

Kiszla: Vance Joseph is sorry. Sorry doesn't cut it in Broncos Country. John Elway needs to find Plan B.

By Mark Kiszla
Denver Post
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The truth was chilling, but everybody in Broncos Country from John Elway to the die-hards in the stadium felt the truth so deep in our bones that it aches.

And the truth is: As coach of this team, Vance Joseph can't win.

For a proud NFL city where losing has never been an option, tomorrow can't come soon enough.

"I want to be here to fix it," Joseph said Sunday.

But unless you view the world through orange-tinted glasses, it's mighty hard to envision a brighter tomorrow in Broncos Country if Joseph remains as head coach.

At the end of a season to forget, as the temperature in Denver plummeted to 16 degrees and maybe the 16,000 fans that remained in Sports Authority Stadium at Mile High clung to hope, the Broncos did what they've done way too often under the direction of Joseph.

The Broncos found a way to lose. Kansas City beat Denver 27-24 on a field goal as time on the clock, and maybe the Joseph era, expired.

We've heard the story 11 times in a sad season, too many times, in frustrating ways that wasted a prime year of Von Miller's brilliant career. For that offense alone, Joseph should be fired.

"It is sad. It is a sad story if it happens," said Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall, who would be sad to see Joseph go. "I think the season in general is a sad story."

Remember when Kyle Shanahan was a candidate to replace Gary Kubiak as coach of the Broncos? Against all odds, the son of the Mastermind not only found a better gig in San Francisco, Shanny 2.0 also finished 2017 with more victories (six) and a better quarterback (Jimmy Garoppolo) than what we're stuck with in Denver.

When Kubiak hung up his coaching whistle, Elway cleaned out his good buddy's staff. Change is not always progress, though. Every coordinator from the Denver team that won Super Bowl 50 not only landed on his feet, but also landed back in the this season's playoffs. There's our good buddy Wade Phillips laughing it up with the Los Angeles Rams, while Joe DeCamillas is in charge of the special teams in Jacksonville, and even Rick Dennison, whose offense was lambasted around these parts as stale vanilla, helped the Buffalo Bills end a 17-year postseason drought.

Joseph awoke on the final day of a sad year to swirling rumors that Elway was leaning toward dumping him after a single season as coach. "What are you going to do there?" Joseph said. "There was a game to play."

Against a Chiefs squad taking the day off to rest for the playoffs, Denver invented ways to lose against a foe that wasn't really trying. Although quarterback Paxton Lynch threw for 254 yards, he also committed three turnovers, including a fumble the Chiefs returned for a touchdown.

After most of the crowd in the stadium walked out on them, Lynch and the Broncos did rally from 14 points down to tie the game late in the fourth quarter, only to promptly give up a 67-yard drive that ended with a 30-yard field goal by Harrison Butker on the final snap.

Before the Broncos hit the showers to wash away the stink of it all, Joseph addressed his players. "He just said everybody fought hard together every week, we prepared to win and we did it as a team," reported cornerback Chris Harris, Jr. "He just said sorry for the results; we didn't get the results that we wanted."

Sorry?

I'm truly sorry Joseph failed to grasp that it takes more than having good practices to keep Broncos Country happy. We keep score around here.

While it's probably too soon to toss away the investment of a first-round draft choice used on Lynch, the Broncos need a new starting quarterback by any means necessary, whether it's through free agency, the NFL draft or both. Whoever the next quarterback of this team might be, he deserves a head coach with a clear vision of how to restore the juice to Denver's offense. And does anybody really believe Joseph is the best man for that challenging job?

As difficult as falling to last place in the AFC West was to endure, the real pain begins now. Coaches have families. Players have roots in Denver. But perhaps 50 percent of the players and maybe even more members of this coaching staff will have to find a different place to work in 2018.

Happy new year, everybody.

"Nobody is safe," said Harris, taking inventory of the Denver locker room.

It's not Elway's nature, but he must resolve to find a Plan B.

Sorry doesn't cut it around here, Mr. Joseph.

Broncos' late rally falls short as Chiefs win in regular-season finale

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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The clouds rolled in, the temperature dipped to a biting 17 degrees and within 57 seconds, the Broncos were seemingly done. Finished. Cooked.

Patrick Mahomes, the Chiefs' rookie quarterback who had never played in a regular-season game before taking the field Sunday, guided a group of primarily backups against Denver's starting defense and quickly found the end zone on the feet of Kareem Hunt.

The frozen crowd had seen this play out before and knew how it could easily end. Coach Vance Joseph did, too. As Chiefs players jumped in celebration on their sideline, Joseph dropped his head in disappointment as his fate — as well as that of his staff and dozens of players — hung in the balance.

In a game that meant little for their record but everything for their future, the Broncos turned in a 27-24 loss against their playoff-bound AFC West rival. The defeat, which turned into a thriller in the final seconds, dropped the Broncos to 5-11 and capped the worst year in general manager John Elway's tenure as an executive.

Quarterback Paxton Lynch took his second start of the season with the hope of erasing the memory of his previous outing and turned in a telling performance, with wild swings of inefficiency before a strong comeback. He completed 21-of-31 passes for 254 yards, two touchdowns, two interceptions and one fumble. He also took two sacks and posted a passer rating of 87.3.

Lynch's interception late in the second quarter was thrown into triple-coverage against the Chiefs' No. 2 defense. Well before the end of the first half, the Broncos benched most of their defensive starters, too, turning the season finale into a preseason 2018 tryout.

But the biggest test was for Lynch as he tried to bounce back from the critical mistake.

Throughout the Broncos' eight-game slide between Oct. 15 and Dec. 3, Elway said one of the most troubling aspects of their losses — often double-digit defeats — was the way they lost and how they struggled to respond to in-game adversity.

In 2015, the Broncos made their close and come-from-behind wins the hallmark of their Super Bowl run. In 2017, the Broncos failed to regroup after mistakes — a pick here, fumble there — and, in turn, allowed opponents to run up the score.

So when Lynch returned from the locker room after halftime for his first drive following the interception, his decisions were critical.

His first try: five plays, a mere 14 yards and a Broncos punt.

The Chiefs then used 18 plays to eat 8:46 off the clock, gain 90 yards, nail a field goal and extend their lead to 17-10. As Kansas City moved into the Broncos' red zone, Denver's defense reached peak disarray as players pointed to one another out of confusion and they were later flagged for having 13 men on the field.

In Lynch's subsequent possessions, he was sacked twice, fumbled once and watched the Chiefs scoop it up for a touchdown, then he threw another interception.

But when Mahomes briefly left the game in the fourth quarter, the Broncos took advantage and forced a fumble that was recovered by linebacker Zaire Anderson and returned 38 yards for the touchdown, and in a last-gasp attempt, Lynch guided the Broncos on a 62-yard drive that he capped with a touchdown lob to Demaryius Thomas. Brandon McManus tied it up at 24-all with his extra point and rookie linebacker DeMarcus Walker sacked Mahomes on the Chiefs ensuing drive and just like that, the Broncos were back.

But not for long. Mahomes engineered one last scoring drive — resulting in a 30-yard field goal as time expired — and quashed any remaining hope in Denver.

The Broncos spun a dud into a nail-biter in the final minutes, but still exhibited many of the same problems that killed their season long ago.

Meanwhile, Mahomes flashed the potential and athleticism of a starter-in-the-making. He had the mistakes typical of a rookie playing in his first regular-season game — that interception into no man's land, other overthrown passes — but he completed 22-of-35 passes for 285 yards and a 76.4 passer rating.

The Broncos have been looking for that. They saw it in spurts with Trevor Siemian to start the year, and for a few quarters from Brock Osweiler. But never did it last. And after Sunday, the Broncos may not have moved any closer to finding it.

The decision to give younger and less experienced players time was made well before the Chiefs rolled into town as Denver began to look ahead to 2018 and take inventory — of talent on the field and on the sideline.

Veteran back Jamaal Charles was inactive for the second consecutive game to give rookie De'Angelo Henderson needed carries before the year expired. Of the constant criticism facing the Broncos and Joseph, especially late in the season, much was about Henderson's playing time when playoffs were long gone. Those calls for Henderson to play were seemingly validated when he sprinted into the end zone on his first touch of the game, a 29-yard catch-and-run to give Denver a 10-3 lead in the second quarter.

And if they Broncos needed another bright spot, they found it in C.J. Anderson, who topped 1,000 rushing yards for the first time in his career and for the first time for the Broncos since Knowshon Moreno did it in 2013.

But this game will be remembered more for what didn't work. This game will be remembered as a fitting end to the Broncos' trying season. And in the coming hours and days, it may be remembered as the final game for many in orange and blue.

Vance Joseph expects to be back for a 2nd season with Broncos, but his future will soon be decided

By Nicki Jhabvala

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Hours before the Broncos arrived at Sports Authority Field for the finale to a forgettable season, a fresh report was posted on the future of their head coach. Vance Joseph faced “longer odds” to return, according to ESPN, adding to weeks of speculation about his fate after the season’s end.

By the evening, the Broncos had tumbled to 5-11 after a loss to the Chiefs, and watched their season come to a nail-biting close with mostly backups on the field. Joseph didn’t get a defiant win that might quell doubts about his future with the team. He didn’t watch another blowout loss, either.

But afterward, he did state his desire to return “to fix it.”

“I’m going to visit with John (Elway) probably tonight or tomorrow,” Joseph said. “I want to be here. It’s a football team that’s close. We’ve got to obviously make some adjustments in some places. But our football team all year has not stopped working. That was fun to see tonight. It’s been a hard year, but everyone kept fighting. I want to be here to fix it.”

Asked if he expects to be back for a second season, Joseph said, “I do. Absolutely.” Asked if he’s been told either way about his job status, Joseph said he hadn’t.

The Broncos had not made a decision on their coach by Sunday evening and Joseph indeed is expected to meet with Elway, the team’s general manager, on Monday morning. (Elway will stay in Colorado instead of traveling to California for the Rose Bowl to see quarterback prospect Baker Mayfield.)

In the next 24 hours, the NFL’s coaching carousel will continue to spin with many veteran coaches being shown the door. Jack Del Rio, the Broncos’ former defensive coordinator, was booted by Oakland on Sunday, and Chuck Pagano, the Boulder native and Colts coach, bid his team farewell.

Joseph hopes his name isn’t the next one to float across the sports news ticker.

Many of his players hope so, too.

“We stand with Vance. You think any of us would have gone out there and played (hard) if we didn’t stand with Vance?” defensive end Shelby Harris said. “This isn’t his fault. This is specifically on the players. It’s on us, it’s on the leaders, it’s on everyone that should’ve gotten this together a long time ago. We didn’t and that’s on us. Nothing they called, nothing would have changed anything. We have to go out and execute. You don’t like the call? Whatever, you still have to go out and execute.”

“Vance has done everything to put us in a position to win, and we did that to ourselves. So Vance shouldn’t be punished for that.”

Nose tackle Domata Peko said players “could hear a pin drop” when Joseph addressed the team after Sunday’s loss.

“Everyone loves coach and has his back,” Peko said. “We’re really pushing for him to be our coach next year. We’ve just got to fix stuff, man. We’ve got to do a better job of helping him out.”

The Broncos had their first losing season since 2010 and failed to make the playoffs for a second consecutive year as starting quarterbacks were rotated, an offensive coordinator was fired and the scheme was changed again and again. The consistency the Broncos experienced for four seasons with Peyton Manning at quarterback was long gone and in its place was a recent history of change — coaching changes, quarterback changes, offensive line changes and new reputation for cutting ties coldly and quickly.

The Broncos have never had a one-and-done coach under owner Pat Bowlen’s watch, but should they decide to move on from Joseph, it’ll be their fourth swap since 2011. The move will send them into another offseason search of not just finding help at key positions on the field, but also another coaching staff. And it’ll come at a tremendous cost as the Broncos will have to foot the bill of most of two coaching staffs (Joseph signed a four-year contract). Though the money does not count against their salary cap, it does take away from money that could go toward rebuilding the product on the field.

But the frustration had been mounting for weeks in the Broncos’ locker room and the disappointment shared by all, especially those in the highest positions, who were miffed at not just the losses, but how the Broncos lost.

While many within the Broncos organization are expecting “drastic” changes of some kind, Joseph’s fate will soon have clarity.

“Everybody is wondering that,” cornerback Chris Harris said of the team’s impending moves. “Nobody is safe and we all have to figure out what happened here and see what direction we want to go in as players and see what the next step is.”

Denver Broncos' 2018 home, road opponents are set

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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The Broncos don't know who their head coach will be or their quarterback or their starting lineup at many key spots. But they do know their opponents for the 2018 season.

The Broncos' loss to Kansas City solidified their fourth-place finish in the AFC West and ensured they will take on the fourth-place teams in the AFC East and AFC South next season.

Denver will host the Houston Texans, Cleveland Browns, Pittsburgh Steelers, Los Angeles Rams and Seattle Seahawks.

They will hit the road to face the New York Jets, Baltimore Ravens, Cincinnati Bengals, Arizona Cardinals and San Francisco 49ers.

Their two games (one home and one away) against their AFC West opponents — the Oakland Raiders, Kansas City Chiefs and Los Angeles Chargers — will round out their schedule.

The Broncos also solidified their place at No. 5 in the first round of the 2018 draft.

Clady honored. Former Broncos lineman Ryan Clady was the team's honorary captain for the coin toss and was recognized during the first quarter with a video tribute. Clady announced his retirement from the NFL in August and returned to Colorado this weekend to unofficially end his career as a Denver Bronco.

"It means a lot. Obviously, I played most of my career here and I loved it while I was here and had great success here. It meant a lot. It's definitely an honor and I'm glad they brought me in for this."

Inactives. Jamaal Charles' pursuit of \$100,000 is over. The Broncos' veteran back was inactive for the second-consecutive week, ending any chance of reaching 500 scrimmage yards for a bonus and likely ending his time in Denver.

Charles' one-year contract included incentives to allow him to earn up \$2.5 million. But he was held out just shy of his 500-yard mark. He ends his season with 425 scrimmage yards.

Receivers Emmanuel Sanders (ankle) and Cody Latimer (thigh), defensive end Zach Kerr (ankle) and tackle Donald Stephenson (hand) were ruled out earlier in the week with injuries. And offensive lineman J.J. Dielman and cornerback Michael Hunter round out the list as healthy scratches.

Footnotes. Safety Will Parks was the only Broncos player to suffer a significant injury in the loss. Vance Joseph said Parks suffered a "shoulder stinger." ... Kansas City wide receiver De'Anthony Thomas fractured the tibia in his left leg while returning a kickoff in the first half, his coach, Andy Reid, said. He was scheduled to remain in Denver for surgery and did not return home with the team.

Grading the Broncos in their season-ending, 27-24 loss to the Chiefs

By Nick Kosmider
Denver Broncos
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Broncos Grades

Offense: B- Yes, it was against mostly second-string players. And, yes, he made a handful of perplexing mistakes. But second-year quarterback Paxton Lynch showed grit in leading the Broncos back from a 14-point deficit in the second half. It was an element not readily present in his previous three starts over the past two seasons.

Defense: C. A rookie quarterback for the Chiefs faced, for much of the game, a Denver secondary full of rookies. Linebacker Zaire Anderson's fumble recovery and touchdown got Denver back in the game in the fourth quarter, but the Broncos couldn't stop Kansas City QB Patrick Mahomes from engineering a game-winning drive with less than three minutes to play.

Special teams: B. Brandon McManus converted all of his kicks — a field goal and three extra-point attempts — on an ice-cold afternoon, and Denver produced solid field position in the return game. In a season full of mistakes on special teams, Denver avoided any major ones in its finale.

Coaching: C. Offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave set Lynch up with a game plan of quick timing passes and screen plays — one that went for a 29-yard touchdown — that a quarterback who has rarely played or practiced this season due to various injuries could easily digest. But the end result was another loss that ended a miserable season at 5-11.

Game Balls

Demaryius Thomas, Broncos WR. He fell short of the 108 yards he needed to reach 1,000 for the sixth year in a row, but he caught the game-tying TD pass on an impressive route late in the fourth quarter and finished with six catches for 57 yards.

C.J. Anderson, Broncos RB. The fifth-year veteran had to grind for every inch of the 61 yards he gained on 18 carries. But that output put him over 1,000 yards for the first time in his career.

Patrick Mahomes, Kansas City QB. The first-round draft pick, making his first NFL start, led the Chiefs on a game-winning drive after Thomas' touchdown catch had tied the game. Mahomes used his big right arm and his legs to set up the winning field goal.

Paxton Lynch went down fighting in latest audition. Did he do enough to be in Broncos QB 2018 mix?

By Nick Kosmider

Denver Post

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Paxton Lynch sat alone on the frozen grass in disbelief. His back was to the south end zone, where the Chiefs were celebrating the touchdown they had made out of the latest crippling mistake by the Broncos' quarterback.

Lynch had just absorbed a sack late in the third quarter at his own 21-yard line, his team trailing by a touchdown. He fumbled the ball after he was leveled by Kansas City lineman Chris Jones. He then sat powerless on the ground as linebacker Ramik Wilson scooped up the ball and hopped across the goal line, delivering a major body blow in a Broncos season marked by bruises.

After a few moments, Denver's 2016 first-round pick peeled himself off the grass and trudged toward the sideline. On a bitterly cold day, it looked like the latest audition for Denver's oft-labeled quarterback of the future would end with a whimper.

Instead, Lynch revealed a grit mostly absent in his previous three career starts. He overcame three turnovers — two in the second half — to lead the Broncos on a game-tying touchdown drive late in the fourth quarter, which he capped with 6-yard touchdown pass to Demaryius Thomas.

"I thought he got better tonight," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said of Lynch. "I really did."

It wasn't enough to prevent the Broncos, doomed by Kansas City's game-winning field goal as time expired, from finishing 5-11 in one of the worst seasons in the team's NFL history. And it wasn't enough to allay all the reasonable doubts — about his durability, his grasp of offensive schemes, his ability to overcome mistakes — that have largely defined his two seasons in a Broncos uniform.

But it was enough to leave Lynch believing "in my heart" that his best in the NFL is yet to come.

"I love football so much and I wish I could play it all the time," said Lynch, who finished 21-of-31 for 254 yards with two touchdowns, two interceptions and an 87.3 quarterback rating. "When it ends, it kind of hits you at once. It's tough, especially when you end the season like this — on a loss — and had the season you did. The only thing you can do now is put it behind you and get to work in the offseason. I'm excited about that, to put in the work in the offseason and come back and be the guy."

Injuries shrank what could have been a bigger opportunity this season for Lynch to make his mark on Denver's quarterback plans going forward. But he showed flashes Sunday — albeit against mostly reserves — of the promise general manager John Elway and others in the organization saw when they drafted him out of Memphis less than two years ago.

Lynch completed 13-of-18 passes for 159 yards in the first half, and his 29-yard touchdown pass to rookie running back De'Angelo Henderson in the second quarter gave the Broncos a 10-7 lead. Offensive

coordinator Bill Musgrave had dialed up a series of quick timing routes with short dropbacks to help Lynch get the ball out quickly.

But Musgrave couldn't keep Lynch from staring down wide receiver Jordan Taylor as the Broncos attempted to register a scoring drive late in the second quarter. He couldn't keep Lynch, who had ample time in the pocket, from forcing a throw into triple coverage. The ball was tipped, then picked off by Chiefs linebacker Terrance Smith.

The turnover ended Denver's threat and left them with a 14-10 halftime deficit. And it appeared to begin a spiral for Lynch, who was sacked five times in the second half. Trailing 24-10 after his fumble turned into a Chiefs touchdown, he drove the Broncos to the doorstep of the end zone midway through the fourth quarter.

But after another sack, the Broncos faced a fourth-and-15 at the Kansas City 16-yard line. Lynch lofted a pass toward the goal line for Isaiah McKenzie, but it was intercepted by Terrance Mitchell at the 2-yard line. It looked final blow on something very close to a lost season for the second-year quarterback.

Then came the late rally, aided by a Broncos score on defense. Lynch using his legs to make plays, delivering darts to open receivers and lofting the scoring pass to Thomas to tie the game.

"He was able to get out and extend the play," Taylor said. "I think that's something Paxton can bring to the table. He's a competitor, for sure, and I think he's definitely improved."

But has he improved enough to be a part of the Broncos' quarterback picture 2018? It's just one question in an offseason loaded with them.

"I want to be the quarterback of this organization," Lynch said. "That's what they brought me here for. That's what I believe in my heart. ... I'm focused on what I need to focus on and that's being the best me I can be so I can make this team the best they can be."

C.J. Anderson becomes first Broncos running back since 2013 to rush for 1,000 yards

By Nick Kosmider

Denver Post

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There was nothing easy about the final stretch of C.J. Anderson's journey toward 1,000 rushing yards.

But on his 18th carry Sunday, as night fell on a frozen Sports Authority Field, the Broncos' running back darted up the left side for 10 yards, officially putting him over the 1,000-yard mark for the first time in his five-year career. Anderson also became the first Denver running back since Knowshon Moreno (1,038) in 2013 to reach that plateau.

The 10-yard run by Anderson, which came early in the fourth quarter, put him at 61 yards for the game and 1,007 for the season.

In another milestone chase for the Broncos, wide receiver Demaryius Thomas narrowly missed his sixth straight season of 1,000 yards receiving. Thomas needed 108 yards Sunday and finished with six catches for 57 yards and a touchdown.

@Broncos

The milestone rush.

Way to go, 22!

4:58 PM - Dec 31, 2017

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Broncos secure No. 5 pick in 2018 NFL draft following loss to Chiefs

By Matt L. Stephens

Denver Post

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The Broncos locked down the No. 5 spot in the 2018 NFL draft with their 27-24 loss to the Chiefs on Sunday. The following is a look at the 2018 first-round draft order of the non-playoff teams. Note that picks Nos. 21-32 will be playoff teams and decided following their outcomes in the playoffs. The winner of the Super Bowl will get the last pick of the first round.

1. Browns (0-16)
2. Giants (3-13)
3. Colts (4-12)
4. Browns [via Texans (4-12)]
5. Broncos (5-11)
6. Jets (5-11)
7. Buccaneers (5-11)
8. Bears (5-11)
9. 49ers (6-10)
10. Raiders (6-10)
11. Dolphins (6-10)
12. Bengals (7-9)
13. Redskins (7-9)
14. Packers (7-9)
15. Cardinals (8-8)
16. Ravens (9-7)
17. Chargers (9-7)
18. Seahawks (9-7)
19. Cowboys (9-7)
20. Lions (9-7)

Patrick Mahomes vs. Paxton Lynch nets a clear winner. The Broncos might be left with the leftovers.

By Nick Groke
Denver Post
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A 17-degree chill bit at Patrick Mahomes' right hand Sunday. His left hand was warmed by a white glove thick enough to be an oven mitt. Together they held the future of the Broncos, in a roundabout way.

The Kansas City Chiefs' rookie quarterback made his NFL debut at Sports Authority Field in a kind of tryout that, in ways both direct and incidental, could affect the Broncos for years.

Mahomes' first career start — a mixed bag of muscled throws and poor decisions — signaled the Chiefs might be ready to move forward with the quarterback they drafted 10th overall in the 2017 NFL Draft. The Broncos, too, forced their young quarterback into a tryout — Paxton Lynch, the 26th pick in 2016, was playing for next season.

"With it being a quarterback issue going into the offseason, we want to see him play to see where this player is," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said last week. He meant Lynch — but Mahomes' start mattered just as much.

Kansas City won the AFC West this season behind veteran quarterback Alex Smith. He will be the Chiefs' starter next weekend when they face Tennessee to open the playoffs. But they earned a 27-24 victory over the Broncos on Sunday behind Mahomes.

Chiefs coach Andy Reid, knowing his team could finish no better or worse than the fourth seed in the AFC, decided to let Mahomes sling it around. Smith watched wearing a heavy parka on the sidelines. The Broncos watched both of them closely.

"Patrick had complete command out there," Reid said. "He's so fortunate to have been in that (quarterback) room with Alex Smith, to know how to go about doing your job at this level. He spent the time (last) week knowing he was going to be the guy."

If Kansas City believes Mahomes is ready to take over as a starter next season, it could leave the Chiefs looking to unload Smith and the \$17 million he's owed in the final year of his contract, according to Spotrac. If Kansas City cuts Smith, they would take a salary cap hit of just \$3.6 million. If they keep him, they'd be docked for \$20.6 million.

If the Broncos signed Smith, it could give them time to develop younger options. With Denver needing a quarterback, it's not out of the question the winds could blow Smith west toward Denver. The three young quarterbacks who started for the Broncos this season — Lynch, Trevor Siemian and Brock Osweiler — have not distinguished themselves.

"We have to fix and rectify that position," Joseph said.

What the Broncos need is a young quarterback to build around, and possibly a veteran to bridge the time it takes to develop someone. The Chiefs think they've found their young prospect in Mahomes, whom they traded up to draft last spring. The former Texas Tech standout is the son of former big-league pitcher Pat Mahomes. He was one of the top prospects in baseball coming out of high school in Texas before deciding on a football future.

"For a young quarterback coming up, he's going about it the right way," Reid said. "He's not banking on his skill that he was blessed with. He's trying to make himself the best. It pays off in situations like this."

Mahomes possesses the skill to carry Kansas City, with some reason for pause. His first career completion was a 51-yard touch pass to Demetrius Harris on a seam route against tight coverage. It set the Chiefs up for a 7-0 lead. On the Chiefs' next possession, though, he threw an ugly pass on a hook route that Broncos safety Darian Stewart intercepted.

In the second quarter, as the Broncos "threw the house at him with blitzes," Reid said, linebacker Von Miller wrapped up Mahomes deep in Kansas City territory. But Mahomes flung a 17-yard pass under pressure for a first down.

"In the beginning, I was too amped up," Mahomes said. "But I settled in."

In the end, Mahomes (22-for-35 passing, 284 yards, one interception) outplayed Lynch (21-of-31, 254 yards, 2 TDs, 2 INTs). Mahomes will almost certainly face the Broncos in an AFC West rivalry again soon and perhaps for many years to come.

The Broncos might be left with the leftovers. Smith seems there for the taking during the off-season.

Source: Elway to sleep on decision, meet with Joseph in morning

By Mike Klis

9 News

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Hold on. Everybody let John Elway sleep on it before handing Vance Joseph his pink slip.

And there may not be a change in the Denver Broncos' head coaching position.

An ESPN report Sunday morning got Broncoland buzzing before the game against the Kansas City Chiefs. The report said Joseph "faces increasingly long odds at being retained and returning for his second season in Denver."

However, a source close to Elway told 9NEWS that the Denver Broncos' general manager wants to sleep on his decision before meeting with Joseph on Monday morning. Elway had not made his decision as of Sunday night, the source said. He will not attend the Rose Bowl on Monday to personally watch Oklahoma quarterback Baker Mayfield.

One more thing: Don't be surprised if Joseph returns for his second season.

"We'll see but I want to be here," Joseph said during his press conference following the Broncos' 27-24 loss to the Chiefs on a 17-degree Sunday afternoon at eventually-to-be-renamed Sports Authority Field at Mile High. "It's a football team that's close. We have to make some adjustments in some places, but our football team all year has not stopped working. That was fun to see, even tonight. It's been a hard year, but everyone kept fighting. I want to be here to fix it."

He may get his wish, although clearly Elway has agonized on this decision. What has been most disturbing about the Broncos' season is -- well, let's not overlook the obvious. It's the 5-11 record.

This was the Broncos' first losing team since Elway took charge of the team's football operations in 2011.

In his first five years, Elway's Broncos won five AFC West titles, two AFC Conference championships, and a Super Bowl title. A 5-11 record doesn't fly with Elway.

Also bothersome was the manner of so many losses. The Broncos suffered four defeats by at least 21 points, and eight by at least 10 points.

The reasons for keeping Joseph, though, are several. First, the Broncos at some point have to think about head coach continuity. The Pittsburgh Steelers have had three head coaches in 49 years.

The Broncos have had three head coaches in four years. Firing Joseph would mean four head coaches in five years.

“That’s crazy,” said linebacker Brandon Marshall. “We just haven’t had consistent coaching, as head coaching stability. ... it’s tough to get a chemistry. It’s tough for the offense. The offense, they have new offensive coordinators every year.”

And that’s a point for retaining Joseph. The Broncos are happy with the job Bill Musgrave has done since replacing Mike McCoy as offensive coordinator.

The Broncos are expected to remove the ‘interim’ label and make Musgrave their full-time offensive coordinator in 2018.

And then the plan is to get a new quarterback. Kirk Cousins could be a target in free agency. Or the Broncos could use their No. 5 overall draft pick and take Josh Rosen, Josh Allen or Baker Mayfield.

Give Joseph better quarterback play and see what he can do.

If not, the Broncos can try to find another head coach from a candidates list that for now is considered so weak, it’s headed by Josh McDaniels.

Many Broncos players are just tired of hearing how their head coach is on the outs in the hours before playing their final game.

“I think it’s garbage,” said Broncos’ defensive end Shelby Harris, who has been one of Joseph’s staunchest supporters this year. “It’s on us, as players. Vance should be here. The failures of this season are specifically on us as players. Everything was cool till the bye week.”

Problem was, the bye week was after game 4 in a 16-game season. The Broncos were 3-1 entering the bye, 2-10 coming out with an eight-game losing streak that was the longest in 50 years.

“People got complacent, people got happy, people thought we were going to roll, bulldoze everyone,” Harris said. “I feel like everyone let off the gas a little bit.

“But, Vance should be here. I stay with Vance. He’s a great coach, great guy, great character guy. A guy you want leading your team.”

Ok, no more. Let’s sleep on it.

Vance Watch: Broncos rally falls short, Denver loses to Chiefs, 27-24

By Mike Klis

9 News

January 1, 2018

With the Vance Joseph Watch on loud timer, the Denver Broncos' JV took on the Kansas City Chiefs JV here Sunday on a cold, overcast Sunday afternoon in the regular-season finale.

For Paxton Lynch and De'Angelo Henderson, you've got to start somewhere.

On the last day of a terrible Broncos' year, Denver rallied from two touchdowns down to tie up the Chiefs. But then quarterback Patrick Mahomes II was reinserted into the game and make a couple of outstanding plays in directing a final-drive field goal for a 27-24 win.

The temperature at kickoff was 17 degrees, which was tied for the fifth coldest home game in Broncos' history.

As has been reported all week by 9NEWS, Broncos general manager John Elway is to decide on whether to retain Joseph, the Broncos' first-year head coach with a four-year contract, for a second year.

It had been reported Sunday morning by ESPN that Joseph was now "facing long odds to return." Elway and Joseph did not talk about the coach's future, or the report prior to the game.

The Broncos were down, 24-10 in the fourth quarter when Chiefs coach Andy Reid pulled Mahomes with 7 minutes left in the game. Mahomes was making an impressive NFL debut in place of starter Alex Smith, who was one of several Chiefs' starters who didn't play because the game lacked playoff implications.

But Chiefs' No. 3 quarterback Tyler Bray fumbled the handoff exchange on his first play and Broncos' linebacker Zaire Anderson returned it 38 yards for a touchdown. Then after a three-and-out by the Denver D, Lynch snapped his mid-game slump by directing a game-tying touchdown drive he capped with a fourth-and-4, 6-yard scoring toss to Demaryius Thomas with 2:58 remaining.

Lynch, the Broncos' first-round quarterback in last year's draft, flashed signs of busting out in the final game of his second season as he started out completing 13 of 16 for 159 yards, including a 29-yard touchdown screen pass to Henderson, a sixth-round rookie running back.

But Lynch couldn't sustain his play in what was the fourth start of his career. In the final seconds of the half, with the Broncos already in field goal range, Lynch forced a pass into traffic across the middle and was intercepted. Late in the third quarter, Lynch fumbled while sacked by Chris Jones. Ramik Wilson picked it up and returned it 11 yards for a touchdown. And then in the fourth quarter, after moving the Broncos to the Chiefs' 11, Lynch took a sack, then threw another interception near the goal line.

At that point, there might have been 25,000 still in the stands watching the Broncos disappointing season wind down. At 5-11, the Broncos will get the No. 5 pick in the 2018 NFL Draft.

The Chiefs rested several key starters as they already had clinched the AFC West Division the Broncos used to own. Unable to move up, and without fear of moving down, from the No. 4 playoff seed, the Chiefs rested starting quarterback Alex Smith, tight end Travis Kelce, pass rusher Justin Houston, receiver/returner Tyreek Hill, cornerback Marcus Peterson and linebacker Derrick Johnson among others.

The Broncos played starting cornerbacks Aqib Talib and Chris Harris Jr. and safety Darian Stewart for a quarter, then turned the rest of the game over to younger backups. The team also spelled Von Miller, Brandon Marshall and Domata Peko more than usual.

Mahomes was 22 of 35 for 284 yards. He was intercepted by Stewart in the first quarter. Lynch finished 21 of 31 for 254 yards, 2 touchdowns and 2 interceptions.

The Chiefs scored easily on their first possession with star running back Kareem Hunt rushing 35 yards for a touchdown. Hunt then joined the other Chiefs' standouts on the sidelines for the rest of the game.

Henderson, who looked good in the preseason but wasn't active for 11 consecutive games this season, turned a short screen from Lynch and broke two quick tackles before speeding into the end zone for the Broncos' only touchdown in the second quarter.

Broncos' running back C.J. Anderson entered the game needing 54 yards for his first 1,000-yard rushing season. He rushed for 61 yards on 18 carries and was taken out early in the fourth quarter after reaching 1,007 yards.

Broncos receiver Demaryius Thomas needed 108 yards for his sixth consecutive, 1,000-yard season. He had six catches for 57 yards with 1:14 left in the game and the Chiefs driving in Broncos' territory.

Broncos starters to share playing time with young players against Chiefs

By Mike Klis

9 News

January 1, 2018

Unleash the bench!

The Kansas City Chiefs won't be the only team giving younger, backup players more snaps during the regular-season finale Sunday afternoon at eventually-to-be-renamed Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

If for a different reason, the Broncos are also planning to give some of their best players a few more plays off than usual during the game, multiple players and league sources told 9NEWS.

Joseph was seen talking to the team's leadership council following practice Friday, apparently to inform them he was going to give more playing time to his younger players.

The 9-6 Chiefs won't play quarterback Alex Smith, receiver/returner Tyrique Hill and perhaps a few other stars in the name of staying healthy and rested for their first-round playoff game as the No. 4 AFC seed next week.

For the 5-10 Broncos, it could mean seeing more of Deiontrez Mount and less of Von Miller for reasons of evaluating young players for next year.

Broncos rookie cornerbacks Marcus Rios, Brendan Langley and safety Dymonte Thomas may play a little more as Aqib Talib, Chris Harris Jr., and Darian Stewart play a little less.

Jerrold Garcia-Williams and Zaire Anderson may get more snaps than usual at inside linebacker in place of Brandon Marshall and Todd Davis.

Along the defensive front, there may be a DeMarcus Walker sighting and Kyle Peko was going to play some, anyway, with Zach Kerr out with an ankle injury.

On offense, the Broncos will still try to get 54 more rushing yards for C.J. Anderson and 108 more receiving yards for Demaryius Thomas so they can each reach their 1,000-yard milestones.

But then rookie running back De'Angelo Henderson and rookie receiver Isaiah McKenzie may get some touches. Up front, Cyrus Kouandjio will play his share of right tackle instead of Donald Stephenson, who is questionable to play anyway because of a hand injury. (Update: After this story was published, the Broncos announced Stephenson had been downgraded to "out.")

Virgil Green may give away some tight end snaps to the likes of Jeff Heurman, Austin Traylor and possibly Matt LaCrosse.

And it has been well-documented, this entire final-game youth movement started at quarterback where Paxton Lynch will get only his second start of the season, fourth of his two-year career.

The Broncos currently have the No. 6 pick in the 2018 NFL Draft. Lose to Kansas City on Sunday and the Broncos could pick as high as No. 4. Win and they could select as low as No. 10.

Joseph stated throughout the week the priority is still to win the game, it's just the way they will go about doing it could include a different playing time rotation.

The plan to play the kids could be an indication Joseph is in good standing with his boss John Elway as the Broncos both look to close out 2017 on a winning note and look ahead to 2018.

Elway to decide fate of head coach Vance Joseph after today's game

By Mike Klis

9 News

January 1, 2018

It looked bleak for Vance Joseph after the Denver Broncos were destroyed by the slumping Miami Dolphins, 35-9, on Dec. 3.

The Broncos' head coach was unable to prevent his team from losing its eighth consecutive game, a skid that included four defeats by at least three touchdowns.

After the game, Broncos chief executive officer Joe Ellis stood back in the back of the losing, visiting locker room, appearing distraught as he observed his players' reactions and the mood of the room.

It was rare for Ellis to hang out so long in the locker room after a game, although he was similarly present following the Broncos' 10-6 loss at Kansas City late in the 2010 season.

A day later, Josh McDaniels was fired as the Broncos' head coach.

A similar fate did not await Joseph. Instead, Broncos' general manager John Elway said after the Miami loss he would not make any staff changes until after the season.

The season is now hours away from ending and Elway has yet to declare Joseph is coming back. He hasn't said he's not coming back, either.

After the loss to Miami, Joseph led the Broncos to two consecutive wins, albeit against similarly bottom-dweller teams in the New York Jets and Indianapolis Colts. The Broncos shut out what had been a fairly hot Jets team, 23-0.

Joseph appeared safe after the 25-13 win at Indy, but then the Broncos played poorly last week at Washington and lost, 27-11. It was their eighth defeat by at least 10 points.

There will be changes to the Broncos' coaching staff in the next few days -- sources close to Elway say as many as five assistants will be dismissed. The number could increase if Elway makes a change with his head coach.

The 5-10 Broncos will give playing time to several young, inexperienced players -- most notably quarterback Paxton Lynch -- in the regular season finale Sunday against the Chiefs. This would seem to be an indication Joseph wouldn't need to win to save his job.

He is one year into a four-year contract. Moving forward, the Broncos will add either a quality free-agent quarterback this offseason, or draft one with their top 10 pick, or both.

Is Joseph, whose expertise is on the defensive side, the right head coach to usher in Denver's new quarterback era?

Elway seemed to be leaning toward keeping Joseph this week. But if we've learned anything since Elway took charge of the Broncos' football operations in 2011 it is that the general manager is unpredictable.

Bronco notes: Kubiak to move back to Denver with new role

By Mike Klis

9 News

January 1, 2018

In his new role in the Denver Broncos' personnel department, Gary Kubiak will relocate back to Denver.

The Broncos' head coach from 2015, when he led the team to Super Bowl 50 champs, and 2016, when he posted an 9-7 record, Kubiak resigned from that post because of health concerns a year ago.

Instead, he spent the past season serving as the Broncos' senior personnel advisor, where his primary role was scouting pro and college players while based at his offseason home near Houston.

Kubiak and his wife Rhonda kept their Denver home. He was in and out of Denver headquarters this year to attend player evaluation meetings with general manager John Elway and player personnel director Matt Russell. His kids are here. Two sons even work for the Broncos.

In his new role, Kubiak will be more involved in player evaluations on the pro side, in particular for the free agent period in March and then in helping the Broncos for the 2018 draft in which the team will have the No. 5 overall pick.

Kubiak will technically work under Russell but more importantly will bring a third set of eyes to the Broncos' personnel department.

The Broncos had a three-man leadership operation with Elway, Russell and Tom Heckert Jr. from 2013-16. But Heckert stepped aside from day-to-day duties last year in part because of health reasons.

Bringing in Kubiak shows Elway is holding himself accountable in what has been a difficult Broncos' season.

Wasn't their fault

This hurts. After Kubiak resigned last season, the Broncos didn't retain his three coordinators: Rick Dennison (offense), Wade Phillips (defense) and Joe DeCamillis (special teams).

All three have similar roles with three different teams this year. All three made the playoffs: Dennison with the Buffalo Bills, Phillips with the Los Angeles Rams and DeCamillis with the Jacksonville Jaguars.

C.J.'s milestone

There were nine NFL running backs this season who rushed for at least 1,000 yards. Only one – New Orleans' Mark Ingram with 230 -- had fewer carries than the Broncos' C.J. Anderson's 242.

Anderson first made the Broncos' 53 roster as an undrafted rookie in 2013, made the Pro Bowl thanks to an incredibly productive second half in 2014, then rushed for 90 yards and scored the only offensive touchdown in Super Bowl 50.

So where does 1,000 yards rank among his accomplishments?

“It’s definitely up there,” he said. “Hundred yards all-purpose in the Super Bowl with a touchdown was big. But this is something personal where, hey, I was undrafted. I’m coming off knee surgery. I wasn’t supposed to be in this position. The average career for us as running backs is very, very short. To surpass the obstacles that I’ve overcome, I just want to build on that and go from there.”

Goodbye

Bronco players will gather as early as 8 a.m. Monday to clean out their lockers at the UCHealth Training Center and begin their offseason. Many will be Broncos for the last time.

Broncos' Vance Joseph confident he'll be back for a second season

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

January 1, 2018

Denver Broncos coach Vance Joseph said he expects to get a second year on the job, even as his future and the futures of many players in the locker room are uncertain.

The Broncos closed out Joseph's first season at 5-11 after Sunday's 27-24 loss to the Kansas City Chiefs. Joseph is expected to meet with Broncos president of football operations/general manager John Elway on Monday morning to discuss Joseph's future.

Sources told ESPN before the game that Joseph was facing an uphill challenge to keep his job. Joseph said he had seen the report before the game.

"My focus today, guys, was on our football team winning a football game," Joseph said. "I saw the report, obviously, our coaches saw the report, but what are you going to do there? There was a game to play.

"I'm obviously going to visit with John ... but I want to be here. It's a football team that's close. We've got to make some adjustments in some places, but our football team all year have not stopped working. That was fun to see tonight guys. It's been a hard year, but everyone kept fighting. I want to be here to fix it."

Joseph was then asked if he expected to return next season, and he said: "I do, absolutely."

Joseph's first season with the Broncos was a rocky one that included an eight-game losing streak -- the team's longest since 1967 -- the first shutout loss in a quarter-century, a 1-7 record on the road and a revolving door at quarterback that saw three players start at least two games.

Joseph also fired offensive coordinator Mike McCoy in November, and quarterbacks coach Bill Musgrave called the plays for the final six games of the season.

Many of the team's veteran players threw their support to Joseph after Sunday's game.

"VJ's been great for us," linebacker Von Miller said. "It's not in my hands, you'd like to see those guys turn it around and we go to the playoffs, to the Super Bowl next season, but it's not in my hands."

"I don't know, I really don't," running back C.J. Anderson said when asked if he thought there would be a coaching change. "That's a question for the boss man. I just know I would love the coaches that I'm close to to stay around."

"Absolutely, I like Vance," linebacker Brandon Marshall said when asked whether Joseph should be back. "I like Vance, I think he's a great coach, young coach, he works hard, he's passionate. And he cares about us, so absolutely."

Asked if he believed Joseph deserved a second season, cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said: "Oh, yeah, definitely. Everybody followed him, we just didn't play good. We've got to play better on the field."

Quarterback Paxton Lynch, whose status is also in question, said he should return in the starter role next season. Lynch lost back-to-back training camp battles with Trevor Siemian for the starter's job but started two games this season as he dealt with shoulder and ankle injuries.

Even as Elway has been scouting the top quarterback prospects in the 2018 draft -- he was at the Cotton Bowl in recent days to see USC's Sam Darnold -- Lynch was asked following the game if he believes he should get the nod next season.

"Obviously, as a football player ... I'll say yes," Lynch said. "And that's what I want to do, I want to be the quarterback of this organization. That's what they brought me here for, why they moved up in the first round to get me. That's what I believe in my heart. That's what I'm trying to do. That's what I'm working to do."

Lynch finished the game 21-of-31 passing for 254 yards with two touchdowns and two interceptions. He was sacked five times.

With changes coming -- again -- Broncos need to regain their balance

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN
January 1, 2018

The Denver Broncos have often lived the best of football life, cloaked in their own successes. They've relished those successes and filled an expansive lobby at their team's complex with trophies.

In Pat Bowlen's three-decade-plus tenure as the team's owner, the Broncos still have had more Super Bowl trips (seven) than losing seasons (six). But the sixth losing season concluded Sunday with a 27-24 loss to essentially a lineup of Kansas City Chiefs reserves.

The Chiefs are going to the playoffs and had far more on their minds than what went on during a frigid afternoon on New Year's Eve. Kansas City still sent Denver into the offseason with a most unhappy ending.

"It's sad. It's like I've been saying, it's a sad story, a sad season," said linebacker Brandon Marshall. "It's just sad. It's not like us -- at all."

But perhaps that is the biggest lesson for the Broncos' decision-makers, most notably John Elway, to take away as they ponder whether Vance Joseph has earned a second season as the team's coach. Joseph and Elway, who is the president of football operations/general manager, are expected to meet Monday morning, and Joseph's fate is expected to become public shortly after.

If Joseph is fired -- and indications Sunday night were that the possibility of his return remained open -- it would mean the Broncos, who once thought of themselves of a franchise with a culture, a system, a way of doing things, have gone into three of their past four season finales with the fate of their head coach in question.

To close out the 2014 season, there were reports John Fox could "be available" if the Broncos lost a playoff game to the Indianapolis Colts. They did, and Fox was fired. To close out 2016, Gary Kubiak was poised to step down because of health concerns. To close out this season, Joseph went to work Sunday amid reports he faced an uphill climb to keep his job.

Joseph said following Sunday's loss that he "absolutely" believed he would be back for the 2018 season and that he wanted to be the guy to "fix it." But whether he's back or not, the Broncos have too often lived the uncertain life of a playoff wannabe rather than a team with the pedigree they've cherished. It was all just camouflaged, it seems, when Peyton Manning could change the play at the line of scrimmage.

But they've now missed the postseason two consecutive seasons and the shine of Manning's era -- four division titles, two Super Bowl trips and one Super Bowl win -- is officially gone.

"We [are] all uncertain right now," running back C.J. Anderson said when asked how much change he expected in the coming weeks and months. "My guaranteed money is up, too. We've got all uncertainty. ... We'll see."

The Broncos' stadium has carried the name of a bankrupt company on it for much of two seasons, and the bright lights still hang on the side of the upper reaches for all of the rush-hour commuters to see. After they fired Mike McCoy earlier this season, Bill Musgrave became the fourth offensive coordinator in the past seven seasons.

They've had four different defensive coordinators, three head coaches and six different starting quarterbacks in those seven years. Throw in an almost constant churn in the offensive line and it's clear the Broncos lack a certain consistency of a team that has prided itself on how it had done things for so long.

"There will be changes. Everybody knows," said cornerback Chris Harris Jr. "But we didn't play well this season. We didn't. We have to fix it -- whatever it takes."

Even if Joseph is retained, the Broncos have to find a way to settle on some things, especially on offense. The quarterback question will always lead the way in a quarterback town because the Broncos' greatest heights have been achieved when they had a Hall of Famer behind center -- and in the locker room -- in Elway. Or they had a future Hall of Famer in Manning.

But their offensive line must reflect what they want to be season to season. Just four of the nine offensive linemen on the roster for Sunday's finale were Broncos draft picks, and they do not have a homegrown prospect at the position on their practice squad.

The Broncos concluded a messy 2017 season with their 11th loss and nothing but questions in tow. And now, not only do they need answers for 2018, but answers that can hold up to the questions that come after that. If not, they just might keep finding themselves back in the same spot, trying to recall the good times.

Questions with offense, quarterback dashed Broncos' big expectations

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

January 1, 2018

The Denver Broncos ended the season with a 27-24 loss to the Kansas City Chiefs on Sunday. Here's a recap of the season and what's next:

Season grade: Below average. This team was 3-1 a quarter of the way into the season and still watched it all crumble with an unproductive offense, unreliable special teams and a defense that statistically was among the league leaders, but surrendered far too many touchdowns.

Season in review: The Broncos (5-11) could never escape their quarterback issues -- they played three different quarterbacks and each of the three started at least two games and was a game-day inactive at least once during the season. That's all you need to know. Toss in repeated troubles with turnovers, consistent failures in big moments and you have the recipe for the Broncos' worst finish since 2010. First-year coach Vance Joseph even felt he had to take the uncommon step of firing his offensive coordinator, Mike McCoy, during the season and McCoy was just in the first year of a three-year contract. Beyond left tackle Garrett Bolles, who showed some growing pains in the lineup, the Broncos also got little impact from their rookie class along the way. But overall, as quarterback Brock Osweiler's outburst on the sideline against the Redskins showed, to largely teammates who had no reaction, the Broncos never seemed to have the kind of edge that carried them to five consecutive playoff trips, or what they had at times in last season's 9-7 finish.

Biggest play of season: Aqib Talib's 103-yard interception return for a touchdown in the closing minute of the Week 2 rout of the Cowboys was the emotional high point perhaps for both the team and the fans. The home crowd was in a frenzy as the Broncos had briefly shown the teeth on defense that had a 2015 feel to it.

He said it: "What is Bronco football? We have to find that. We have to grind and get back to whatever it is." -- Broncos linebacker Von Miller after the Dec. 3 loss to the Miami Dolphins.

Key offseason questions

Biggest draft need: A lot of it depends on what the Broncos' real opinion is of Paxton Lynch as they move into the offseason. But the Broncos expended a first-round pick on Lynch in 2016 and this season had four players at the position they drafted, including Chad Kelly on injured reserve, and yet are still poised, having scouted the top quarterbacks in the draft with great interest, to potentially use their top pick on a quarterback once again.

Free-agency targets: The Broncos will look with great interest at the available quarterbacks and see if that kind of potential investment fits the plan. If the Redskins don't use the franchise player tag on Kirk Cousins for a third consecutive year, he's just the kind of veteran player who would be on the Broncos' radar, but they will likely be looking at the offensive line, wide receiver and inside linebacker, as well.

Hazy future: The Broncos have two front-line starters with two years remaining on their contracts in Talib and running back C.J. Anderson who have each openly wondered about their future with the team. Talib was recently named to his fourth Pro Bowl in his four seasons with the Broncos and counts \$12 million against the salary cap next season. His deal also carries just a \$1 million dead money charge in '18 if the Broncos decide to release him. Anderson, who had his best season as a pro, counts \$4.5 million against the cap in '18, but has no dead money charge if the Broncos chose to release him for any reason.

What, again? The Broncos will go into their fifth consecutive offseason with plenty of uncertainty on the offensive line, and they don't have any of their own homegrown prospects at any of the five offensive line positions on their practice squad. Four of the nine offensive linemen who finished the season on the 53-player roster were drafted by the team. Until Denver builds a line of its own that fits its offense, the team may hinder any quarterback it puts behind center.

2018 NFL draft order: Top 20 set; Browns have two picks in top four

By Seth Walder

ESPN

January 1, 2018

John Dorsey might want to send Sashi Brown a holiday card.

The new general manager of the Cleveland Browns is staring at a boatload of draft capital, especially after the Houston Texans lost Sunday, thanks the Browns' old GM. Houston's loss to the Indianapolis Colts gave Cleveland the No. 4 overall pick in addition to the No. 1 overall selection that the Browns had locked up in Week 16. Oh, and they have the Texans' second-round pick for good measure, too.

With the regular season wrapped up, the draft order for the first 20 picks is all set, aside from one coin flip at picks Nos. 9 and 10. You can see that below, along with our live FPI projections for picks 21-32. Those projections are based on live simulations of the playoffs and do not include changes to FPI ratings based on Sunday's games.

1. Cleveland Browns (0-16)

The Browns are going to want a quarterback. The question for Josh Rosen and Sam Darnold may now be: Do they want the Browns? Both are underclassmen, and neither have announced yet if they are going pro.

2. New York Giants (3-13)

It looked dicey for a bit -- and was a 50-50 race when New York and Indianapolis were at halftime -- but the Giants locked up the second overall pick despite beating the Redskins because the Colts also won, beating the Texans. That competition for the No. 2 pick might have been the most exciting race of the early window Sunday.

3. Indianapolis Colts (4-12)

Though they would have been much better off with the No. 2 slot, the Colts will be in the enviable position of having the best draft pick among teams that don't need a quarterback. That means they might be able to return a haul if they decide to trade down.

4. Cleveland Browns (via Houston Texans, 4-12)

Entering the day, this pick had a 58 percent chance of landing here. This worked out as well as it could have for the Browns, and it means that in addition to potentially drafting a quarterback No. 1 overall, they can take another premium player here or -- in the spirit of the old Browns' regime -- trade down.

5. Denver Broncos (5-11)

John Elway was a quarterback. John Elway needs a quarterback. John Elway might draft a quarterback. It appears there are likely four first-round caliber quarterbacks in Darnold, Rosen, Josh Allen and Baker Mayfield. The question now is: Will the QB that Elway wants still be available at No. 5?

6. New York Jets (5-11)

Did the Jets lose just enough that they won't have to make a costly trade up for the quarterback they want? This is the third time in four years they have ended up with the No. 6 pick. If it works out the way Leonard Williams and Jamal Adams have so far, they ought to be in good shape. Vernon Gholston on the other hand ...

7. Tampa Bay Buccaneers (5-11)

The Bucs don't need a quarterback but have the benefit of drafting early. They could use some help in the secondary, however.

8. Chicago Bears (5-11)

Given that the Bears desperately need to get Mitchell Trubisky some help, one has to think that Alabama wide receiver Calvin Ridley would be a candidate to land with them.

9/10. Oakland Raiders (6-10, coin flip pending)

Will Monday Night Football analyst Jon Gruden have a say in this pick? It's possible with Jack Del Rio fired and the Raiders preparing to pursue him. Regardless of who ends up coaching the Raiders, they could use some help on defense.

9/10. San Francisco 49ers (6-10, coin flip pending)

Through Week 12, the 49ers had a 99 percent chance to end up with a top-five pick. Then Jimmy Garoppolo happened. Hard to imagine there will be any complaints out of San Francisco, though. They have found their franchise quarterback.

11. Miami Dolphins (6-10)

The Dolphins are another team with an interesting decision to make at quarterback after the Jay Cutler experiment didn't work out. Do they hand the reigns back to Ryan Tannehill? Do they bring in some veteran insurance? Or do they draft another young QB with high upside?

12. Cincinnati Bengals (7-9)

With Marvin Lewis likely gone, is it totally crazy to imagine the Bengals moving on from Andy Dalton and entering the quarterback free-for-all? Maybe not. If so, they might be better positioned to try a veteran, but at No. 12 maybe they have a shot at one of the second-tier rookies.

13. Washington Redskins (7-9)

Jay Gruden will be back. Will Kirk Cousins join him? If not -- and if the Redskins don't replace Cousins in free agency or the trade market -- then we can add them to the list of teams that could add a first-round quarterback. At this spot they might be in range for Mayfield, or maybe they could trade up for one of the other hot names.

14. Green Bay Packers (7-9)

It has been apparent in watching the Packers without Aaron Rodgers that this team needs help. In particular, they could use some help on defense, perhaps part of the reason why Todd McShay had Green Bay selecting Boston College pass-rusher Harold Landry in his first mock draft.

15. Arizona Cardinals (8-8)

Whether Carson Palmer is around next season or not, the Cardinals need a quarterback of the future. They could absolutely be in the mix for the four potential first-round signal-callers. No matter who they take in the first round, that player likely won't be coached by Bruce Arians.

16. Baltimore Ravens (9-7)

Entering Sunday, the Ravens had a 97 percent chance to reach the playoffs, per FPI. Sometimes, that 3 percent happens.

17. Los Angeles Chargers (9-7)

Here's another sleeper quarterback team. Rivers is still good enough that the Chargers can win with talent around him -- and they do have talent around him -- but they also might want to start thinking about life after him.

18. Seattle Seahawks (9-7)

The Seahawks need help on the offensive line. Everyone knows that. They might be hoping that one of the Notre Dame offensive linemen -- offensive tackle Mike McGlinchey or guard Quenton Nelson -- fall to them here.

19. Dallas Cowboys (9-7)

With Dez Bryant's future in Dallas uncertain, perhaps Dallas could look to the draft for another top-flight wideout at No. 19.

20. Detroit Lions (9-7)

The Lions already have a good cornerback in Darius Slay, but it's hard to have too many corners in the NFL.

Projected 21-32, from FPI:

21. Tennessee Titans (9-7)

22. Buffalo Bills (9-7)

23. Atlanta Falcons (10-6)

24. Buffalo Bills (via Kansas City Chiefs, 10-6)

25. Carolina Panthers (11-5)

26. Los Angeles Rams (11-5)

27. Jacksonville Jaguars (10-6)

28. New Orleans Saints (11-5)

29. Pittsburgh Steelers (13-3)

30. Philadelphia Eagles (13-3)

31. Minnesota Vikings (13-3)

32. New England Patriots (13-3)

Mahomes leads Chiefs past Broncos 27-24 in 1st start

By Arnie Stapleton

Associated Press

January 1, 2018

Patrick Mahomes II made both his first NFL start and his first NFL relief appearance a success.

After handing off a two-touchdown lead midway through the fourth quarter in his spectacular NFL debut, the rookie first-round QB returned to rescue the Kansas City Chiefs, driving them 67 yards in 11 plays to beat Denver 27-24 on Harrison Butker's 30-yard field goal as time expired.

"You always have to be ready," Mahomes said. "All season long, it's kind of been the same thing — you have to make sure you're ready to go at any moment."

The Chiefs (10-6) will go back to starting Alex Smith for their wild-card game Sunday against Tennessee, even more secure in the knowledge they have a clutch backup in Mahomes, the former Texas Tech standout they selected with the 10th overall pick in April.

"He played fantastic," said Kareem Hunt, who secured the league's rushing title by scurrying 35 yards for a touchdown on his only carry.

Smith and several other starters rested because Kansas City was locked into the No. 4 seed in the AFC playoffs, allowing coach Andy Reid to essentially use this regular season finale as a playoff bye.

"It was good to get a couple bumps and bruises healed up," Reid said.

Von Miller said he was impressed by Mahomes, whom he expects to see plenty of in the coming years.

"He's great," Miller said. "He's the quarterback of the future for the Chiefs."

The Broncos (5-11) head into another offseason still searching for their quarterback of the future — and maybe their fourth coach in five years after Vance Joseph oversaw a team that lost eight times by double digits and oversaw an eight-game skid, their longest in 50 years.

Joseph, who inherited what was seemingly the best situation of the half dozen new head coaches in 2017 only to finish with the worst record of the bunch, will meet with GM John Elway on Monday to discuss his future.

"I want to be here," Joseph said. "It's a football team that's close. We have to make some adjustments in some places, but our football team all year has not stopped working. That was fun to see, even tonight. It's been a hard year but everyone kept fighting. I want to be here to fix it."

Mahomes became the first quarterback drafted by the Chiefs to win a game for them since Todd Blackledge in 1987. He threw for 284 yards on 24-of-35 passing with no touchdowns and an interception.

Mahomes thought his day was won at 24-10 and Reid sent in Tyler Bray, who handed off late to fullback Anthony Sherman, who carried 14 times for 40 yards after coming into the game with six career carries in seven NFL seasons. Linebacker Zaire Anderson scooped up the loose ball and scored from 38 yards out to pull Denver to 24-17.

After the Chiefs punted, Lynch added a 6-yard TD pass to Demaryius Thomas on fourth down with 2:53 left, and Brandon McManus' extra point tied it at 24.

Mahomes took off his jacket, put on his helmet and returned to the game with 2:45 left. He was promptly sacked by DeMarcus Walker but recovered nicely to drive K.C. to victory.

Mahomes made a good first impression, connecting with tight end Demetrius Harris for 51 yards on Kansas City's opening drive. Then, he handed off to Hunt, who dashed for a 35-yard touchdown less than a minute into the game.

TOP RUSHER: Hunt secured the NFL rushing title over Todd Gurley II and Le'Veon Bell, both of whom were inactive Sunday. Hunt wasn't planning on playing, either, but the Chiefs were thin at running back and dressed him.

"Honestly, it wasn't on my radar because I wasn't supposed to play," said Hunt, who finished with 1,327 yards and joined the Bengals' Paul Robinson, who led the AFL in rushing in 1968, as the only rookie rushing champs not selected in the first round of the common draft era — the last 50 years.

C.J. Anderson gained 61 yards to top 1,000 for the first time in his five-year with the Broncos.

"It was tough," said Anderson, who carried 18 times.

LYNCH SO-SO: Broncos QB Paxton Lynch was 21 of 31 for 254 yards with two TDs, two interceptions and was sacked five times. He threw an interception late in the first half and was sacked three times in a five-snap span in the third quarter, losing the ball on one of them with linebacker Ramik Wilson scooping it up and scoring from 11 yards out.

It was 17 degrees at kickoff, the fifth-coldest home start in Broncos history and the coldest temperature for any of Lynch's starts, in the pros or at Memphis.

INJURIES: Chiefs backup PR De'Anthony Thomas broke his right leg and CB Phillip Gaines was knocked out with an elbow injury just before halftime. Broncos S Will Parks (shoulder stinger) left in the fourth quarter.

UP NEXT: The Chiefs seek their first playoff win at Arrowhead Stadium in their history while the Broncos, who have lost five straight to K.C. for the first time since the early 1970s, head into another offseason where the only certainty is change.

QB-in-waiting Mahomes shows flashes of talent in Chiefs win

By Pat Graham
Associated Press
January 1, 2018

The Kansas City Chiefs got an enticing glimpse of their quarterback-in-waiting with the debut of Patrick Mahomes II.

Now, it's back to the present, with Alex Smith starting in the playoffs.

Here's something good to know: Should he be called upon, Mahomes can step in with little worries after leading the Chiefs to a winning field goal during a 27-24 win over the Denver Broncos on a frigid Sunday in the regular-season finale.

Next up, Tennessee on Saturday in the wild-card game at Arrowhead Stadium. And back under center, Smith, who got the day off with the game essentially meaningless. Well, meaningless except for Mahomes getting an extended look to see what he can do.

Mahomes, picked 10th overall in the 2017 draft out of Texas Tech, showed poise in the pocket all afternoon. He finished 22 of 35 for 284 yards and an interception. Just when it looked like his day was over — subbed out to give Tyler Bray some work — Mahomes was summoned back to the field. He led the Chiefs on a drive with just under three minutes remaining that set up Harrison Butker's winning 30-yard field goal as time expired.

"I thought he did a nice job. He had complete command out there," Chiefs coach Andy Reid said.

Smith played a role Sunday, too, helping the QB he's grooming to take his job one day get a handle on a Denver defense that's one of the best in the league.

For that tutorial, thanks.

"Alex is an awesome guy. He helped me the entire game, showing me what he was seeing out there, and showing me the things he was recognizing and giving me tips the entire game," said Mahomes, who showed up for his postgame news conference wearing a dazzling blue suit. "You can't ask for a guy to be in front of you as well as Alex has been for me."

Mahomes has spent all season watching and waiting while Smith topped 4,000 yards passing for the first time in his 13th NFL season. Having clinched the AFC West for a second straight season, the Chiefs (10-6) turned the offense over to Mahomes.

At times, he looked like a rookie, sailing a pass to a wide-open receiver that landed in the arms of Broncos safety Darian Stewart.

In other instances, he was downright electric, completing a long pass to Albert Wilson in the second quarter with safety Will Parks draped on him.

"I thought he ruined a couple of great plays," Reid joked. "Listen, he did a nice job. He did a great job. You saw that in college, right? You saw that same thing in college and for him to be able to transfer it here to this level and you've (a Denver player) draped on you and you make a throw like that, there's not a lot of guys that can do that."

Reid took out Mahomes and inserted Bray with about seven minutes left and the Chiefs up 24-10. Bray fumbled on the first play and it was scooped up by linebacker Zaire Anderson for a 38-yard TD to make it 24-17. After a three-and-out, Paxton Lynch led a tying score that culminated with a 6-yard pass to Demaryius Thomas with 2:58 remaining.

Put back in, Mahomes was at his best on the final drive. He seamlessly led the team into field goal range.

The real deal?

"I wouldn't call him the real deal, but he has an arm, though," said Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall, whose team finished 5-11 to miss the playoffs for a second straight season. "He has a cannon. He has a cannon, man. You see him just running this way and he throws it back across his body and the guy catches it. I think he has all the talent, he has all the tools, but I'm not going to call him the real deal."

NOTES: Chiefs rookie running back Kareem Hunt scored on a 35-yard run on his only carry, securing the NFL rushing title over Todd Gurley and Le'Veon Bell, both of whom were inactive Sunday. To think, Hunt wasn't even going to play, but talked Reid into it. "He told me he'd get it taken care of quick and he did that," Reid said. ... Chiefs punt returner De'Anthony Thomas broke his leg on the final play of the first quarter. He will stay behind in Denver to undergo surgery, Reid said.

Broncos Vance Joseph faces uncertain future entering finale

By Troy Renck

KMGH

January 1, 2018

Vance Joseph faces an uncertain future entering Sunday's season finale against the Kansas City Chiefs. Armed with a four-year contract, Joseph has not been told he will return. Until he receives word, the possibility of change exists.

General manager John Elway hired Joseph after Gary Kubiak stepped away following last season's final game. Kubiak returned in a scouting role this season, and the team is expected to expand his position to include front office responsibilities. A fresh set of eyes in player evaluation can only help, and add a reinforcement to a staff that is among the NFL's smallest. Kubiak is not looking to return to coaching. Still, the Broncos are, at the very least, considering a coaching change following one of the worst seasons in franchise history.

Multiple NFL sources remained unsure of Joseph's fate leading up to kickoff, and Elway has a reputation for being unpredictable. The outcome of Sunday's game would not be the determining factor as much as the potential replacement. Is there someone out there who makes sense as a longer term solution (I have previously mentioned adding Chuck Pagano as a veteran assistant, and he remains the type of experienced name to file away).

The 5-10 record has not placed Joseph on the hot seat as much the path to a second straight playoff absence. Of the Broncos' 10 losses, eight have come by double digits. After a 3-1 start, The Broncos dropped eight straight games, matching the team's longest losing streak since 1967. Denver won only one road game -- the third worst mark -- and was outscored 223-117. The Broncos also showed a lack of discipline with penalties and were submarined by horrific special teams play overall, and by punt returner Isaiah McKenzie (six muffed punts) specifically.

The argument for keeping Joseph centers on development and consistency, avoiding the fourth head coach in five seasons. In fairness, it was time to move on from John Fox, and Kubiak would still be the head coach if not for health issues that forced him to step down. It stands to reason Joseph would improve in his second season, which, regardless if he's back, will feature multiple staff changes.

If Joseph returns, he must do a better job of coaching his coaches. He gave his assistants freedom to do their jobs, but needed to intervene more quickly when things went sideways. Joseph and offensive coordinator Mike McCoy were not on the same page philosophically, with McCoy acting like he was a head coach and running a three-wide, pass-heavy scheme that did not fit the team's personnel. After the Eagles routed the Broncos in Brock Osweiler's starting debut -- which featured more of the same pass protection issues and quarterback turnovers -- Joseph wanted to fire McCoy, but relented. He lost his patience after the Bengals home loss, a team Joseph knew well from his time in Cincinnati and, thus, should have been more involved in the offensive game plan. Giving assistants room to work is admirable, but as the top boss Joseph needs to be more assertive.

The easiest explanation for keeping Joseph is the quarterback position he inherited. He had nothing to do with the roster of Trevor Siemian, Osweiler and Paxton Lynch. Siemian's regression -- he was functional in Kubiak's offense -- led to the team's dramatic nosedive. The Broncos' top offseason priority remains finding a starter. The Broncos will cast a wide net, eyeing potential free agents Kirk Cousins, Drew Brees and the Minnesota stable, while scouting draft picks Josh Rosen, Sam Darnold and Baker Mayfield. How much better would Joseph be with certainty at the league's most important position? That's a fair question. It's also fair to wonder if the team wants to land a high-profile agent if a higher profile coach is needed.

Why move on? It would simply be Elway becoming convinced it won't get any better and that a more seasoned coach makes more sense. There will be staff changes, with special teams coordinator Brock Olivo among those on shaky ground. And Elway has right to wonder why young players did not get better this season. Were they not good enough, or not being coached in a way that allowed them to progress? If the answer is the latter it reflects poorly on Joseph.

Players remained uncertain of Joseph's future leading up to kickoff. Several offered support of him this week, with Von Miller calling him one of his "favorite coaches," and linebacker Brandon Marshall saying, "He's a first-year coach. Everything is not his fault. It was a tough season. The turnover (margin). ... Minus 16 (which ranks 31st in the NFL), there's no way you can have a winning season that way. There's been some different things out of his control. I definitely think he deserves another chance."

Broncos stagger vs. Chiefs in Vance Joseph's potential final game

By Troy Renck

KMGH

January 1, 2018

In the early winter of 2017, Vance Joseph stood in front of a gaggle of reporters and described the challenge of reviving the Broncos.

"This is a reboot," Joseph said, "not a rebuild."

After one of the most forgettable seasons in team history, the possibility exists there will not be a rerun. Joseph faces the sobering reality of being a one-and-done after the Broncos finished their season with a 27-24 loss to Kansas City Sunday in bone-chilling conditions at Mile High Stadium.

Joseph walked into the postgame press conference not knowing his fate, but hopeful of returning. He expects to speak with general manager John Elway on Sunday night or Monday morning regarding his status.

"I want to be here," Joseph said after the Broncos finished 5-11 overall and 4-4 at home. "It's a football team that's close. We have to make some adjustments in some places but our football team has not stopped working. It was a hard year. Everyone kept fighting. I want to be here to fix it."

Typical of their season, the Broncos found another unique way to lose. Trailing 24-10, they staged an uncommon rally, tying the score. However, Kansas City rookie quarterback Patrick Mahomes re-entered and led the Chiefs on a game-winning drive with Harrison Butker nailing a 30-yard field goal as time expired.

It was a final crowbar to the shins in an awful season. Players offered support of Joseph afterward.

"It's just sad (regarding Joseph). It's just a sad story if it happens," said Marshall of the first-year coach, whose voice was halting as he spoke to the team in his postgame speech. "I think the season in general was a sad story. Our lack of -- I don't know -- we just couldn't get it done in all phases. It's not like us. It's so different to go through this."

Added All-Pro linebacker Von Miller, "VJ has been great for us. All the coaches have been. But his job is not in my hands. You would like to see those guys turn it around (he specifically mentioned he wants outside linebackers coach Fred Pagac return), and we go to the playoffs or the Super Bowl next year."

The Broncos tied the game at 24-all with receiver Demaryius Thomas' 6-yard scoring catch from Paxton Lynch with 2:53 remaining. They were in position to come back after linebacker Zaire Anderson's scoop and 38-yard score shaved the deficit to 24-17 with 6:52 left.

In the end, it only made the game more interesting, not satisfying. The Broncos, however, won by losing. They hold the fifth pick in the draft, their highest selection since selecting Miller second overall in 2011.

In 17-degree weather, the Broncos' fifth-coldest home game, Joseph bundled up in a gray sweatshirt and ski jacket. He appeared braced for the conditions, both during the game and afterward. Prior to kickoff, Joseph's status hung in the balance -- he admitted he was aware of the reports -- and that's where it stood in the first hours after the game's conclusion. Confidence in Joseph's future began to dissolve as the weekend progressed, and it remains to be seen if the Broncos will trust him moving forward. Joseph did not speak with Elway regarding the uncertainty before kickoff, an uneasy feeling given Elway's unpredictability.

As written earlier, it was not the losses, but the nature of them that reflect poorly on Joseph. Of the Broncos' 11 defeats, eight came by double digits. The Broncos were shut out for the first time since 1992, a cringe-worthy defeat at the Chargers, tied a 50-year-old losing streak with eight straight losses, and won only one road game.

The Broncos ranked 31st in turnover margin, which often left them trailing, mitigating their best defenders (Miller, Chris Harris Jr. and Aqib Talib) and creating a parade of issues with their quarterbacks and pass protection. Denver changed quarterbacks six times from Trevor Siemian to Brock Osweiler to Paxton Lynch to Siemian to Osweiler, and on Sunday, back to Lynch.

"Nobody is safe," Pro Bowl cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said, adding he wants Joseph to return. "We all have to figure out what happened. We are all at fault."

The Broncos began the season 3-1, and looked like a contender. Then came the bye week. So long relevance.

"That is on the players (finishing 5-11)," running back C.J. Anderson said. "That is on us. We put all our coaches in hard situations. It stinks to not know if (Joseph) is returning. It would hurt me if he lost his job."

The Broncos started their historic losing skid with a pathetic home effort against the previously winless New York Giants. A month later, Elway called the team soft, an indictment of the players and coaching staff, saying complacency had taken root after the first four games. Later, as the losses mounted and the team fell out of the playoff picture, Elway called the season "embarrassing," and promised the team would rebound next year.

It did not help that the draft class, outside of left tackle Garrett Bolles, failed to contribute, blame that can be assigned to Elway and also Joseph and his coaches.

Sunday's outcome did not play into the Joseph decision. And the game, like many before it, did not start well. The Broncos responded in a way more reflective of their season than their desire to save their coach. Playing several backups, the Chiefs raced down the field on their opening drive. Kareem Hunt, a rookie of the year candidate, bolted 35 yards for a touchdown. The Broncos answered with a three-and-out drive and the latest poor punt from Riley Dixon.

As both teams emptied their benches, using reserves, it became a compelling watch. In the first half, Lynch delivered his best performance since entering in relief at Tampa Bay as a rookie. In a well-executed play that raised the question of why it wasn't used all season, Lynch connected on a screen to rookie De'Angelo Henderson for a 29-yard score. He received the ball from his first touchdown. The impressive run after the catch shoved the Broncos ahead 10-7. Mahomes, the godson of former

Colorado Rockies closer LaTroy Hawkins, demonstrated why he once threw 94 miles per hour as a high school pitcher. With elite arm strength, he rifled the ball into tight spots against Denver's backups. Mahomes' scramble set up an easy score, leaving the Chiefs ahead 14-10 at half.

Lynch, 13-for-18 for 159 yards and one touchdown in the first 30 minutes, lost traction in a second half that mirrored this season. A strip sack represented the low point. Linebacker Ramik Wilson picked up the loose ball and rumbled 11 yards to increase Kansas City's lead to 24-10. Zaire Anderson pulled the Broncos back within reach with his touchdown.

From there, the goal was simple: see more of Lynch and chase a milestone for C.J. Anderson. Anderson rolled up his sleeves and delivered. He bumped and bounced for a 10-yard gain in the fourth quarter, leaving him with 61 yards on 18 carries. It lifted him to 1,007 for the season. He became the first Broncos running back since Knowshon Moreno in 2013 to reach the mark.

"It was huge. It felt really good," said Anderson, who received a game ball. "I probably will give (the game ball) to my mom. I wouldn't be in this position without her."

Anderson has one year remaining on his contract at \$4.5 million, and might not return. However, he showed durability for the first time in his career after an offseason of cycling. He will have suitors if he becomes a free agent. Bad seasons narrow the focus on individual achievements. It is an odd spot for the Broncos, who measure themselves in AFC Championships and Super Bowl crowns. Lynch finished 21 of 31 for 254 yards, two touchdowns, two interceptions, one fumble and five sacks. He was asked afterward about the team already looking at potential high draft picks like Josh Rosen, Sam Darnold, Baker Mayfield and Josh Allen.

"I am focused on who is in the building," Lynch said.

Missing the postseason for the second consecutive season proved jarring. That the losses were so gruesome ultimately left Joseph on a frozen island.

"It stinks when you only win five games. There are going to be changes, but can only control what you can control," said nose guard Domata Peko. "It sucks because you come to the Broncos, and you think of playoffs, you think of championships. You have to look in the mirror and come back stronger and better. We really have to attack this offseason big time."

Footnotes

I spoke exclusively with quarterback Trevor Siemian on Sunday before the game. With his arm in a sling, Siemian told me he will receive a second opinion on his non-throwing left shoulder. Surgery is a possibility as they look into an issue with his labrum. Siemian's future with Broncos remains uncertain. Staying healthy has been a problem for him. Toughness has not, as he has earned respect from his teammates for battling through injuries. . . . Former Broncos All-Pro left tackle Ryan Clady was honored during the game. He retired as a Bronco on Saturday. "I missed football the first month of the season, but not in October. I loved waking up and feeling great on Mondays," said Clady, who is dabbling in real estate, golfing and doing Yoga in his retirement. ... Safety Will Parks, who had tough day, exited with a neck injury in the second half. ... The Broncos' tickets distributed: 75, 928. The actual attendance: 67,111. That represents a healthy number given the frigid conditions and the meaningless nature of the

game for both teams. ... Receiver Demaryius Thomas finished 51 yards shy of reaching 1,000 for the sixth straight season. He averaged 11.4 yards per reception, the lowest of his career.

Why it happened: Chiefs 27, Broncos 24

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
January 1, 2018

A frustrating season came to a bitter end on a frigid afternoon as the Chiefs escaped from Denver with a 27-24 win on Harrison Butker's game-winning 30-yard field goal as time expired Sunday.

Denver dropped to 5-11 with the loss, which was their 10th in the final 12 games to close the campaign.

Quarterback Paxton Lynch completed 21 of 31 passes for 254 yards with two touchdowns and two interceptions, and running back C.J. Anderson ran for 61 yards on 18 carries to finish with the first 1,000-yard season of his career, but it was not enough to prevent the defeat.

Why did the Broncos fall?

Because the Chiefs pounced early

Kansas City used a 51-yard connection from Patrick Mahomes II to Demetrius Harris on the third play of the game as the primary propulsion to a game-opening touchdown drive that put the Chiefs on the board just 57 seconds into the contest.

Kareem Hunt scored on a 35-yard run two plays later to put the Chiefs in front 7-0.

Because a penalty resuscitated the Chiefs late

Denver had rallied thanks to a 38-yard fumble return for a touchdown by Zaire Anderson, a quick three-and-out and then a 13-play, 62-yard march to a 6-yard Lynch-to-Demaryius Thomastouchdown that tied the score at 24-24. The Broncos' rally had coincided with the Chiefs' decision to insert Tyler Bray in place of Mahomes, as their 14-point lead with 7:02 remaining seemed safe.

The Broncos got off to a good start when Mahomes came back into the game, as DeMarcus Walker sacked him for a 7-yard loss on first-and-10 to begin a final drive. But a potential three-and-out was wiped off the books because of an offside penalty against Walker.

The Chiefs promptly pounced on the good fortune, marching to Butker's game-winning 30-yard field goal as time expired. Mahomes completed three passes for 39 yards after the penalty to move the Chiefs into field-goal range.

"He came out and made some great throws," outside linebacker Von Miller said. "He's a rookie still, and he got out there and played lights out. We had some [first-teamers] out there and he still came through and played."

Because the turnover issues returned

Offensive Coordinator Bill Musgrave gave Paxton Lynch a game plan in which he could be effective early, relying on a series of short slants and quick reads that allowed him to get comfortable and find a rhythm

that allowed Denver to crank out drives of 72 and 80 yards in the first half. Those possessions pushed the Broncos to a 10-7 lead in the second quarter.

But with a 14-10 deficit and the chance to narrow the gap to one point or take the lead before halftime, Chiefs linebacker Terrance Smith intercepted a pass that was intended for Jordan Taylor, ending the Broncos' scoring threat. It was the first of three giveaways by the Broncos. A strip-sack fumble off of Lynch was returned 11 yards for a touchdown by Ramik Wilson with 3:04 left in the third quarter, and a fourth-quarter interception off Lynch cost the Broncos another scoring chance.

Because the Chiefs were able to control the clock in the third quarter

Although Denver's defense came up with a goal-line stand to hold the Chiefs to a 20-yard Harrison Butker field goal with 3:58 remaining in the third quarter, the Chiefs were able to chew up eight minutes, 46 seconds of clock time on the 18-play, 90-yard drive.

Kansas City converted a third-and-8 on a 14-yard pass from Mahomes to Albert Wilson and a fourth-and-1 on a 5-yard run by Anthony Sherman to keep the drive alive. Denver's defense came up big with a pair of stops near the goal line to limit the damage, but the drive further closed the Broncos' window for a rally.

From the Pocket: Paxton Lynch focused on offseason work to become Broncos' quarterback of the future

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
January 1, 2018

In the immediate aftermath of Sunday's 27-24 loss to the Kansas City Chiefs, quarterback Paxton Lynch had already turned his attention toward the opportunity that could await him in 2017.

Following an up-and-down performance that saw Lynch turn the ball over three times but also lead the team to a late touchdown drive to tie the game, Lynch said he has no doubt about his ability or desire to be the franchise's starting quarterback in 2018 and beyond.

"I want to be the quarterback of this organization," Lynch said. "That's what they brought me here for. That's why they moved up in the first round to get me. That's what I believe in my heart. That's what I'm trying to do, and that's what I'm working to do. The season is over so I can't do anything about it now.

"The opportunity is over with in terms of games, so in the offseason, I just have to get to work and come back prepared and better than ever."

In his second start of the season, the 2016 first-round pick certainly showed glimpses of why President of Football Operations/General Manager John Elway drafted him out of Memphis.

Lynch finished 21-of-31 for 254 yards, two touchdowns, an 87.3 quarterback rating and a game-tying drive. He also showed plenty of room for improvement, as he threw a pair of interceptions — one of which came in the red zone — and was strip-sacked by Chris Jones.

The second-year player was sacked five times in all, but he seemed to do a "fine job" bouncing back from the turnovers, Head Coach Vance Joseph said.

Joseph has said repeatedly the Broncos must find answers at the quarterback position, and after Lynch's performance Sunday, Denver's head coach may be a bit more convinced that Lynch can be that answer.

"I thought Paxton played good football tonight," Joseph said. "It wasn't all perfect, but having a chance to finally play a full game, I thought Paxton made some strides tonight. Obviously, the one interception was a fourth-and-long, just taking a shot. He had a sack-fumble there and he had one pick down the middle, but I thought he got better tonight as a quarterback."

Lynch addressed that needed ability to leave previous plays behind and move on — just as he did late in Sunday's game.

"Football is like a roller coaster," Lynch said. "It's going up and down, up and down. You turn the ball over, you get the ball back and you score a touchdown. You turn the ball over and they go and score a touchdown. There are just so many things that happen. Being the quarterback, you just have to be that guy who after he makes a mistake, it's just 'next play, next play, next play.' That's how it has to be for everybody, and I think we did that tonight as a group, as an offense and as a defense, too."

And that's enough to give Lynch reason to be optimistic heading into the offseason. He said he also takes comfort in knowing there's not just a single area of his game in which he can improve.

"I don't think there is just one thing," Lynch said. "I think there is just so much more I can get better at. That's what I'm excited about. As a player, there is always something to grow [on], and this year obviously didn't turn out the way we wanted it to, but you have to move on from that. In the offseason, I know there will be things that will come up that I will specifically want to work on, but as an individual, there is just so much I can work on to try to get better as a player."

It's for that reason that Lynch won't pay much heed to the quarterbacks the Broncos scout or court during the offseason. He's focused solely on his own game and the future opportunity that, after Sunday's game, seems just a bit more attainable.

"The only thing you can do now is put it behind you and get to work in the offseason," Lynch said, "and I'm excited about that to put in the work in the offseason and come back and be the guy."

Cover 4: Broncos fall 27-24 to Chiefs in season-ending nailbiter

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
January 1, 2018

The Broncos erased a 14-point deficit Sunday, but the Chiefs prevailed late as Denver capped its 2017 season with a 27-24 loss.

The tight affair was settled late in the game following a Kansas City field goal, and the Broncos fell to 5-11 on the year.

Game-changing moment

The Broncos nearly pulled off quite the comeback victory, but Patrick Mahomes came back in at quarterback for the Chiefs and led his team on a game-winning drive. The game, which at times looked like it would become a Chiefs blowout, truly wasn't decided until the final moments after the Broncos stormed back from a 14-point deficit. In his first regular-season attempt at a game-winning drive, though, Mahomes guided the Chiefs to a 30-yard field goal and a win.

Defining statistic

62. After an otherwise up-and-down performance, Paxton Lynch guided the Broncos on a 62-yard drive late in the fourth quarter to tie the game at 24. Trailing by seven points, Lynch made the necessary throws to put the Broncos in position for the win. And on a key fourth-and-4, Lynch found an open Demaryius Thomas on a corner route for the game's tying score. The Broncos would ultimately lose the contest, but the drive was the most encouraging part of Sunday's game.

Top performers

Running back C.J. Anderson didn't turn in his most-efficient performance, but he earned just enough yards to record the first 1,000-yard season of his career. With his 61-yard day, he became the first Bronco since 2013 to accomplish that feat. Safety Darian Stewart also earned honors for his first-quarter interception of Patrick Mahomes. Stewart led the Broncos in interceptions this season with three picks. He was also tied for the team lead in interceptions in 2016. Zaire Anderson recovered a fumble after a botched Chiefs exchange and returned it 42 yards for a score to cut the Kansas City lead to seven. Finally, Demaryius Thomas caught a touchdown on fourth down to tie the game late.

Memorable highlight

De'Angelo Henderson scored the first touchdown of his young career when he caught a screen pass midway through the second quarter and darted 29 yards into the end zone. The 2017 sixth-round pick previously showed off his speed in the preseason, but Sunday's game provided the first real opportunity for the rookie to display his talent in a regular-season game. The catch-and-run showed off his speed and elusiveness and gave Denver its first lead of the game.

The Broncos have other promotions here, in addition to following promotions available the day after the game:

- With two Broncos touchdowns, you score \$1 roast beef sandwiches the day after a Broncos game at participating Arby's.
- Download the McDonald's app for free Broncos gameday offers! Additionally, get a \$1 Big Mac sandwich or Sausage McMuffin with Egg the day after every Broncos Game as well as 30 percent off any hat after every Broncos game at Denver Broncos Team Stores with the McDonald's key tag.
- Buffalo Wild Wings: If the Broncos make a field goal, you could win a free sharable at Buffalo Wild Wings!

Broncos' 2018 opponents finalized

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

January 1, 2018

As the 2017 slate comes to a close, the Broncos can already begin looking forward to the 2018-19 season.

Denver's opponents for the upcoming year were finalized as Sunday afternoon's games became final and the division standings became clear.

The Broncos' loss locked them into the fourth spot in the AFC West, and they will take on the fourth-place teams in the AFC East and AFC South in 2018.

Indianapolis defeated Houston on Sunday, which means the Broncos will welcome the Texans for the first time since the Broncos won 27-9 in 2016. This will be just the seventh time in franchise history that the Broncos will face the Texans.

The Broncos also found out Sunday they would travel to MetLife Stadium to take on the Jets. Denver earned a 23-0 shutout win over the Jets in 2017.

Denver's 2018 slate also includes games against the AFC North and NFC West.

The team will host the Cleveland Browns, Pittsburgh Steelers, Los Angeles Rams and Seattle Seahawks at Sports Authority Field at Mile High in 2018.

The Broncos last welcomed the Steelers to Denver for a 2015 AFC Divisional playoff game and held on to win as they marched toward the Super Bowl 50 crown.

In 2018, Denver will hit the road for games against the Baltimore Ravens, Cincinnati Bengals, Arizona Cardinals and San Francisco 49ers.

The Broncos, as always, will play a six-game division slate against the Los Angeles Chargers, Kansas City Chiefs and Oakland Raiders.

The NFL has not yet announced which teams will travel abroad for contests, so the location of games could be subject to change.

The league tends to release finalized schedules in April.

Home opponents: Browns, Chargers, Chiefs, Raiders, Rams, Seahawks, Steelers, Texans

Away opponents: 49ers, Bengals, Cardinals, Chargers, Chiefs, Raiders, Ravens, Jets

Broncos to pick fifth in 2018 NFL Draft

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
January 1, 2018

The Denver Broncos officially own the fifth-overall pick in the upcoming 2018 NFL Draft.

The pick is the Broncos' highest since they held the second-overall selection in 2011. With that year's No. 2 pick, the Broncos selected three-time First-Team All-Pro Von Miller.

Ezekiel Elliott (2016), Brandon Scherff (2015), Khalil Mack (2014), Patrick Peterson (2011) and Eric Berry (2010) are just a few players in recent history who were selected with the No. 5 pick.

Those five players have a combined 18 Pro Bowl appearances and nine First-Team All-Pro selections between them.

In President of Football Operations/General Manager John Elway's current tenure (2011-present) with the Broncos, the team has taken the following players in the first round: Von Miller (No. 2 overall), Sylvester Williams (No. 28), Bradley Roby (No. 31), Shane Ray (No. 23), Paxton Lynch (No. 26) and Garrett Bolles (No. 20).

A complete list of the top 20 picks can be found below:

1. Cleveland
2. New York Giants
3. Indianapolis
4. Cleveland (via Houston)
5. Denver
6. New York Jets
7. Tampa Bay
8. Chicago
9. San Francisco*
10. Oakland*
11. Miami
12. Cincinnati

13. Washington

14. Green Bay

15. Arizona

16. Baltimore

17. LA Chargers

18. Seattle

19. Dallas

20. Detroit

*The 49ers and Raiders finished with the same record and strength-of-schedule rating. A coin flip will likely be used to determine which team picks ninth.

Broncos inactives vs. Kansas City Chiefs

By Staff

DenverBroncos.com

January 1, 2018

Right tackle Donald Stephenson will miss the Broncos' season finale on Sunday with a finger injury, and either Cyrus Kouandjio or Allen Barbre will start in his place.

Stephenson was just one of seven Broncos on the team's inactive list for Sunday's contest. Running back Jamaal Charles was also ruled inactive for the second consecutive game.

A full list of the Broncos' inactive players can be found below.

NFL FOOTBALL OPERATIONS
WEEKLY DEACTIVATION REPORT

DATE: 12/31/17
TEAM: Broncos

NUMBER OF PLAYERS ON ACTIVE LIST: 53
NUMBER OF PLAYERS REQUIRED TO DE-ACTIVATE: 7

PLAYERS PLACED ON INACTIVE LIST FOR TODAY'S GAME:

Uniform #	Name	Pos
10	SANDERS	WR
14	LATIMER	WR
28	CHARLES	RB
39	HUNTER	AB
64	BIELMAN	OL
71	STEPHENSON	OL
92	KERR	DL

PREGAME INTRODUCTION DESIGNATION REPORT

INDICATE HOW TEAM WILL BE PRESENTED FOR PREGAME INTRODUCTION
(If selecting "Individual" or "Group", please circle a choice on line 2)

1 Individual Group Team
2 Offense Defense

Klee's Rapid Reactions: Chiefs 27, Broncos 24 (end of an error)

By Paul Klee

Colorado Springs Gazette

January 1, 2018

Gazette columnist Paul Klee shares three observations from Mile High on Sunday:

1. Vance's last dance

This must be the final game for Vance Joseph as head coach of the Broncos. It has to be. Hate to pile on — Lord knows I've been critical since the Broncos introduced Joseph on Jan. 12, 2016 — but the head-scratching, eye-rolling, bizarre decisions continued all the way through the season finale on Sunday. On his fourth touch of the season, rookie playmaker De'Angelo "Hop" Henderson skedaddled 29 yards for a crowd-pleasing touchdown. Where's he been all season? The Broncos used three timeouts to close the first half, hoping for a big punt return ... from Isaiah McKenzie, who allowed the football to bounce all the way to the Broncos' goal line? The loud, proud Broncos defense — facing a rookie quarterback! — steamrolled on an 86-yard scoring drive to open the game. Strange way to support your embattled coach, don't you think? There was no announcement on Joseph's status when this was published. He said he expects to return for the 2018 season. But if the Broncos want more than the 20,000-ish fans who remained at game's end on Sunday, Joseph must be replaced. And while they're at it, bring back Gary Kubiak in a front-office role.

2. Loyal to the end

In weather conditions only a penguin would love, the star of the game was Broncos Country. There are NFL outposts where these factors would result in a crowd of 20,000 fans: 5-10 team with no shot at the postseason, backup quarterbacks, backups everywhere else and a kickoff temperature of 17 degrees, tied for the fourth-coldest regular-season game in team history. Yet there you were, 67,111 bundled up in layers. And more layers. And more layers. I can see a robust crowd when the Broncos hosted the Ravens to open the playoffs in January 2013 and the temperature was 13 degrees. When it's the playoffs, you pack a flask and go big. But with nothing on the line, other than a fear of frostbite? Y'all deserve a cold one. Actually, a warm one. And the Broncos owe it to some of the most loyal fans in sports to fix this thing.

3. AFC West quarterbacks

Talk about salt in the wound: Just as the Broncos wrap up one of the worst seasons in franchise history and embark on an offseason destined for major changes, the Chiefs debut a franchise quarterback. Patrick Mahomes II looked like a keeper, didn't he? So that makes three of four teams in the AFC West that appear to be set at the most important position in professional sports: the Chargers with Philip Rivers, who finished this year with his lowest interception rate since 2009; the Raiders with Derek Carr; the Chiefs with Mahomes, who appeared wholly comfortable despite the wholly uncomfortable winter weather. Let's pump the breaks on the Aaron Rodgers comparisons. The Broncos yanked most of the "No Fly Zone" in the first half. "I wouldn't say he's the real deal," Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall said. "But he has a cannon." And if Mahomes had debuted for the Broncos on Sunday — and looked as promising as he did — no one's losing their job.

Paul Klee: Auld lang syne: Denver Broncos loss to KC must be end of Vance Joseph error

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 1, 2018

What should be Vance Joseph's final appearance as coach of the Broncos went down in the same polite and respectful manner he operated with for the past 12 months.

Still thawing out from a 27-24 loss to the Chiefs that kicked off with a game-time temperature of 17 degrees, the fourth-coldest regular-season game in Broncos history, Joseph approached a podium and took three questions on whether he will get fired from the most high-profile job on the Front Range.

That can't be easy. And he's met every difficult moment with a smile, firm handshake and, "It's a beautiful day." So give the man this much, no matter if you're holding the door on his way out or hoping he plans to buy instead of rent: It's too bad Joseph's team stunk up the joint. He was a class act all the way to what should be the bitter, cold end. Something to be said for that.

And Sunday at Mile High Stadium should be the end. That — whatever that was — was quite enough, thank you. With a roster that's largely the same from the outfit that won Super Bowl 50 just 23 months ago — and competed for a playoff spot just last year, with the same valid issues at quarterback — Joseph's Broncos somehow managed to look even worse than their 5-11 record.

I asked Joseph if he expects to return in 2018.

"I do," he said. "Absolutely."

Joseph will meet with John Elway on Monday, according to a late report from Denver's 9News. It's like the straight-to-DVD version of the Super Bowl parade in 1999, the second one, when The Clash serenaded Elway with "Should I stay or should I go?" as the legendary quarterback pondered retirement.

And give the Broncos this: boring is not in their vocabulary. For the third time in four seasons — wow! — the Broncos entered the final game of the season with reports bouncing around the internet that their head coach was on his way out. Happened with John Fox. ("It was 2014, as well, right?" linebacker Brandon Marshall recalled without hesitation.) Happened with Gary Kubiak. Sunday morning, an ESPN report said it could happen with Joseph.

"I saw the report. Obviously our coaches saw the report," Joseph said. "But what are you going to do there? There was a game to play."

OK, the New Year's Eve niceties are out of the way: the Broncos must rip off this Band-Aid. No more of the wishy-washy decision-making that's led to a quarterbacking nightmare for two full seasons as an all-time defense grows gray hairs and aches a little worse on Mondays. Moving on from a good man like Joseph will sting for a minute. But in frigid conditions cold enough that Broncos fans were dancing in the aisles during a home loss to the Chiefs simply to keep warm, Broncos Country gave the team 67,111

reasons to go find the right staff. It's not this one, Broncos fans know it, and you should never take fans for granted.

As the Chiefs steamrolled through the Broncos' once-proud defense on an 86-yard touchdown romp to open the game — with rookie quarterback Patrick Mahomes II making his first career start, no less — I had to wonder if the players saw the report, too, and did their best to make sure it comes true. Knowing their coach was on the hot seat, the Broncos allowed the longest game-opening drive of the entire season. And yes, the healthy starters were in.

While this gig was too big for Joseph from his underwhelming introductory press conference on Jan. 12, 2017, all the way through an eight-game losing streak the likes of which the Broncos had not endured since 1967, this is a franchise failure that includes almost everyone. Elway and the front office not only have failed to identify a starting-caliber quarterback, it has hamstrung two coaching staffs with the flimsy idea that Paxton Lynch must play when it's clear as day that he can't.

"I felt like I played well," Lynch said.

"I thought Paxton played good football tonight," Joseph said.

Narrator voice: Paxton Lynch had a hat trick of turnovers. One fumble and two interceptions, the final one headed for a 100-yard return if not for the hustle of lineman Connor McGovern on a saving tackle. The only franchise quarterback on the frozen field wore No. 15 for the Chiefs.

"I wouldn't say he's the real deal," said Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall, endearingly defiant to the end. "But he (Mahomes) has a cannon."

As Joseph left the field in a hurry, wearing a gray hoodie and orange beanie, five TV cameras documenting his exit, the Broncos were locked into the No. 5 overall pick in the first round of the draft. It's where they should select Oklahoma wild man Baker Mayfield or trade down to fortify a roster that has holes all over the offense and is thick with big-money contracts on defense.

But it's the severity of Denver's defeats that should hasten a coaching change. The Broncos lost six games by double digits, sometimes to No. 1 playoff seeds with Super Bowl aspirations (by 39 to the Eagles, 25 to the Patriots) and sometimes to teams that have no business beating them like that (13 to the then-winless Giants, 26 to the Dolphins, 16 to the Redskins). They were more competitive arguing with fans on Twitter than they were on the field against the mediocre AFC West. It's the first time the Broncos finished dead last in the division since 2010. Once they knew, the Broncos didn't wait to fire Josh McDaniels. They made the tough call, and with a new quarterback-coach combo, followed it up with a long run of division titles and wild home crowds.

Sunday afternoon and into the bone-chilling night, I saw much of the crowd snapping selfies and dancing during a defeat, sure signs this was not an audience of longtime season-ticket holders. The diehards have had enough and bailed.

"It's not in my hands," star pass-rusher Von Miller said of the coaching decision. "I'll have to put in an application for a front office position (to have that pull)."

This collapse wasn't solely on Vance Joseph. But when you know, you know. Too bad, really. It's a bummer when nice guys finish last.

David Ramsey: John Elway, lead villain of 2017 Bronco disaster, must return to being John Elway

By David Ramsey
Colorado Springs Gazette
January 1, 2018

Amazing to consider, but it's only been 23 months since John Elway walked into a locker room party at Santa Clara. He stood there, radiant in suit and tie, as emperor of the NFL.

He had been one of the top four quarterbacks ever, leading the Broncos to five Super Bowls.

And on that day in Santa Clara, Calif., minutes after the Broncos pounded the Panthers in the Super Bowl, it seemed a superlative quarterback doubled as a genius at designing teams.

On Sunday at Mile High, I was thinking back to that moment while standing at halftime near a west gate to the stadium. Over the past 15 seasons, I almost always take a quick halftime walk to this gate, where I've seen a total of a few hundred fans take an early exit from all things Bronco.

On Sunday, thousands of fans hurried to their cars to escape a gray afternoon that froze their bodies and a vicious season that broke their hearts.

The Broncos were irrelevant. The Broncos had fallen apart.

And the blame for this collapse belongs with Elway, the lead villain in The Disaster of 2017.

Since Elway's triumphant entrance in Santa Clara, the team has lost 18 of 32, and 2017's 5-11 finish leaves rookie coach Vance Joseph teetering on the edge of his own exit.

Let's be clear about who is most responsible. Elway didn't find a worthy quarterback for Joseph, didn't build a sturdy offensive line and didn't sign an elite running back.

Elway did allow defensive coordinator extraordinaire Wade Phillips to depart to the Rams. You might have noticed Wade will again coach in the playoffs. No surprise there. The man is a genius.

The easy move is for Elway to dump Joseph. The rookie coach did not inherit a playoff-ready team, but he should have won at least two more games. He should have found ways to stop the team's wandering. He should have yanked Trevor Siemian early against the Giants and in the Chargers shutout.

He should have. That could become his Bronco epitaph.

And yet ...

Joseph has less responsibility for the current Broncos struggles than Elway. Because of his past with the franchise, Elway isn't worried about employment. I get that. I support that.

Let's see what Joseph can do with a properly constructed team. Let's see how many wins Joseph can deliver with a legit quarterback (Case Keenum?) and offense.

Dumping Joseph after a season will satisfy millions of enraged and depressed Bronco fans, but dumping Joseph will welcome chaos into the heart of a proud franchise.

Free agents, at least the wise ones, will not flock to a franchise that hires a coach in January and fires him in December. And it will be the wise, tough free agents who transform this broken team.

"I want to be here," Joseph said in a steady voice a few minutes after the Chiefs defeated his Broncos 27-24. "... I want to be here to fix it."

Still, everyone knows who the prime fixer will be. And everyone knows his history.

After the 2013 season, Elway rebuilt the Broncos from a space-age, hugely entertaining and kind of soft offensive machine into a stone-age and brutish defensive squad inhabited by football muggers. This reconstruction was the work of a master, and the master's mind has not gone anywhere.

He can deliver those wonders again.

Von Miller spent most of his time with the media in a rambling monologue, his thoughts scrambled after a long, bitter season.

Von was clear about one subject:

His boss.

"He's going to take care of this," Miller said of Elway. "I have all the faith in Elway."

Only 23 months ago, the entire population of the Front Range carried this faith deep in their guts. No. 7 could solve any football problem. He had once changed, while scrambling around the field, defeat to victory. Then he did the same changing while wearing a suit.

Anything seemed possible in that locker room in Santa Clara. Anything still is.

If Elway returns to being Elway after his two-year vacation.

Report: Broncos Unlikely to Retain Vance Joseph

By Daniel Rapaport
Sports Illustrated
January 1, 2018

The Broncos are increasingly unlikely to retain first-year head coach Vance Joseph, according to a report from ESPN's Adam Schefter.

It would be the first time in team history that a non-interim head coach would last just one season.

The Broncos have been plagued by poor quarterback play this year. Trevor Siemian, the starter coming into the season, proved ineffective and was replaced by Brock Osweiler, who also struggled. Paxton Lynch, the team's first-round pick in 2016, started one game before suffering a shoulder injury that sidelined him for multiple weeks. All together, the Broncos' quarterbacks have thrown for 3,107 yards, 17 touchdowns and 20 interceptions.

Joseph, 45, was the defensive backs coach for three teams before serving as the Dolphins' defensive coordinator for the 2016 season. He became the Broncos' first-ever black head coach before the start of this season when he replaced Gary Kubiak, who stepped away from the NFL due to health concerns.

Many of the Broncos' stars, including Aqib Talib and Von Miller, have been vocally supportive of Joseph throughout the disappointing season.

Vance Joseph makes one final plea to retain his job

By Zac Stevens

BSN Denver

January 1, 2018

"I do."

Two of the words Denver Broncos' head coach Vance Joseph said with confidence following his team's season-finale 27-24 loss to the Kansas City Chiefs on Sunday evening.

The two words weren't in response to the typical joyful wedding vows, but instead to whether he believes he will keep his job heading into his second season after a dreadful 5-11 rookie campaign.

The questions about his future with the team hit Joseph in every direction as he defrosted under the hot lights of the postgame podium after a report surfaced just hours before the start of Sunday's game that Joseph was facing "an uphill battle to return" as Denver's coach after the season concluded.

Denison's Jordan Taylor sets career-high marks against Chiefs

By Staff

KXII News 12

January 1, 2018

Denison's Jordan Taylor set career highs with 6 catches and 65 receiving yards for the Denver Broncos in their season finale against the Kansas City Chiefs on Sunday.

In Sunday's game against the Chiefs, Taylor helped lead the way in receptions for the Broncos (6) tied with Demaryius Thomas.

In addition to receiving, Taylor finished the game with one punt return for six yards.

Source: Elway wants to elevate Kubiak in personnel department

By Staff

The Coloradoan

January 1, 2018

John Elway may be about to get some much-needed help in his personnel department.

A source close to Elway told 9News this week that the Denver Broncos want to elevate Gary Kubiak to a prominent personnel department position.

Kubiak, who is already serving as a Broncos scouting consultant, would work closer alongside Elway.

Signs are pointing to Vance Joseph being done in Denver

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
January 1, 2018

Broncos G.M. John Elway has said he'll make any additional decisions about the coaching staff after the season. While that still may be true, there's a growing sense within the organization that the decision will be that coach Vance Joseph will be gone after only one year on the job.

Joseph became the head coach a year ago, following a surprise retirement by Gary Kubiak. Joseph, who had been a finalist when Kubiak replaced John Fox after the 2014 season, was believed to be the predetermined favorite for the job after it opened in early 2017.

The firing of a coach after only one year is hardly unprecedented. The 49ers did it in 2016 and 2015, dumping both Chip Kelly and Jim Tomsula. Other one-and-dones over the past decade or so include Browns coach Rob Chudzinski (2013), Jaguars coach Mike Mularkey (2012), Raiders coach Hue Jackson (2011), Seahawks coach Jim Mora (2009), Dolphins coach Cam Cameron (2007), and Raiders coach Art Shell (2006).

If Elway decides to move on, Joseph would be entitled to the remainder of any guaranteed money under his contract, presumably subject to an offset.

Elway clearly is bothered not just by the losses but by the magnitude of them. Eight of the team's 10 losses came in double digits. Four times, the Broncos lost by 20 or more points.

And while the failure of Joseph is in large part a failure of Elway, if he thinks he made a mistake he has two choices: Fix it or compound it. Elway's ultra-competitive personality makes him far more likely to do the former.

Vance Joseph: I want to be here to fix it

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
January 1, 2018

Word on Sunday was that the odds of Broncos coach Vance Joseph seeing a second season in Denver weren't good, but there was no change in Joseph's status in the hours following their 27-24 loss to the Chiefs.

Mike Klis of KUSA reports that Broncos General Manager John Elway is sleeping on the decision after Joseph went 5-11 in his first season on the job.

"We'll see but I want to be here," Joseph said after the game. "It's a football team that's close. We have to make some adjustments in some places, but our football team all year has not stopped working. That was fun to see, even tonight. It's been a hard year, but everyone kept fighting. I want to be here to fix it."

Paxton Lynch started at quarterback for the Broncos on Sunday and was one of three different quarterbacks to play for the Broncos while they went 2-10 after a 3-1 start to the year. That kind of quarterback situation would be trying on any coach and it seems we'll learn Monday whether he gets a shot at a better one in 2018.

Elway may be having second thoughts about firing Vance Joseph

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
January 1, 2018

On Sunday, it seemed that Broncos G.M. John Elway would be moving on from coach Vance Joseph, after only one year. On Monday morning, that may not be the case.

A league source passed along to PFT not long before the ball dropped in Times Square that some in the Broncos organization now believe Elway is having second thoughts about pulling the plug on the Vance Joseph experiment after only one season.

On one hand, the Broncos plummeted to 5-11, losing eight games by double digits and four by 20 or more points. (The Browns suffered the latter indignity only once this year.) On the other hand, Elway hired Joseph a year ago — not as an outside-the-box, 11th-hour candidate, but as Elway's hand-picked first choice.

Elway's other hand-picked first choices at quarterback haven't worked, either. Maybe Elway realizes that, if he throws too many of his hand-picked first choices overboard, folks in Denver may start to wonder whether he's the guy who should be making these choices.

Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs beat Paxton Lynch and the Broncos

By Michael David Smith

Pro Football Talk

January 1, 2018

In a meaningless game to close the season, the Chiefs and Broncos both wanted a look at their young first-round quarterbacks. And Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes looked better than Broncos quarterback Paxton Lynch.

If you can overlook the fact that it was a meaningless game, today's game in Denver was exciting: It went down to the final play, when Kansas City kicker Harrison Butker hit the game-winning field goal to make the final score 27-24.

But the game was mostly about those young quarterbacks. Mahomes completed 22 of 35 passes for 284 yards, with no touchdowns and one interception, while Lynch completed 21 of 31 passes for 254 yards, with two touchdowns and two interceptions. Lynch also lost a fumble.

The Chiefs have the playoffs to get ready for, but in the offseason both teams will have tough questions to answer about the future of their quarterback position. Will Lynch start for the Broncos in 2018? Will Mahomes start for the Chiefs? Today's game gave both teams some things to think about.