year in part because they have committed just five turnovers at the halfway point to rank No. 2 (Kansas City has four turnovers).

The Broncos, meanwhile, have committed a whopping 19 turnovers -- with 13 coming during their 4-game losing streak. Only the woeful and winless Cleveland Browns have committed more turnovers than the Broncos with 21.

"This team will allow you to beat yourself," Broncos head coach Vance Joseph said of the Patriots. "They won't beat themselves. That's what they've done the last 10-15 years. It's a team that plays an efficient brand of football. When you watch them play, it's going to be a clean game."

In 2006, the Patriots committed 27 turnovers to finish tied for 16th in the league. Since then they have never ranked lower than a tie for 8th in turnovers.

Here's how the Patriots have fared the previous 11 seasons:

Year ... W-L ..... TO (Rank)

2017 ..... 6-2 ..... 5 (2)

2016 ... 14-2 ... 11 (T-1)\*

2015 ... 12-4 ... 14 (1)

2014 ... 12-4 ... 13 (T-1)\*

2013 ... 12-4 ... 20 (T-8)

2012 ... 12-4 ... 16 (T-2)

2011 ... 13-3 ... 17 (3)\*\*

2010 ... 14-2 ... 10 (1)

2009 ... 10-6 ... 22 (T-5)

2008 ... 11-5 ... 21 (T-8)

2007 ... 16-0 ... 15 (1)\*\*

\*Won Super Bowl

\*\*Lost in Super Bowl

The Patriots average record their previous 10 years has been 12.6-3.4. And they're on pace for 12-4 this year.

"They've figured it out," Joseph said. "It's not about the scheme or having the best players. It's about not beating yourself. More games are lost than won. They won't beat themselves but they will allow you to beat yourself."

# Look on bright side: Patriots not as good as Eagles

By Mike Klis

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It's been dour around Broncos headquarters the past month or so. The natural balance of life says it's time to look at the bright side.

So here you go: The New England Patriots are not as good as the Philadelphia Eagles. They can't be. And the friendly confines of eventually to be renamed Sports Authority Field Mile High is a much nicer place to play than Philadelphia.

As non-competitive as the Broncos were last Sunday while getting drubbed, 51-23 at Philadelphia, they do not figure to get embarrassed before their home fans and primetime televised audience against the Pats.

"I'm sure we're not going to see anything close to what happened last week in Philadelphia," said Pats' coach Bill Belichick. "I know we'll get their best effort. They have a lot of great players that will compete hard and are tough. I feel like we're going to have to play our best game of the year this weekend."

Step one in the Broncos' comeback attempt was to get over last week. It wasn't easy for Broncos players.

"It's one of the biggest losses of my career," said Von Miller, the Broncos' top defensive player who has 8.0 sacks through eight games. "I don't think it's just something that you just totally forget. I'm sure as a team, and I'm sure as a defense, you forget stuff like that. But me and being the guy that I am, I always remember that because I never want to experience that again. Just use that to drive me in games going forward."

Fans can stew all week. Players tend to move on quicker. Still, Broncos' receiver Demaryius Thomas said it took a full 24 hours for the dark Philly cloud to dissipate.

"After the plane ride back home, a couple guys were talking about it, I overheard it, you have guys talking about what we did wrong, what we could have done better," Thomas said Thursday in a sit-down interview with 9News. "Because we're able to watch film on the plane. So, I would say really that Monday after we all came in together and watched everything, pointed out our mistakes and do whatever it is to get better as a group. Everybody had the option to tell you what we could have done better here. And after that meeting it was over with and onto the Pats."

"It is behind us, as a team and as a whole, it's behind us, and we're not too worried about that," Miller said. "We have another great opportunity to go against arguably the best football team in the NFL. We have a huge opportunity again, so you can't stay caught in the past. We have a huge game coming up this week and if we can get this one, it'll be wonderful. It truly will be."

The Eagles, not the Patriots, are the best team in football. The Pats are not as explosive as the Carson Wentz college offense that gave the Denver D fits, and nowhere as dominant on defense.

I'm not saying the Broncos, who are 7.5-point underdogs, will beat the Patriots. But they should at least make them sweat. They better or that home crowd won't be so friendly.

# Bronco notes: Von's sacks and sacks, Durable Demaryius

By Mike Klis

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There is money and taxes. Sacks and offsides.

These are parallel entities that intersect in abundance in the world of Von Miller.

Two seasons into his \$114.1 contract extension that set a record among NFL defensive players, Miller has grossed \$41.6 million in salary and bonuses. At an estimated 40 percent tax rate, he never saw roughly \$16.6 million that was taken by the government.

Follow along here. Miller picked up his eighth sack last Sunday against Philadelphia. He also was flagged twice for offsides, as he has taken to trying and time the snap count.

"I look at it like taxes," Miller said in his humorous way. "I'm going to get it. The sacks are going to come. The false starts and the offsides are like taxes for those. You have to pay taxes. I would like to keep my taxes minimal. I don't like to have two a game. Probably one every three games would be cool, but two a game is just not good."

## Von vs. Brady

Miller has had some of his best games against the Patriots. Counting playoffs, he has 7.5 sacks, an interception and a touchdown off a fumble return in eight games against New England.

Yes, there is something about going up against Patriots' quarterback Tom Brady that gets Miller's juices flowing.

"He's the G.O.A.T.," Miller said, referring to the acronym for greatest of all time. "I mean I'm going against the G.O.A.T. There's two different types of emotions you can have going against the best. You can have the emotion of, 'Oh man, this guy's great. He's going to do this or he's going to do that. You go into the game expecting that or you can have that emotion like, 'I'm going against the best, I'm going to go out here and I'm going to play lights out so I can show everybody what we're about and show everybody that we are great, too. That has been my mentality since 2011 when I came into the National Football League and we played with Tim Tebow versus the Patriots here. We have a great team and I'm excited to go out here. That is the mentality I have had every single time I play the Patriots."

## Wolfe, Anderson miss practice

Defensive end Derek Wolfe sat out practice Thursday with a sore neck and running back C.J. Anderson was sent home after he fell ill.

Broncos head coach Vance Joseph said he expected both to play Sunday night against New England.

## Durable Demaryius

Broncos receiver will play in his 100th consecutive game Sunday and make his 89th consecutive start. The start streak is the most among active receivers.

Which is an especially impressive streak considering Thomas seems to come up limping at least twice a game with all the shots he takes to his legs.

“Everybody thinks I’m playing but it’s for real,” said Thomas, who has 535 catches during his 88-game starting streak that began with Game 1 of the 2012 season. “Every time I get hit it’s in my legs. It’s always bothered me. I’ve (previously) had a torn Achilles, I broke my foot, I’ve busted my hip. I’m bothered in my knees and everybody keeps hitting me in my knees.

“I just wish they would hit me in my chest and I wouldn’t have to worry about getting hit in my legs all the time.”

# Demaryius Thomas key positive to come out of Josh McDaniels era

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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As those who work for the Denver Broncos walk the halls at the team's complex, as they move from one task to another in the day-to-day drumbeat of a season, the team's history is all around them.

Trophies, pictures, framed pieces of memorabilia and even the team's top football decision-maker, John Elway, is the franchise's most decorated player. But this season, one largely of struggle to this point, has reawakened another part of the past, a part that helped shape what the team has been and is a reminder of the degree of difficulty in trying to stay at the front of the NFL's line.

The Broncos' current four-game losing streak is their first since 2010, the last season they finished with a losing record (4-12) and saw Josh McDaniels fired as head coach.

There is only one player who remains from that 2010 team, one player who saw what happened then and what's happening now -- wide receiver Demaryius Thomas.

"I look around and there's nobody else left," Thomas said after Friday's practice. "It probably means you're blessed because you're still here, still playing, but it also means those were some tough times."

McDaniels will be on the other sideline this Sunday night, now in his second stint as the New England Patriots' offensive coordinator. He has five Super Bowl rings to his name, Tom Brady still at quarterback and the Patriots at 6-2. But the Broncos' current struggles have forced some to look into the rear-view mirror at McDaniels' two-season tenure in Denver as the coach who replaced Mike Shanahan.

The Broncos finished 8-8 in 2009, after a 6-0 start, and fully unraveled in 2010 with the Spygate scandal, a shallow depth chart, a pile of losses and some sparse home crowds. McDaniels was fired with four games left in what became a 4-12 finish.

But for all that went wrong, there still are some positive reminders of McDaniels' time with the Broncos. Start with Thomas.

Thomas was one of four first-round picks the Broncos made in McDaniels' tenure -- 22nd overall in the 2010 draft. Quarterback Tim Tebow was the other first-round pick that year and the two combined for the 80-yard catch-and-run by Thomas in the wild-card win over the Pittsburgh Steelers following the 2011 regular season.

That 80-yard romp on the first play of overtime may be McDaniels' legacy with the team though he had just finished his only season as Rams offensive coordinator when it happened.

"Nothing against Josh. He's as successful a coach as he can be, he's doing his thing in New England, multiple Super Bowl rings, winning every year," Thomas said. "But to be the guy who's left here, it says a lot about how much has happened. ... There has been so much change since then."

Elway was hired, Peyton Manning was signed, and the Broncos won five consecutive AFC West titles after 2010. Thomas made just five starts for McDaniels, but since has made five Pro Bowls and has had five consecutive 90-catch, 1,000-yard seasons. Indeed, he's come a long way since McDaniels drafted him.

"I was young, had injuries and I was out there trying to beat guys who been doing it for a while," Thomas said. "I think looking back, I could have taken the injuries more seriously back then, could have taken some other things more seriously back then. I was playing all the positions and there was so much I didn't know about being a wide receiver, about taking care of my body, how to put the right things in your body. I had to work, so it helped make me what I became."

The Broncos' front office still features director of player personnel Matt Russell, who was hired during McDaniels' tenure, and the team has two assistant coaches who were on McDaniels' staff -- running backs coach Eric Stutesville and offensive coordinator Mike McCoy.

McCoy and current Miami Dolphins coach Adam Gase are two of McDaniels' former assistants who have gone on to become head coaches in the league. Both Gase and McCoy have said during their time running the Broncos' offense with Manning at quarterback, they involved some elements of McDaniels' work with the Patriots.

"As time goes on, the greyer I get and the more you're in this business, you kind of steal a little bit from everybody," McCoy said this week. "... A lot of little things like the way you prepare for a game, that I learned from [McDaniels]. There are different little things that you deal with during the week, how to approach a week, how to prepare for an opponent."

With half a season to play, the Broncos say they have aspirations of something far better than what's gone on in the season's first half. That includes Thomas, who by experience knows what it takes to get out of the current funk.

"Football and off the field struggles make you if you don't let them break you," Thomas said. "I know where I came from, I know what I put in every year. I'm not perfect by any means, but every time I step on that field, I give my all. And that's what we all have to do. I know where we've been. We can get out of this, right now."

# To Von Miller penalties are like 'taxes,' and he's looking for relief

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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Von Miller wants to do something, anything, to snap the Denver Broncos out of their current four-game losing streak that has the look of dragging down a season.

So, in his eyes he needs a little football tax reform to do it.

That's because, in his quest to get to opposing quarterbacks to create "those game-changing plays," Miller has had five offside penalties and one neutral-zone violation in the Broncos' eight games. A product of trying to be the guy who gets to the quarterback, but something that he said this week needs his attention as the Broncos prepare to face New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady.

"Anything that moves, I'm going," Miller said. "I know that makes me vulnerable to offsides, but I look at it like taxes, the sacks are going to come, the false starts, the offsides are like taxes on those. You've got to pay taxes. I would like to keep my taxes minimal, not have two a game, probably one every three games would be cool, but two a game is just not good. Coach (Fred Pagac), he coaches us better than that, Coach (Bill) Kollar, all the coaches coach us better than that."

Miller had three such penalties in the Broncos' Week 2 win over the Dallas Cowboys, and he had two in the 51-23 loss to the Philadelphia Eagles this past Sunday. Miller's first penalty Sunday came on a first-and-10 with the Eagles at their own 35-yard line as Philadelphia led 24-9.

The second one came in the fourth quarter with the Eagles facing a second-and-9 at the Broncos' 47-yard line with a 44-23 lead.

"Especially when you're down, you're more inclined to take a risk like that. Never on third-and-10, never on crucial situations. There is some plays when I walk out there, and I think as a fan you can feel it, they've been on one for the last six snaps. I'm a gambling man, gambling got me here."

Shane Ray also had two offside penalties in the game as the Broncos had a season-high 14 penalties. Miller is the second-most penalized Broncos player this season with eight – two have been declined.

Rookie left tackle Garrett Bolles is the team's most penalized player with nine, six of those in the last three games.

# Kava: The NFL's newest and safest painkiller

By Kevin Seifert

ESPN

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Matthew Masifilo was a sophomore defensive lineman at Stanford in 2009 when he tore the MCL in his knee. The swelling and pain were horrible, he says. To lower his discomfort, and get him back on the football field, team doctors did what they often do in those situations. They prescribed Vicodin.

"I wouldn't take it," Masifilo said. "I always reacted badly to it. So I stuck with the old ways."

The "old ways" featured regular consumption of kava, a ceremonial drink at the center of Polynesian culture. Made from the root of a native plant, kava is viewed largely as a social lubricant that delivers a calming, mellowing effect. But Masifilo considers it a natural pain reliever and anti-inflammatory agent as well, a substance that is far less dangerous than opioids and doesn't carry the legal hurdles of marijuana.

After retiring from a five-year NFL career in 2015, Masifilo has employed his Stanford engineering degree to deliver kava to football players -- and anyone else -- who want natural options amid the national opioid crisis. He invented a shaker bottle, which he calls an AluBall, to simplify the preparation process and encourage individual use at a time when kava consumption is spiking around the country.

"With the opioid crisis, there is a big need for other options," said Masifilo, who was born in Hawaii but is of Tongan descent. "The doctors used to think I was crazy when I said I wanted to treat my injuries with kava. But it helped me, and I think it has the potential to help address this painkiller problem we have in football and many other sports."

Thomas Keiser, for one, can provide powerful testimony. Masifilo introduced him to kava at Stanford, and Keiser said he "truly embraced it for pain management" during his second year in the NFL. As a linebacker for the Carolina Panthers in 2012, Keiser suffered a series of injuries that sound like they were caused by a car accident rather than football.

First, he endured an impact injury on his leg that required a sizable piece of flesh to be removed. The area got infected, causing pitting edema and then swelling throughout the leg. As he played through it, with the help of painkillers, he then tore the UCL in his left elbow when a collision pushed his arm backward. Braced and taped, he continued playing in that game -- until he tore the UCL in his right elbow while trying to protect the left.

With a swollen leg and two torn UCLs, Keiser said he was "on lots and lots" of painkillers.

"One day I was like, 'This is probably not a good path to be going down,'" said Keiser, who retired after the 2015 season. "Kava was absolutely a better alternative for me. To this day, it's still part of my routine. I've taken painkillers and I've used kava. To me, opioids weren't as much about relieving pain as they were almost just getting you high to take your mind off of the pain. Whereas, to me, kava feels like the actual addressing of pain."

There is little clinical research on kava as a painkiller or anti-inflammatory, according to Dr. D. Craig Hopp, the deputy director of the division of extramural research at the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. Research does suggest, however, that kava works as an anti-anxiety agent -- what Hopp called "herbal Xanax."

Can diminished anxiety contribute to less pain? Perhaps.

"If you're more calm or relaxed," Hopp said, "if you aren't stressed about the pain you're under, that might help indirectly with the perception of its benefit. There isn't much direct evidence of it as a pain reliever, but that might be an indirect link."

There are no clinical indications of addictive properties, and Hopp said: "But I think kava is a much safer alternative in most circumstances than opioids."

And while opioids are addictive and can destroy organs, there is little clinical concern for the safety of kava. In 2002, the Federal Drug Administration issued a consumer advisory that warned of possible liver damage. But those concerns have subsided, Hopp said, amid uncertainty about whether kava caused liver damage during research or if another substance did.

In recent years, in fact, kava bars -- public establishments where kava is served instead of alcohol -- have popped up around the country. The company Kalm with Kava has tracked the opening of 82 such bars in the U.S. Keiser said that many of the people he meets at kava bars say they are recovering opioid addicts. Indeed, Kopp said, "The things I'm aware of suggest that kava usage is the highest that it's ever been."

That's a trend Masifilo will continue to try to bring to NFL locker rooms. Between the two of them, Masifilo and Keiser played for four different franchises. At one point or another, all of them had a group of players who would sit in the locker room after practice, drinking kava and talking. Kava helped alleviate the pain from the physical grind of the season, but the team-bonding benefits were just as significant, Keiser said.

Kava is a legal substance, according to U.S. law and NFL policy. Masifilo said some players have tried to keep their use "hush-hush," but by all accounts, it has been welcomed by team officials who have noticed it.

Among them is New England Patriots owner Bob Kraft, who in 2014 counted 18 players drinking kava in the locker room after a late-season practice. That team included two prominent players of Polynesian descent, tight end Michael Hoomanawanui and defensive lineman Sealver Siliga. Kraft credited the kava gatherings with helping to build unity on a team that went on to win Super Bowl XLIX.

"It was late afternoon," Kraft said, "and they were just joshing around and having fun. It was really special."

It is no secret that NFL players are desperate for pain relief, both during their career and afterward. Keiser, who played in a total of 40 NFL games, deals with the aftereffects of not only the elbow injuries, but also ankle and knee ligament tears, along with herniated discs in the lumbar, thoracic and cervical parts of his spine.

"I have major pain issues from the various injuries of my career," he said, "I absolutely drink kava now and love it for the pain. It's also a social drink, and it's nice to get together with your boys and drink it for the social aspect of it.

"The big thing is that painkillers are far too common in football. This is a far better alternative to all the opioids. I can definitely speak from experience on that."

# Broncos special teams coach Olivo always accepts the blame

By Arnie Stapleton  
Associated Press  
November 11 2017

For many coaches, it's difficult to admit fault when things go haywire on the football field. They'll say things like, "Coaches coach and players play," and suggest that the game plans were great even if the execution wasn't.

Not Brock Olivo .

Denver's rookie special teams coach willingly accepts blame for any and all blunders made by his blocking or coverage units and especially the stumbles by his specialists.

"The way I see it is the product that we put on the field is a reflection of me and a reflection of my work," Olivo said.

When Brandon McManus missed five early field goals that were well within his range and punter Riley Dixon also got off to a slow start, Olivo insisted it was his fault. He said he had to "do a better job of putting Riley and Brandon in better situations."

The plan against the Chargers last month was to keep speedster Travis Benjamin in check with directional punts. But Benjamin returned Dixon's line drive right down the middle for a tone-setting touchdown.

"That's on me," Olivo said. "We knew that Travis Benjamin was a guy that we had to stop. That was one of our first objectives going into that week. I didn't do a good enough job of preparing him to do that, apparently."

When rookie returner Isaiah McKenzie didn't get under the ball and fumbled his fourth punt of the season in a loss at Kansas City, Olivo said McKenzie had to learn to be lighter on his feet so he could adjust when the wind changes the football's trajectory at the last second.

Olivo said he was to blame for that, too, because he hadn't stressed that enough.

"We keep having egregious error after egregious error and that's on me as a coach," Olivo said. "It's attention to detail. We fix the leak on one end of the boat and another one pops up on the other end. I have to dial in and get the guys focused. I'm trying to create a special teams culture here of a bunch of (tough guys). I have to get that out of them. I'm not doing that yet, so I have to step it up."

McManus said the players know who's to blame for the blunders, and it's certainly not their coach.

"We appreciate Brock taking responsibility but when push comes to shove, it's not his fault for what we do," McManus said. "If it's a bad kick, what could Brock have done to change a bad kick? Nothing. So, that's tough for me."

McManus appreciates Olivo's passion, though.

"Being a special teams player in this league, he understood he wasn't going to be a starter in the NFL and the only way for him to get on the field was through special teams," McManus said. "So, he tries to get that across to the players here about the importance of special teams and knowing your role and being professional and doing a lot of studying and making sure you do everything right."

When they do something wrong, they know Olivo has their backs.

Olivo, who spent the last three seasons as an assistant to Chiefs special teams coordinator Dave Toub, was a key special teams player for the Detroit Lions from 1998-2001.

His enthusiasm as a player was infectious and he's trying to spread that same spirit now at age 41.

With the Broncos (3-5) hosting the Patriots (6-2) and their renowned special teams Sunday night, Olivo took the opportunity Friday to suggest New England was his model, praising in particular Matthew Slater for his "burning desire to make plays."

"That's where I've come up short. I haven't created that culture here yet," Olivo said. "... I'm trying to drive that home to the guys every day. We've got to have guys with that attitude like Matthew Slater, that leadership, guys who take pride in special teams.

"We have a couple. It needs to be contagious and it needs to spread throughout that meeting room and be translated onto the practice field. That's on me. I've got to create that. That's why I'm here. I realize that. And I've come up short. So, I owe it to the franchise, this staff and this team to get that thing rolling."

# NFL sacks leaders see teammates as keys to bringing QBs down

By Schuyler Dixon  
Associated Press  
November 11 2017

DeMarcus Lawrence lost his NFL lead in sacks when he didn't have one for the first time in eight games this season with the Cowboys.

The Dallas defensive end still said it was his best game of the year.

Such is the art of the sack, a stat so focused on the individual — down to the celebrations the sack stars create along the way — and yet one that pass rushers and their coaches like to think is more about the entire defensive line.

"I use the term 'four equals one,' four men working as one," said Cowboys defensive coordinator Rod Marinelli, a longtime defensive line coach. "It's really neat because it's not just the diagrams. They have to feel it."

The Jacksonville Jaguars sure felt it in the opener, setting a franchise record with 10 sacks, including four from Calais Campbell. The 10th-year end grabbed the league lead from Lawrence with one sack last week, giving Campbell 11 to Lawrence's 10 1/2.

The Jaguars matched that franchise mark in Week 7 against Indianapolis. They lead the NFL with 35 sacks and have a shot at Chicago's season record of 72 from 1984. They like to credit what they consider one of the NFL's best secondaries.

Lawrence gave his first sackless game a high grade in part because tackle David Irving extended his streak to all four games since returning from a four-game suspension for violating the performance-enhancing drug policy.

Despite the absence, Irving leads all tackles with six sacks, according to Sportradar. And if Irving keeps it up, Lawrence might see fewer of the double teams he was proud of battling in a 28-17 win over Kansas City last weekend.

Lawrence and Irving have been working mostly on the same side, and the Cowboys are averaging nearly four sacks per game since they were paired.

"It just depends how you rush," Irving said. "If I'm at tackle and DeMarcus is at end, I go inside and DeMarcus goes outside, that's a huge gap, that's a huge window for the quarterback. You've got to scheme up your rushes and rush smart."

Minnesota's Everson Griffen and Arizona's Chandler Jones are the others with double-digit sacks so far with 10, and Griffen's number is somewhat remarkable considering coach Mike Zimmer's system doesn't necessarily promote high individual totals.

Former Vikings star Jared Allen almost set the sack record in 2011, finishing with 22, and left the team for Chicago in free agency in 2014, the year Zimmer arrived as coach. He probably wouldn't have been the best fit in Zimmer's scheme.

"When you have a good sack number, there's usually one or two guys that are higher," said Seattle coach Dan Quinn, who came up as a defensive line coach. "But it takes all four because if one guy's just kind of doing his own thing, it kind of can get out of whack."

The NFL's best pass rushers don't necessarily wish for a statuesque quarterback in the pocket every week. Take Denver's Von Miller, the runaway winner in September in The Associated Press rankings of the top outside linebackers.

Considered among the most dangerous rushers in the game, Miller plays in a division with two quarterbacks who built their reputations on mobility — Kansas City's Alex Smith and Philip Rivers of the Los Angeles Chargers.

"I like sacking them all," said Miller, a three-time All-Pro and 2011 AP Defensive Player of the Year. "It's not like if I'm going against Alex Smith, I'm like, 'Man I wish I was playing Philip Rivers this week.' The player's the same."

Campbell has turned into perhaps the biggest free agent pickup of the season, joining the Jaguars following nine years without a double-digit season with Arizona. The 31-year-old is the first double-digit sacker for Jacksonville since Bobby McCray in 2006.

And the Jags (5-3) are tied for the AFC South lead with Tennessee, well on their way to ending a six-year streak of double-digit losses.

"Any time you can get production, it usually comes from other people," Campbell said after a 27-0 win over Indianapolis last month. "I happened to fall into some good stuff, but it really is because of our secondary. They make the quarterback hold the ball for four seconds. If they hold the ball longer than 2.5, we're supposed to be there."

Lawrence emerged from obscurity with 6 1/2 sacks in the first three games, and needed just five games to surpass his previous career high of eight sacks. Naturally, that led to the age-old concern for all dominant pass rushers — double-team, and sometimes triple-team blocking.

Miller, the second overall pick in 2011 who finished in the top 10 in sacks in five of his first six seasons, knows that drill.

"If a team doesn't want you to get a sack, that's top on their agenda," said Miller, who ended a career-long streak of five games without a sack in Week 2 against the Cowboys.

"Don't let Von get a sack. Don't let him ruin the game. Ninety percent of the time, it's not going to happen. 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."

And the best pass rushers also look to their teammates along the defensive front for help.

# Woody Paige: McCoy must change the horses if the Broncos are to have a chance in the AFC West

By Woody Paige

KMGH

November 11 2017

Mike McCoy should study and scout his own history with the Broncos. Maybe he'd find a solution to the team's offensive flaws, faults and failings.

After the 2008 season, McCoy was a 37-year-old NFL assistant without a job. His contract with the Panthers, who were coached by John Fox, was not renewed – at the orders of owner Jerry Richardson.

Up popped 32-year-old Josh McDaniels as the new, surprising head coach of the Broncos. He replaced "coach for life" Mike Shanahan. Kid McCoach had been the offensive coordinator with the Patriots.

McDaniels intended to be his own offensive cording and play-caller with the Broncos. But he had been impressed with McCoy's creativity with the Panthers and brought him to plot out the offensive game plan and work with quarterbacks Kyle Orton, who had been acquired from the Bears in a deal for Jay Cutler, and Chris Simms, son of famous quarterback/analyst Phil Simms and a free agent scuffling to find his spot in the NFL after being dumped by the Bucs (where he suffered a serious injury) and serving as a backup with the Titans.

Under the McBrothers, the Broncos got off to an amazing 6-0 start. But a not-so-funny thing happened on the way to a sure thing – the postseason. The Broncos were beaten in eight of their last ten games with Orton and Simms (one losing start). The sure thing didn't happen.

In 2010 the Broncos jettisoned Simms, traded for a Cleveland first-round bust, Brady Quinn, and drafted already legendary college quarterback Tim Tebow. McDaniels wanted Quinn or Tebow to take over from Orton, but neither was remarkable, or even competitive, in training camp. And McD and McC were stuck with Orton, who had proved to be an underachiever in both Chicago and Denver.

Orton scuffled again; the Broncos struggled (eventually ending up 4-12), and McDaniels was gone before the end of the season. McCoy became the actual offensive coordinator when running backs coach Eric Stutesville assumed command as interim coach. And Tebow was installed as the starting quarterback. He had one gallant game leading the Broncos over the Texans (and coach Gary Kubiak).

Enter John Elway, then John Fox for 2011. Fox kept his former assistant and good friend McCoy as the lead dog for the offense.

The Broncos tried to trade Orton to the Dolphins, but the quarterback wanted a renegotiated (higher) contract, and the deal collapsed. Orton was the starter again.

The Broncos won only one of their five games, and Tebow was sent on the field in the second half against the Chargers, and nearly brought the Broncos a victory.

Fox had a difficult decision the next week and told me off to the side: "Sometimes you know what the right thing is, but you can't do it." He didn't elaborate, but I suspected he wanted to start Tebow.

There are different sides to the story at this point. It's claimed that Elway demanded a change. Fox would say later the choice was his. Obviously, both had serious influence on the decision. McCoy did not. According to one of the major men involved, McCoy had to be "dragged against his will" into the switch to Tebow and told Fox: "You'll get all of us (coaches) fired by doing this."

But, to his credit, McCoy immediately requested that the University of Florida send all the Tebow plays in the zone-read offense to the Broncos. And McCoy watched them intently and began to overhaul the pass-heavy offense specifically for a Tebow-dominant run scheme. Players grumbled.

A hybrid offense, based on Tebow being Tebow, did win in overtime in south Florida, but the Broncos were blown out at home by the woeful Lions. Then, with a 2-5 record and the new offense in full force, the Broncos reeled off six straight victories, with Tebow leading fourth-quarter comebacks, and another overtime triumph.

In a game in Kansas City, the Broncos seldom threw passes. Tebow ran for a touchdown and connected with Eric Decker for a 56-yard touchdown, and the Broncos prevailed 17-10.

The Broncos were defeated in three games down the stretch, but finished in a three-way tie with the Chiefs and the Raiders at 8-8. The Broncos won the division on the tiebreaker.

With a brilliant McCoy call on the first play of overtime, the Broncos scored on a 80-yard Tebow-Demaryius Thomas catch-and-run, and they upset the Steelers. Yet, the season ran out in New England against the vastly superior Patriots. Tebow was hurt in the game, and would never play again for the Broncos. Elway and Fox lured Peyton Manning to town.

What's important is that McCoy, despite his reluctance, changed the horses in mid-stream in 2011.

He must do it in 2017 if the Broncos are to have any chance in an AFC West that is floundering on all fronts. Who knows? There could be another three-way tie if the Chiefs continue to fade and the Broncos and the Raiders regroup.

After all, this is just the midway of the season for the Broncos. They have to find six victories in the final eight – beginning with those dastardly Patriots Sunday night.

With Brock Osweiler at quarterback, McCoy needs to be as creative as he was with Tebow. Certainly, the quarterbacks possess different skill sets. But if the Broncos could go on streak with Tebow, they should be able to with Osweiler – with the right offense, mindset and the correct play selections.

When McCoy did it before with Tebow, and then jumped on Manning's back the next season, he got a head coaching position. His only opportunity to secure a second will be a result of how he handles the current dilemma in Denver.

Now, the Broncos' season is on the offensive coordinator. Can he be the real McCoy again?

# Broncos Injury Report: Matt Paradis, Derek Wolfe good to go

By Andrew Mason  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 11 2017

Right tackle Donald Stephenson (calf), inside linebacker Todd Davis (high ankle sprain) and wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders (ankle) were all listed as questionable for Sunday's game with the Patriots, Head Coach Vance Joseph announced.

Defensive end Derek Wolfe, who sat out Thursday because of a neck problem, and center Matt Paradis, who missed Wednesday's practice and was limited Thursday because of a back issue, were not listed as questionable or doubtful, so both players are expected to play.

Running back C.J. Anderson, who sat out Thursday because of an illness, also returned to practice Friday and is set to play.

"He had a stomach issue and is totally fine," Joseph said.

Stephenson is one of "three options" the Broncos have at right tackle, Joseph said. Veteran Allen Barbre and rookie Elijah Wilkinson are also available.

Wilkinson was promoted from the practice squad to the 53-man roster last month after Stephenson injured his calf three days before the Week 7 loss to the Los Angeles Chargers.

"[Wilkinson] is coming along well," Joseph said. "He's a young player; he's a physical player; he's a smart player. If he had to play, I'd be OK with that."

# How the Broncos defense wants to prove that Philly was an aberration

By Andrew Mason  
DenverBroncos.com  
November 11 2017

A game such as Sunday's 51-23 loss to the Eagles happens to every great defense that sustains a run for several years -- one in which all the averages get blown to smithereens, and everything that worked so well for so long comes apart.

The turn-of-the-century Buccaneers defenses that featured multiple Hall of Famers had a few days during their dominant run that they'd rather forget, including a 1999 game at Oakland when the Raiders hit them with a 45-0 walloping.

The "Steel Curtain" defenses in Pittsburgh in the 1970s had the occasional game where an opponent racked up well over 400 yards and 30 or more points -- a standard that meant more back in those days than it does today, as teams break 30 points once every four times they take the field in the 2010s, compared with once every six times in the 1970s.

Even the famed 1980s Bears had a few letdowns -- a 38-24 loss to Miami in 1985, a 41-0 pasting at the hands of the 49ers in 1987, and a Monday night loss in Denver that same year in which the Broncos racked up 439 yards, the most Chicago allowed in a 72-game stretch from September 1985 through October 1989.

For any defense, allowing 51 points and seven touchdowns is a statistical outlier. But the key for the Broncos is to get back to their previous form, one that saw their defense allow just 1.4 touchdowns per game from Week 3-8, keeping the Broncos in games despite struggles in the other two phases.

"I want to go out there and prove that last week was just a fluke," outside linebacker Von Miller said. "We have the same exact team this week and we have an opportunity to go out here and get a win."

The first step is ensuring that the loss to the Eagles did not rob the defense of its confidence and swagger.

"It didn't go anywhere," Defensive Coordinator Joe Woods said. "It's there. The swag is always there. I think the guys are frustrated. They've been playing hard. We've been doing good things at times.

"But at the end of the day, it's about did you win or lose. It's a bottom-line business in the NFL. Did you win the game? Did you lose? And we're losing, so they're frustrated. But the swagger is there."

This week, you can add a dash of anger to the emotional cocktail.

"We were embarrassed on national television. They [CBS] changed the game. They took us off the air," outside linebacker Shane Ray said, referring to how CBS pulled the broadcast of the game from all but a few markets in the third quarter because of the lopsided margin.

"That's embarrassing, to lose like that. Don't think any of us are taking it lightly. We're all just as [ticked] as the fan base and everybody else. But we're trying to figure it out."

And that brings the defense to a key step -- its preparation, which starts on the practice field and extends to hours of meetings, with and without coaches.

"We were trying to get that competitive nature back going at practice," cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said. "Everybody's working. Everybody was pushing each other harder [during Thursday's practice]."

"We're still going to do our extra film meetings to try to get on the same page as a defense."

Those meetings go beyond what the defense has with coaches; they are players-only sessions designed to foster accountability and fine-tune details and communication.

"When we meet, we meet as a defense on Thursdays and Fridays, and we all just sit in there as players and we look at the film, look at our play-call sheets. We call out the plays, like, basically trying to have the communication on point," Ray said.

"We're all in the room together. It's not like we're separated, like, maybe the linebackers should have done this, maybe the safeties should have done this. We're all there to talk about it. And that's been the big emphasis the last couple of weeks, because we all need to communicate. We all need to be on the same page. Whatever the call is, we all need to run it, we all need to execute it."

At these meetings, words aren't minced in the name of getting concepts down and making sure that mistakes are not repeated.

"It's a very blunt meeting. If I miss an assignment, I'm getting called out on my assignment in front of my defense. If I was supposed to do this and that cost us a big play, that's seen," Ray said. "So it keeps the truth, it keeps the realness, because what happens is when you start losing and things start getting bad, you get guys that point fingers at everybody, or this guy could have done this or this guy could have done this."

"But if you're in a room with everybody, you can't just disguise yourself. No. You were supposed to do this. We were supposed to do this. Now everybody knows. This is the communication. It's not a single thing anymore. That's what makes a difference."

After allowing 51 points, the defense knows it needs that kind of communication and accountability more than ever.

"We're just being real, we're being pros, and we're putting it in your face, because the way the record is, we can't sugarcoat stuff," Ray said. "Things have to change and be fixed now. That's the thing."

Fixing them would ensure that last Sunday's game was just an aberration, a blip for a defense that has set the league's standard the last three years.

# Patriots at Broncos: Paul Klee's report card and prediction

By Paul Klee  
Colorado Springs Gazette  
November 11 2017

## Offense

You can count the remaining games for C.J. Anderson as a Bronco on two hands. And you won't need all 10 fingers. One of the few blueprints to a Broncos' win against the Pats — and I emphasize few — is 20-plus spirited carries for Devontae Booker and a pair of Von Miller strip-sacks.

## Advantage: Patriots

## Defense

For the first time in three seasons of the "No Fly Zone," the advantage in this space was up for debate. Yes, New England's defense has holes. But it's good where the Broncos are bad: in the red zone. Denver must hit Handsome Tom 20-plus times, like the 2015 AFC title game.

## Advantage: Broncos

## Special teams

Credit the Broncos coaching staff for one thing, at least. They've taken ownership of the team's many failures. "I've been all talk to this point," special teams coordinator Brock Olivo said. "We've got to perform." The head-scratching fake punt at Buffalo was the start of their decline.

## Advantage: Patriots

## Coaching

Dreams aren't realized easily. Vance Joseph worked 18 years to realize his dream of becoming a head coach — a long, difficult road. So when I wrote that Joseph is not the right guy for the job, it was not a flippant, off-hand opinion. Just the truth. Bill Belichick is a glaring mismatch.

## Advantage: Patriots

## Intangibles

The Patriots twice were confirmed as cheaters. After adding Martellus Bennett, cut by the Packers for lying about a medical condition, they're liars too, too. But morals don't matter Sunday. Me thinks Tom Brady has a bone to pick with his 7-9 record vs. Denver.

## Advantage: Patriots

**Klee's prediction**

Patriots 30, Broncos 13 ... New England is favored by 7.5

Klee record's on the season: straight-up: 6-2; ATS record: 6-2

# Can a good but not elite Broncos pass defense still handle Tom Brady?

By Jared Dubin

CBS Sports

November 11 2017

Over the last several seasons, the Denver Broncos have consistently had one of the best defenses in football.

From 2013 through 2016, the Broncos ranked second in total yards allowed, and second in yards per play allowed. They ranked seventh in points allowed, seventh in first downs allowed, third in passer rating against, and fourth in yards allowed per rush. They pressured the quarterback at the highest rate in the league and sacked the quarterback more often than anyone else as well. Denver finished in the top five in yards allowed during each of the last three seasons, and let all NFL teams in defensive DVOA (Football Outsiders' measurement for defensive efficiency that adjusts team performance for down, distance, and opponent) in both 2015 and 2016.

The strength of that defense (and, in the earlier years, the sparkling play of Peyton Manning) led the Broncos to top-of-the-division finishes in 2013, 2014 and 2015. As such, they played the Patriots every year instead of just once every third year based on the league's divisional rotation. Add annual games from 2013 through 2016 to two playoff contests, and the Broncos and Patriots squared off six times over the last four seasons.

With the two sides meeting once again this coming Sunday in Denver, it's a good time to look back at how that Denver defense has fared against the engine that powers the Patriots' explosive offense: Tom Brady.

It should come as no surprise to interested observers that the Broncos defense has fared quite well against Brady over this period of time, and especially in more recent seasons as the defense got even stronger. The Broncos held him to a 57.9 completion percentage, far lower than his 64.4 percent mark against all other teams (including playoffs). His 6.39 yards per attempt figure was considerably worse than his 7.48 mark against everyone else, just as his 87.1 passer rating fell far short of the 98.9 mark he posted against non-Broncos opponents. All of that likely had something to do with the fact that the Broncos pressured him more often than anybody else, recording a sack, hit, or hurry on 35.8 percent of Brady's drop backs, compared to the 31.1 percent average compiled by other defenses. (Of course, that figure was also considerably higher in 2015 and 2016, when the Broncos ascended to being the clear best defense in the NFL. Those groups pressured Brady an incredibly 45.7 percent of the time.)

Given that information, one might expect that it would be similarly difficult for Brady to find success against the Broncos this Sunday. However, this year's Broncos defense is not like the ones of the last few years. The team's run defense has bounced back to 2014 and 2015 levels (second in DVOA after ranking 21st a year ago), but the pass defense has dropped off considerably.

Some of this drop-off is due to the fact variations in their pressure rate. The Broncos have recorded a sack, hit, or hurry on 38 percent of opposing quarterbacks' drop backs this season, per Pro Football Focus, not that much worse than the 39.6 percent rate they hit last season when they had the best pass

defense in the league. Their pressure rate when rushing four has dipped to 34.6 percent this season, down slightly from 36.6 percent last season. Their pressure rate when sending five men after the quarterback is down six percentage points, though, from 43.8 percent to 37.8 percent. In order to get more pressure on the quarterback, they've had to resort to sending six rushers or more. That's been successful, but having to do it more often has left them slightly more vulnerable over the middle and, especially, on deep passes than they have been in previous seasons.

The Broncos were the best team in the NFL at defending passes to the middle of the field last season, per Football Outsiders. This year, they're 11th. The Broncos were also the league's best team at defending the deep pass, but this year, they're second-worst. Having to send an extra linebacker or a safety after the QB has its drawbacks, and leaving pockets of space open inside and over the top are chief among them.

Aqib Talib, Chris Harris and Bradley Roby are having their usual strong seasons (if not quite as stingy as last year), but interior defenders like linebackers Brandon Marshall and Todd Davis have been picked apart in coverage, and the safety help from Darian Stewart and Justin Simmons has not been up to par with what the Broncos have gotten out of their safeties in recent seasons.

On Sunday, all of these minor downturns should play right into the hands of the Patriots. A pass defense struggling on throws over the middle and against tight ends (25th in DVOA after ranking fifth last season) sounds like one that is going to get torn apart by Rob Gronkowski. Linebackers that have been vulnerable in coverage likely don't stand a chance against James White, Rex Burkhead and Dion Lewis. And a team that has been getting beaten on throws down the field has a lot to worry about when going up against Brandin Cooks, the NFL leader in catches on throws 20 yards or more downfield.

Of course, we've also seen Patriots offenses that were seemingly designed to beat the Broncos struggle against them before. If the Broncos can take away New England's short crossers and quick outs (an easier feat with Julian Edelman watching others run those routes from the sidelines instead of doing it himself), forcing Brady to hang onto the ball while his receivers try to shake open, they can batter and bruise him in the pocket, just like they did during the 2016 playoffs. If, however, the Broncos allow Brady to deliver the football in rhythm at the top of his drop -- like Carson Wentz was able to a week ago -- they could be in for a long afternoon.

# Ezekiel Elliott fallout: Roger Goodell keeps on end-zone dancing all over players and they have themselves to blame

By Charles Robinson  
Yahoo! Sports  
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One by one, lawsuit by lawsuit, decision by decision, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell is ascending to disciplinary emperor. And in the wake of the Ezekiel Elliott case, his reign over the players is looking more untouchable than ever.

For NFL players and their union, that's the fallout from Thursday, when a federal appeals court in New York all but guaranteed Elliott will serve his six-game suspension for violating the league's domestic violence policy. For Goodell and his legal department, the victory comes despite a few judges along the way questioning whether the league's punitive process is fundamentally fair. It also comes in the face of one of the NFL's investigators stating her own suspension objections after weighing evidence in the case.

Yet even in the face of those concerns, Goodell has ridden out a litany of legal challenges and prevailed once again, bolstering a nebulous disciplinary process that may never be penetrated.

As it turns out, this NFL emperor not only has clothes, he's got a legal suit of armor.

The NFLPA gave it to him in the collective-bargaining agreement, and now its players are paying for legal upgrades, too. That's what is happening with Elliott, whose case may end up damaging the union.

What is left on the docket? The Dallas Cowboys' star running back will ride out an expedited appeal through the U.S. Court of Appeals in the 2nd Circuit that is set to hear oral arguments on Dec. 1. Unless there is a miraculous revelation, Elliott is likely to lose his appeal. Even with a new panel of judges from the 2nd Circuit, it would be a stunning development to have the court ultimately determine that his appeal arguments were more worthy of a legal win than the simple injunction he was just denied.

And if (or when) Elliott suffers an appeals loss? His legal team could get extremely ambitious and attempt to secure a moonshot appearance before the U.S. Supreme Court, something New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady didn't bother to try in deflate-gate. Getting the highest court in the land to hear Elliott's case would be a monumental accomplishment as it would also be far outside of the norm. The Supreme Court typically takes cases that either have broad and sweeping implications or require a resolution for conflicting decisions from lower branches of federal court. Elliott's collective-bargaining complaint meets neither standard.

Elliott may try anyway, but when those roads meet a dead end and he is left with no other options, the ripples will have already set in for the NFLPA. And those are this: His federal case and the precedent it helps solidify will be put down right next to Brady and Adrian Peterson – all of whom took the NFL to court over the CBA, and all of whom lost.

Ultimately, that will be three extremely strong pillars holding up Goodell's power and the NFL's ability to dictate justice in almost any manner. Each damaging in its own way. Peterson's case illustrated to the NFL that it has latitude to discipline players as it sees fit; Brady's case bolstered the league's reliance on scant (and arguably circumstantial) evidence; and Elliott's case brought both of those realities together in one legal battle.

The potentially damaging outcome for players might be even more severe due to Elliott's case. For the first time, it showcased that the NFL can essentially run its own in-house investigation however it wants and still be protected by federal courts – so long as the league goes through its own arbitration process, which has also been painted as rigged. If that doesn't illustrate the remarkable power that Goodell holds, nothing does.

Authorities decline to press charges against a player? Doesn't matter. Not necessary in the NFL's disciplinary realm. The in-house investigator says evidence doesn't support a suspension? Doesn't matter. That opinion can be overridden. The player and his legal team believe the investigation was butchered to the point of appearing to be conspiratorial? It turns out the longtime league-appointed arbitrator doesn't have to weigh those arguments. The arbitrator needs to only see that the NFL went through an investigative process and gathered enough information to make a decision (any decision it wants, basically).

Without embellishment, that's the level of power Goodell has risen to. Or rather, that's the level of power Goodell was given. For all the talk about how terrible the last CBA was for players, there is little argument about this one part of it: The NFLPA made a grievous error in surrendering such wide-ranging and largely unchecked authority to Goodell.

The union knows it now. The players know it now. And for years, they've been trying to win back some of it in a courtroom, racking up millions in legal bills while simultaneously helping the NFL strengthen its position with legal wins.

All of that has taken this to the place it was always going. To a plateau where the NFL is able to run roughshod over players when it sees the disciplinary outcome it has to win. In domestic violence cases like Peterson and Elliott, it was fundamental to help erase some stains of the Ray Rice fiasco. In the case of Brady, it was instrumental in showing that no player is untouchable, particularly when the NFL is defied to the point of alleged evidence being destroyed or concealed.

In a handful of high-profile wins, the league has shown what it deems to be unacceptable. And more than ever, it has shown the lengths it will go to strike down players who challenge those standards. Some will argue those pursuits have been as rightful as they have been successful. Unquestionably, they've been legally fruitful. It takes only one look at the emperor's suddenly impenetrable armor to recognize that.

The NFLPA gave this gift to Goodell. Then it spent millions in court losses strengthening it. Now the players will have to endure it.

# Von Miller: Offside penalties are like 'taxes' on sacks

By Kevin Patra

NFL.com

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Von Miller was caught offside twice in the Broncos' Week 9 shellacking at Philadelphia. Miller took ownership of his mistakes that aided the Eagles' blowout, but also explained his philosophy on trying to time the snap.

For Miller, getting a split-second head start to crush the quarterback is worth the risk of an occasional penalty.

"I look at it like taxes," the Denver Broncos' pass rusher said Thursday, via the team's official website.

"The sacks are going to come, so the false starts and the offsides are like taxes on those. You've got to pay taxes. I would like to [keep] my taxes minimal. I wouldn't like to have two a game. Probably one every three games would be cool. Two a game is just not good."

Miller also added that time and situation play on whether he tries to time the snap.

"[Outside linebackers] coach [Fred Pagac], he coaches us better than that. [Defensive line] coach [Bill] Kollar, all the guys coach us better than that. It's just, especially when you're down, you're just more inclined to take risks like that. Never on third-and-10, never in crucial situations for me, but there are some plays where I walk out there -- and even as a fan I think you can feel it -- like, 'OK, they've been moving the ball. They've been going on one for the last six snaps.' I'm a gambling man. Gambling got me here."

It is likely Miller will gamble some more Sunday night against Tom Brady and the New England Patriots. The all-world pass rusher has 7.5 career sacks on Brady in eight games (including playoff). No other player has more on the future Hall of Fame quarterback (Cameron Wake also has 7.5 in 14 games). With the Broncos' offense struggling, Miller knows his defense must smother Brady in order to pull off the home upset in a virtual must-win to save Denver's season.

# NFL reviewing Russell Wilson's concussion test

By Staff

NFL.com

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The NFL is conducting a thorough review of the concussion test Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson underwent during Thursday night's game against the Arizona Cardinals, a league spokesman told NFL Network Insider Ian Rapoport on Friday.

Wilson briefly left during the Seahawks' win after taking a hit to the chin early in the third quarter. The quarterback was ushered off the field by referee Walt Anderson after the hit. Wilson went into the medical tent on the sideline but sat out just one play before returning. TV cameras showed Wilson was only in the tent for seconds before returning the game.

Wilson was asked about the sequence after the game.

"Well I got smacked in the jaw pretty good there," Wilson said. "I wasn't concussed or anything like that. I felt completely clear. I was just trying to feel my jaw, I was like 'aw man, it's stuck.' I think I was laying on the ground for a second just trying to feel my jaw and I think Walt [Anderson, the referee] thought maybe I was a little injured or something like that. I told him I was good, I was good and he said you got to come off.

"I think Walt did a great job, first of all," Wilson said. "He made the smartest decision. I was fine though. A hundred percent fine. And then I finally went over through the whole concussion stuff. We went through every question you can imagine. I answered even some more for them just so they knew I was good and then went back in there."

According to the joint policy developed by the NFL and NFL Players Association, if the concussion protocol is found to not be properly followed, the team is subject to fines and a potential loss of draft picks.

The NFL has made 47 rule changes since 2002 to protect players, improve practice methods, better educate players and personnel on concussions and strengthen the league's medical protocols. The NFL deploys 29 medical professionals on the sidelines for each game. Working with the NFL Players Association, the league enforces a concussion protocol for players that has been instrumental in immediately identifying and diagnosing concussions and other head-related injuries.

# The NFL and family time on any given Sunday

By Whit Honea

Washington Post

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The NFL was always there. I remember Sunday mornings, my dad and his friends sitting in the living room, the game on and laughter everywhere, me sprawled upon the carpet barefoot and cheering. Thanksgiving? The parade was fun and the kitchen busy, but the real action, where dirty jokes and bad beer made everybody thankful, was in the family room around a shrine of pigskin and nearly drunk uncles. Football was a reason to gather, and I loved it for that.

When I became a father I continued the pattern, insisting that the “f” in family time was for football, even if I was alone by halftime.

I started boycotting the NFL a few seasons ago. It was a decision based on a number of things, including the way the league seems to emotionally blackmail cities into funding stadiums that taxpayers can’t afford and the disregard for serious head injuries to the athletes.

However, my primary issue was the constant worship of players who spend their off-season committing felonies and acts of abuse, only to return each year with wrists freshly slapped and new deals waiting on the table. How could I, in good conscience, teach my kids right from wrong, only to have them spend their Sundays kneeling at an altar of hypocrisy?

The irony, of course, is that the act of kneeling is now why so many other fans are boycotting the NFL. But rather than being upset about the negative role models on the field, many fans are outraged by a peaceful act of protest. They feel that America is being disrespected, when in fact it is America’s finest quality being showcased: Freedom.

Until recently, the National Football League has treated the peaceful protest made by Colin Kaepernick, his kneeling during the pre-game playing of the national anthem rather than standing, as he told NFL.com, for “a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color,” as a brand embarrassment.

Kaepernick’s silent use of America’s rights and freedoms to protest the actual lack of them has kept him on the unemployed sidelines while the league misjudged the intelligence and sensibilities of the ticket-buying public and our collective call for justice.

However, it is important to note that football was in serious trouble long before Kaepernick’s taking of a non-stand upon the soiled sod of the NFL pitch.

Consider Anytown, USA. It is Friday night, and there are lights. The horizon is alive with their glow, a patch of daylight against a cool, starless sky. From it, a wave of voices breaks upon the hum of soft suburban silence, the ebb and flow of cheered excitement beneath a band beating double-time.

It is high school football, and despite the grass-stained energy of teens sweating hope upon the gridiron, the sport is in a free fall of public opinion. The stands are not as full as they used to be, but they will be even less so next season and perhaps fewer still the one after that.

The reason for football's steady decline, specifically at the youth level, is well-documented in medical studies, including this one reported by The Washington Post, which confirm the lasting, negative effects of head injuries and the alarming regularity with which they occur. The health risk far outweighs the goal line reward, and many parents are choosing to err on the side of caution.

Yet, opinion remains that football is a fun game. As far as frenzies go, football is an easy one to embrace. The highest level a golden gladiator pit with each new star player richer and bigger than the last.

In a culture hungry for heroes, football players have been appointed the real-life equivalent of so many caped crusaders. They are plastered across bedroom walls, and selling everything in everything commercials, all with their jerseys draped upon children's backs. They are role models to the masses, and while there are many who may be deserving of the title, too often NFL players present a glaring reminder of society's woes.

It is the constant flow of NFL players in and out of courtrooms that now litter highlight reels where sportsmanship used to be, a regular rogues' gallery of murderers, rapists, drug use, and the repeated abuse of women, children and animals. Even worse is the league's apparent willingness to look beyond the crime, further down the field to where the earth bends just below the goalpost, and the financial glory growing there.

These are not the news clips I want my children to see.

The NFL's repeated acceptance of criminal behavior is no different than a celebration of it, and when coupled with the medical studies that are keeping countless kids away from football, it is all too much.

Heroes have flaws, and that is what makes them relatable, human. But heroes learn from flaws. That is the difference here.

What message is being sent to our children when too many of our anointed heroes face faux consequence for the worst of behaviors, but are publicly ostracized when exemplifying integrity and merit?

The kids deserve better than that.

Which brings us back to the blacklisting of Kaepernick and the kneel heard around the world, perhaps the most powerful thing any player has ever done on the field. His action is one of the few moral highlights in a league, and a country, that sorely needs them. Yet, even as other players continue to honor his example, too many have failed to understand it.

That all changed when Donald Trump added his heated take into the mix:

"Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out. He's fired. He's fired!'"

In reaction to Trump's statement(s), whole teams have rallied to support Kaepernick by taking their own knee during the national anthem, or, in some cases, not entering the field until the song has finished playing. While the symbolism is striking, the sentiment is even more so, for it is plausible that many of

those joining in the protest are not doing so because they agree with Kaepernick's stance, but rather his American right to to express it. And that is something I want my kids to witness. That is the NFL heroism I want them to see.

It is enough to inspire hope in a country that desperately needs some, and remind us that heroes do exist, not because of the logo on their jersey, but the heart beneath it. If society continues to encourage children to view athletes as role models then we should be sure they are worthy of the responsibility, using their power for doing the right thing rather than just the game they play.

Honestly, I don't know if I will ever return to embracing football like I once did. There is no scenario in which my kids will ever play, and even though I strongly support the protesting, it doesn't offset the official lack of character shown by those running the league.

Instead, my kids and I will use examples from all sides to talk about right and wrong, and the implications thereof.

When it comes to quality family time, there are plenty of ways to spend a Sunday.

# Broncos defense says it hasn't lost swagger after blowout loss

By Josh Alper

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The Broncos gave up 51 points and 419 yards to the Eagles last Sunday, which was a low-water mark for a defense that had kept the Broncos in other games while the offense stumbled.

It was the first time the Broncos had given up more than 276 yards this season and they hope to show that it was an uncharacteristic outing when the Patriots pay them a visit on Sunday night. One part of making that happen is assuring the unit remains confident and defensive coordinator Joe Woods believes that's the case.

"It didn't go anywhere," Woods said, via the team's website. "It's there. The swag is always there. I think the guys are frustrated. They've been playing hard. We've been doing good things at times. But at the end of the day, it's about did you win or lose. It's a bottom-line business in the NFL. Did you win the game? Did you lose? And we're losing, so they're frustrated. But the swagger is there."

The unit's record makes a rebound seem like a good bet, although how much it will matter if the offense stays at the same level remains to be seen.