Broncos' Peyton Manning: The field general doubles as flight attendant

By Benjamin Hochman
The Denver Post
September 4, 2013

The Broncos' brigadier general of their aerial assault carries himself all week with the bluster of an Air Force force — but on flights after road wins, Peyton Manning is suddenly a Southwest Airlines flight attendant after one too many mocha frappuccinos.

"He makes jokes, dedicates songs to players, some of the songs are funny," Broncos safety David Bruton said. "He'll be dedicating some outlandish ones to some players, it's pretty funny. It's just having a good time, lightening up, letting loose a little bit."

There are 349 non-gamedays a year, 349 days when Peyton Manning is the Peyton Manning of lore — pouring his life and legacy into intricacies to avoid interceptions. It's 349 for just 16 (and sometimes closer to 20). So when the quarterback wins on the road, he lets it all out on the flight home, when he becomes dorky and silly and carefree.

"Remember when Eric Decker caught the pass and just fell by himself?" left tackle Ryan Clady asked. "He played 'Another One Bites the Dust' (by Queen). He has his little joking sessions, he plays the music over the intercom — a lot of guys sometimes want to sleep or watch a movie so it kind of throws that off, but if you're looking to have a good time, it's fun."

But a Peyton Manning workplace is ruled with an iron throwing hand. He's a perfectionist's perfectionist. In many locker rooms, the players fear the coaches and revere the quarterback. Here, it's not that they fear Manning, but it's almost bigger than revere — Peyton demands the best out of you in the sense that he's not just your teammate peer, but your brigadier general.

Can it be too much?

He's won a Super Bowl, so obviously it has worked. But does his playoff record of 9-11 make one at least wonder if his approach is too much? Or is it too much to say that the culture he creates has any true bearing on how, say, the defense plays in December?

It was fascinating to read this quote from his banner buddy Joe Flacco in ESPN The Magazine.

"Look at Peyton," the Baltimore Ravens quarterback said. "He has guys on eggshells all the time. If they do the wrong thing, they're thinking, '(Expletive), he's going to kill me.' And that works for him. But at the same time, I think it's tough to play in that environment. Sure, if you're not consistently putting in the effort, that's when I'm going to call you out. But if you're putting in a full effort and you do something that costs us the game, what the (expletive) is yelling going to do? The game's over. Let's move on and get better."

Fascinating point, for sure. And Manning made a comment to Sports Illustrated's Peter King about guys in the locker room talking about endorsements and money, and all Manning can think about is, "That's the guy who dropped two balls in practice today."

Decker is a young receiver who has felt the wrath and warmth of his quarterback. So I asked him to describe Manning as a team leader.

"The best that I've been around," he said. "When it's time to work, he works and he's going to demand the best out of you. There's no messing around when there's something on the line, this week especially, everyone wants to start the season off with a win. So he's making sure that there are no mistakes, that everyone puts a full effort in and that we're loose at the same time. And that's hard to do, to be focused and loose, and we've had a good balance so far.

"He tries to slide in some jokes there at the end of meetings, just to let everyone know that you have to have some fun too. Sometimes you're late to laugh because he's so serious and focused, but when we're in the locker room or off the field, he's a light-hearted guy and fun to be around. So he knows how to shift gears as well."

Or, as Bruton described the Manning culture, "Everybody shoots for perfection. Mistakes are going to happen, it's just letting them not be repeat mistakes."

So the goal is to fix mistakes so that you can get to the point where Peyton, your flight attendant, is dedicating silly songs?

Bruton laughed.

"Ultimate goal," he said.

Perhaps, say, on a flight from New York in the wee hours of Feb. 3, when Peyton will play a different Queen song.

Broncos' passing attack armed and dangerous behind Peyton Manning

By Benjamin Hochman
The Denver Post
September 5, 2013

NFL defensive coordinators are often portrayed as master strategists. And yet, when it comes to defending the Broncos, perhaps the best plan would be, in lieu of having four hands down along the line of scrimmage, instead have 11 knees down and 11 face masks facing the sky.

Prayer might be the only way to stop this Broncos' offensive assault.

"It's that classic 'pick your poison,' " said John Lynch, a former all-pro Broncos safety, referring to the difficulty of stopping Denver wideouts. "You want to stop him? We'll go here. And the guy throwing to them is pretty darn good too. I would go a step further and add the emergence of (tight end) Julius Thomas.

"To me, at the end of last year, you started seeing people say, 'All right, we'll take care of the two guys outside, we can double up.' But now you can't do that, because you better respect the middle of the field with Wes Welker and Julius."

One could argue that the best way to defend the orange this season would be using a nickel defense (five defensive backs), and blitz. A lot. In this scheme, you play the areas of the field underneath, then match up one-on-one on the outside. Pressure is the key, blitzing from places quarterback Peyton Manning won't expect while taking advantage of unproven center Manny Ramirez.

Running the ball effectively also will help take the heat off Manning, Lynch said.

"Running will be a critical piece, because you better show you can run, or people will disrespect that," Lynch said. "I think the door is open for some guy to have great success, because you aren't going to see eight guys in the box a lot."

The addition of Welker in the slot will naturally free up Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker from time to time.

"I think this could be the best trio in football right now," said Rich Gannon, a former NFL MVP and a current CBS analyst.

And, for all the athleticism among the wide receivers that makes Broncos fans gush, it's the brains that make Broncos coaches gush.

"The great thing about all three of them is that they are very smart players," offensive coordinator Adam Gase said. "And the volume of what we do (in the passing game), for them to not have mistakes, it's huge for us, and that's why we can do a lot of things."

He da Man(ning)

A sampling of records set by Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning:

Manning is the league's only four-time MVP.

Manning owns the second-most regular-season wins (154) by a starting quarterback in NFL history, trailing only Brett Favre in that category.

Manning owns an NFL-record nine seasons with at least 12 wins.

Manning has orchestrated an NFL-record 48 game-winning drives in the fourth quarter or overtime.

Manning's 23 career AFC offensive player of the week honors are tied with Tom Brady for the most by a player since the award was initiated by the NFL in 1984.

Manning is the third player in NFL history with 400 career passing touchdowns, reaching the milestone in Week 1 of the 2012 season — his 209th game — to become the fastest of the three players to No. 400.

Manning set an NFL record for quarterbacks with his 12th Pro Bowl selection — named a starter for the squad in 2012.

Manning threw a single-season team- record 37 touchdown passes for Denver in 2012.

Manning needs 1,875 passing yards to move ahead of Favre for second in career passing yards in NFL history. Source: Denver Broncos

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Numbers even better with win

For 14 seasons, Peyton Manning lining up under center has equated to a parade of points for the team lucky enough to employ him. Still, for all of his brilliance, only one of Manning's teams — the 2004 Indianapolis Colts — is among the top 10 in scoring offense during the NFL's pass-happy era.

Broncos fans have reason to believe that could change this season. With Wes Welker joining Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker, the fast-paced Broncos could be primed to join the ranks of the elite offensive teams in the NFL history. Following is a look at the top five scoring offenses of the Super Bowl era.

If the Broncos join this exclusive group, they hope to do so while ending the season in a way no team that made the top five did, by winning the Super Bowl.

1. 2007 Patriots

Points per game: 36.8

Key players: Tom Brady, Randy Moss, Wes Welker

Result: 16-0; lost 17-14 to the New York Giants in Super Bowl XLII

Summary: The greatest offense in NFL history was supposed to pave the way to an undefeated season. But it came up short, thanks to that other Manning (and a little help from a helmet). One of the biggest pieces of that juggernaut (Welker) is now wearing orange.

2. 2011 Packers

Points per game: 35

Key players: Aaron Rodgers, Jordy Nelson, Greg Jennings, Jermichael Finley

Result: 15-1; lost to the New York Giants in the NFC semifinals

Summary: Rodgers might have provided a blueprint for how Manning could deal with his embarrassment of riches at receiver. While tossing 45 touchdowns, Rodgers had no trouble keeping his three top pass-catchers happy. Nelson (1,263 yards), Jennings (949 in 13 games) and Finley (767) were all mismatch nightmares.

3. 1998 Vikings

Points per game: 34.8

Key players: Randy Moss, Cris Carter, Randall Cunningham, Robert Smith

Result: 15-1; lost 30-27 to the Atlanta Falcons in the NFC championship game

Summary: Moss burst onto the scene with one of the most electric rookie seasons ever, with 1,313 receiving yards and 17 touchdowns while quickly establishing himself as a lethal deep threat. The Broncos are hoping Thomas can be that

weapon. They wouldn't mind enjoying another luxury the 1998 Vikings had: a 1,000-yard rusher in Robert Smith.

4. 2012 Patriots

Points per game: 34.8

Key players: Brady, Welker, Rob Gronkowski, Stevan Ridley

Result: 12-4; lost 28-13 to Baltimore in the AFC championship game

Summary: The Patriots found greater balance last season, with Ridley rushing for the most yards (1,263) of any New England back since 2004. But the constant remained Brady, a future Hall of Famer who threw for the second-most yards (4,827) in his career.

5. 2011 Saints

Points per game: 34.2

Key players: Drew Brees, Jimmy Graham, Marques Colston

Result: 13-3; lost to San Francisco in the NFC semifinals

Summary: Brees rewrote the NFL single-season record book, setting marks for yards (5,476), completion percentage (.712) and completions (468). The Saints also redefined the running back-by-committee approach, with four backs rushing for 374 yards or more. Maybe there is room for all those guys trying to take handoffs from No. 18 after all.

Note: The 1950 Rams, led by quarterback Norm Van Brocklin, hold the NFL record at 38.8 points per game.

Nick Kosmider, The Denver Post

Eric Decker developing all-around game as Broncos star WR

By Benjamin Hochman
The Denver Post
September 5, 2013

Eric is no Clapton.

"My rhythm is a little sketchy," said Eric Decker, professional football player and amateur guitar player. "I'm tying to get my rhythm down, changing from chord to chord."

He's forever working on his rhythm, the lifeblood of an acoustic guitarist, and as a Peyton Manning target. Decker plans to take serious guitar lessons next summer, but will he have to learn to play while wearing a bulky ring?

"Super Bowl or bust" became a Broncos mantra this summer, and heading into his contract year — and coming off his best season — Decker has the skills to keep Denver afloat, and maybe get him atop a float in Denver in February.

So what makes Decker Decker?

His ability to intelligently and swiftly separate himself from defenders separated him from his fellow receivers last season. Denver fans know the big numbers — 85 catches for 1,064 yards and 13 touchdowns a season ago — but check this one out: When Manning threw a pass his way a season ago, his quarterback rating was 123.7, second-best in the NFL behind, yep, another Manning target, Demaryius Thomas (126.2), according to profootballfocus.com This doesn't mean the 6-foot-3, 218-pound Decker is the second-best receiver in the league, but it does show how sure-handed he has become.

"I've watched a lot of Eric Decker, because I live here in Minnesota, so I watched him at the University of Minnesota," former NFL MVP Rich Gannon, now a CBS analyst, said by phone. "And he brings that unique skill set of being big, strong and physical. He uses his hands really well at the line of scrimmage, does a good job of getting off press coverage.

"He's got better speed than people think, and he's got good short-area quickness. I think he runs certain routes really, really well. He's a good slant runner, uses his body to post up. And the other thing about him is he attacks the ball well when it's in the air."

Last season, Decker utilized these skills to become a valuable deep threat, complementing Thomas, both of whom the Broncos drafted in 2010. On passes targeted to him of 20 yards or longer, Decker finished ninth in the NFL in receiving percentage (.348).

"What Eric does so well is his technique as a route runner — he does a great job at using every ounce of speed he has," Broncos offensive coordinator Adam Gase said. "A lot of people will say, 'He's not a blazer,' but what he does is he has the ability to get up on you and go by you. And when you think he's gone by you, he knows how to snap out a route. His intelligence is off the charts."

Decker's ability to snap off a route to the corner of the end zone became a trademark move a season ago, leading to his team high in TDs.

He learned the game by learning from the game's best. When he was playing at Minnesota — long before GQ photo shoots and his marriage to singer Jessie James — Decker had the opportunity to work out with Larry Fitzgerald of the Cardinals, who is from Minnesota, and former Minnesota Vikings star Cris Carter.

Oh, and Jerry Rice was there too.

"I don't often get star-struck, but with him I definitely did," Decker said of the San Francisco 49ers legend. "And Larry was a guy I always wanted to be like. Frame-wise, we're both 6-3, about 215, 220, so it's learning how he gets off the line, how he gets separation. It's watching film and trying to emulate his game.

"And you have Jerry Rice and Cris Carter there, two of my all-time favorites. Michael Irvin was there as well. You have Hall of Famers teaching the basics of the game, giving you the knowledge that allows you to be a good player. That helped my career, helped my confidence."

Best catch?

"In college, my senior year against Cal, it was an out-and-up, and I went up to get it, dragged one foot in and got hit. It busted my chin open, I got hit so hard. And that was a touchdown to tie the game in a crucial point."

First catch?

"When I think of my first catch, I think of my freshman year in college, a post for a touchdown. That's one that always stands out; pretty cool."

What I do when I score a touchdown

"I mix it up. I like to mix in the (Mile High) Salute. I like jumping into the stands, like a Lambeau Leap. It's just fun to share that emotion with the fans. I did 'The Macarena' last year."

Favorite memory of a catch?

"I remember we were playing Northern Illinois, and I caught a touchdown to go ahead and seal the game."

Biggest drop?

"I'm sure I've had plenty. That's the beauty of this game, is that there's always the next play. I would go with the trip in San Diego as my 'drop' (when a wide-open Decker tripped and fell while running for a probable touchdown). That will always stick out."

I knew I'd be an NFL receiver when ...

"After my sophomore year, after I had a good year against good opponents, I knew I had that chance."

Peyton Manning's WR trio with Broncos could rewrite NFL history

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
September 5, 2013

As an 11-year-old growing up in Minnesota, Eric Decker got caught up in the scoring machine that was the 1998 Minnesota Vikings. "Jake Reed, Cris Carter, Randy Moss," Decker said as if it were yesterday and not 15 years ago. Randall Cunningham was the quarterback of those Vikings, and not then, nor ever, was he considered among the NFL's elite passers. What that team featured foremost was arguably the most talented receiver trio in league history.

Carter was a Hall of Fame possession receiver. Moss justified coach Dennis Green's controversial first-round draft decision by putting together arguably the most dominant rookie receiving season ever. Reed played through injuries but had No. 1 receiver talent and was the third option on those Vikings.

"That was the best three-receiver group I had ever witnessed," former Broncos safety John Lynch said.

Which is saying something, because Lynch's Broncos were torched by the 2004 Indianapolis Colts' Marvin Harrison, Reggie Wayne and Brandon Stokley.

"But this group the Broncos have now has the chance to be the best," Lynch said, "when you consider the versatility they bring. And it's three different types of receivers."

It also helps that the Broncos' pass-catching trio of Demaryius Thomas, Wes Welker and Decker doesn't have Cunningham throwing the ball. The Broncos have Peyton Manning, one of the best passers in NFL history. It was Manning who threw 37 of a then-record 49 touchdown passes in 2004 to Harrison, Wayne and Stokley.

"The opportunity is there for us," Decker said. "We're playing with Peyton Manning. We have to make sure we're in top physical shape, we know this playbook like the back of our hand and take advantage of when the ball is in the air, thrown your way, to make a play."

The most prolific single-season receiving trio in NFL history was the 1995 Detroit Lions' Herman Moore, Brett Perriman and Johnnie Morton. They combined for 275 catches and 3,764 yards.

The combined numbers for Thomas, Decker and Welker in 2012 were 297 catches and 3,852 yards — 22 more receptions and 88 more yards than Moore, Perriman and Morton.

True, 118 catches and 1,354 yards by Welker weren't alongside Thomas and Decker, but with the 2012 New England Patriots.

Still, this is about the enormous possibilities Welker brings to a Denver offense that finished second to the Patriots in scoring last season.

On paper, the addition of Welker gives the Broncos an opportunity to leap beyond the 1987-89 Washington Redskins, the 1995 Lions, the 1998 Vikings, the 1980 San Diego Chargers (if you want to count tight ends as a third receiver) and the 2004 Colts as the NFL's all-time best receiving trio.

"Yeah, on paper," Welker cautioned. "It's called noise. We've got to go out there and do it."

Three can be a scary number

Three. The Goldilocks fairy tale would have lost its rhythm had she not come across the Three Bears. The Two Stooges without Curly would have been all slap, no shtick. The Broncos would like their opponents this season to discover that bad things happen in threes.

When he quarterbacked the Broncos, John Elway once had the Three Amigos. Why shouldn't Elway, as the Broncos' front-office boss, have an offense built around the Peyton Trio?

"The Three Amigos were fun, and I enjoyed them," Elway said of his diminutive threesome of Vance Johnson, Mark Jackson and Ricky

Nattiel. "But if you look at these three guys, the combination of speed, size, quickness, it's a different set of receivers."

Denver's trio has a clear superstar talent, and he goes by Demaryius. Welker has more star power, because he played on so many high-profile, successful New England teams. But Thomas is 6-foot-3 and 230 pounds of unlimited potential, fast enough to beat the fleetest of cornerbacks deep and strong enough to outposition the most muscle-bound of safeties down the middle. His hands don't catch — they snatch the ball away from traffic.

Thomas led the Broncos last season with 94 catches for 1,434 yards.

It's the growth of Thomas, who turns 26 on Christmas, that raised a stiff-arm to the otherwise widely applauded decision to add Welker.

Pint-sized, but strong, coy and quick, Welker displayed a ferocious appetite for Tom Brady's passes during his six seasons with New England. It wasn't Welker's skill as a slot receiver that's in question, but whether his knack of drawing the quarterback's eye would dilute from the production of Thomas and Decker, a touchdown machine who added 85 catches as the Broncos' No. 2 receiver last season.

After all, there is another well-known axiom involving three: Three's a crowd.

"Does it dilute?" said Adam Gase, the Broncos' first-year offensive coordinator. "Or does it create more opportunities for Demaryius and Eric because Wes helps them draw more one-on-one coverage? If they're focused on Wes, that means D.T. is going to have some big-play opportunities. If they want to double outside, Wes and whoever is playing tight end can have good games. And if they try to double everybody, guess what we're going to do. We're going to run the ball. Wes helps our offense get better."

Still, there's only one ball and so many passes a 37-year-old quarterback can make in one season. Selflessness will be key. Thomas and Decker have proved they can be patient. Thomas played in a run-option offense at Georgia Tech — and still wound up as the Broncos' first pick in the 2010 draft.

Thomas and Decker showed flashes of breaking out in their second pro seasons of 2011, but they wound up blocking way more than running routes with Tim Tebow at quarterback.

"I've been through it," Thomas said. "I'm used to waiting my turn. But I've got a quarterback who knows how to spray the ball. Last year, (Brandon) Stokley had 45 catches. I had (94). Deck had 85. The tight ends (Jacob Tamme and Joel Dreessen), between the two of them they had (93). Peyton knows how to spread the ball around."

Rise of the receiving tight end

What's lacking most in the distinction of all-time best receiver trio is time. Three-receiver formations broke into the NFL about the time the world was getting pushed along by the Internet. There long had been a formation that included a split end, a flanker, a tight end, a fullback and a halfback.

From this formation, the American Football League in the mid-1960s started using tight ends such as Fred Arbanas and Billy Cannon as the No. 3 receiving options. Over in the stodgy National Football League, Johnny Unitas started splitting his passes among a young tight end named John Mackey, Hall of Fame split end Raymond Berry and flanker Jimmy Orr.

Offensive evolution would remove the fullback in exchange for a second receiver who split out wide. The flanker became renamed as the slot. Joe Gibbs found success in the late 1980s by giving mediocre quarterbacks Mark Rypien and Doug Williams a prolific hands trio of Art Monk, Gary Clark and Ricky Sanders.

Eventually, a second, smaller tight end would also line up in a slot position, which became known as an H-back. The Broncos' Shannon Sharpe was part of the H-back movement in the late 1990s. Factor in Super Bowl title rings with the statistics of receptions, yards and touchdowns and Thomas, Decker and Welker have a ways to go to catch Rod Smith, Ed McCaffrey and Sharpe as the best receiving trio in Broncos history.

Sid Gillman and Don Coryell get their share of credit for the game's vertical passing innovations, but a slice of three-receiver modification should be saved for Tom Moore. He was the offensive coordinator of the 1995 Lions, who spread all those catches and yards among Moore, Perriman and Morton, yet still had enough football for Barry Sanders to gain 1,500 yards rushing.

Nine years later, Moore was the offensive coordinator for the 2004 Colts, who not only produced three 1,000-yard seasons from Harrison, Wayne and Stokley, but 1,548 yards rushing from Edgerrin James.

Some of the most well-designed combinations, though, never clicked. In 1981, the Green Bay Packers acquired John Jefferson, who in three seasons with the Chargers had become the most potent receiver in the AFC. He teamed with James Lofton, who was emerging as one of the top receivers in the NFC.

On paper, it was going to be the best receiving duo in NFL history. It didn't turn out that way. Packers quarterback Lynn Dickey rarely looked Jefferson's way while Lofton continued building his Hall of Fame résumé.

Gase and Manning may have found a way around such a problem. It was suggested to Manning, whose wife, Ashley, is part owner of the NBA's Memphis Grizzlies, that he will be playing the role of point guard on a team with three 30-point scorers.

"I'd rather have three 30-point scorers than three 10-point scorers," Manning said. "It's a good problem to have. I wouldn't call it a problem. It's a challenge."

How to get enough shots to all these scorers? It's easier if your team employs the fast break.

In one half of a preseason game against the St. Louis Rams last month, Manning used the fast-tempo offense to throw 34 passes. Thomas had seven catches, on pace for 14. Decker had six catches, on pace for 12. Welker didn't play; he was

saving his legs for the season opener against the Baltimore Ravens. But his replacement, Andre Caldwell, was targeted six times, on pace of 12.

"We learned this preseason with that tempo that we're capable of doing it," Decker said. "With that comes a conditioning level. We're all human. You do get tired. But the more you can condition yourself for that pace, the better chance it succeeds.

"Nothing is given to you. We've got to go out there and prove it. With that said, we do have a great opportunity."

All-time NFL trios

NFL reporter Mike Klis picks his best NFL receiver trios of all time:

1. 1998 Vikings

Randy Moss, Cris Carter, Jake Reed

181 rec., 2,798 yards, 33 TDs

Moss caught 17 touchdown passes and averaged 19.0 yards per catch in his rookie season. Carter had one of his Hall of Fame seasons. Reed averaged 13.9 yards per catch in 11 games. The Vikings set a single-season scoring record with Randall Cunningham as the quarterback.

2. 1989 Redskins

Art Monk, Gary Clark, Ricky Sanders

245 rec., 3,553 yards, 21 TDs

Check out this balance: Monk (86, 1,186, eight TDs), Sanders (80, 1,138, four) and Clark (79, 1,229, nine). Imagine if they had a better quarterback than Mark Rypien.

3. 1995 Lions

Herman Moore, Brett Perriman, Johnnie Morton

275 rec., 3,764 yards, 31 TDs

Scott Mitchell's big year. Moore had 123 catches, 1,686 yards, 14 TDs; Perriman had 108 catches for 1,488 yards. The offensive coordinator was Tom Moore, who later hooked up with Peyton Manning in Indy.

4. 1980 Chargers

John Jefferson, TE Kellen Winslow, Charlie Joyner

242 rec., 3,762 yards, 26 TDs

Jefferson led the NFL with 1,340 yards and 13 TDs; Winslow was first with 89 receptions and second with 1,290 yards. Joyner was fourth with 1,132 yards. And Dan Fouts led the NFL in passing yards for the second of four consecutive seasons.

5. 1967 Jets

Don Maynard, George Sauer, TE Pete Lammons

191 rec., 3,138 yards, 18 TDs

Joe Namath became first to throw for 4,000 yards. That didn't happen again until the first 16-game season, in 1978. Sauer and Maynard were 1-2 in the American Football League in receptions; Maynard and Sauer were first and fourth in yards. Lammons was fifth among tight ends with 45 catches.

6. 2004 Colts

Marvin Harrison, Reggie Wayne, Brandon Stokley

231 rec., 3,400 yards, 37 TDs

Manning's best season distributed 15 TDs to Harrison, 12 to Wayne and 10 to Stokley. Third option Stokley had career-best 68 catches for 1,077 yards.

7. 1984 Dolphins

Mark Clayton, Mark Duper, Nat Moore

187 rec., 3,268 yards, 32 TDs

Dan Marino's 48 touchdowns and 5,084 passing yards held for 20 years as NFL records. Clayton caught 18 of those TDs.

8. 1950 L.A. Rams

Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsch, Tom Fears, Bob Boyd

135 rec., 2,023 yards, 18 TDs

Fears led the NFL in receptions (84) and yards (1,116) in a 12-game season. Hirsch was sixth in catches (42) and seventh in yards (687). Boyd averaged 24.4 yards per catch.

9. 1976 Raiders

Cliff Branch, TE Dave Casper, Fred Biletnikoff

142 rec., 2,353 yards, 29 TDs

The best of the Kenny Stabler-John Madden teams went 16-1 with a trouncing of the mighty Steel Curtain in the AFC title game. Branch averaged 24.2 yards per catch. Casper had 10 TDs. A fading Biletnikoff had 43 catches and seven TDs.

Wes Welker still getting comfortable with Broncos as new go-to WR

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
September 5, 2013

Wes Welker has been settling into life in Colorado for a while now.

He started, coincidentally enough, with a destination wedding to Aspen last summer. He then went back to the New England Patriots for another 100-reception season, but in mid-March, he jumped to the Broncos. He and his wife, Anna, have since moved into the Cherry Creek area, where they enjoy getting out and about.

Welker started running routes for his new quarterback, Peyton Manning, in April and practiced with the Broncos through parts of April, May, June and July — and all of August.

A big man on the Patriots' campus the previous six years, when did Welker stop feeling like the new kid in the school at Dove Valley?

"I still feel like the new kid in school," he said. "I don't think you ever really arrive. That's the way you have to look at it. The moment you think you've arrived, that's when you're going to have a bad year, or have a bad game. You've got to keep that edge."

There is a good reason Welker never feels comfortable. He set school records as a wide receiver and a punt returner at Texas Tech, but his name was never called during the NFL's 2004 draft. He signed as an undrafted rookie with San Diego, but the Chargers cut him after one game. He played the rest of that season with the Miami Dolphins, but he didn't arrive as a pro receiver until the opening game of the 2005 season, when he caught the first four passes of his NFL career on a sauna-hot afternoon against Denver.

How could the Broncos know, as they were preparing that week to stop the likes of Chris Chambers, Marty Booker and Ronnie Brown, that a 5-foot-9, 185-pound slot receiver would become the biggest NFL star from that game?

"I remember we talked a lot about him in Mike (Shanahan's) general meeting that, 'Hey, this guy is a dangerous punt returner,' " said John Lynch, a star safety with the Broncos in 2005 and now an NFL analyst. "And then I do remember him being productive in that game and thinking, 'Wow, this guy is pretty good.' "

Welker has an NFL-most 764 catches since that game and yet he never truly arrived as a Dolphin, traded after three seasons to New England.

To the surprise of many, Welker never really arrived with the Patriots, either, even though he averaged an astonishing 112 receptions per season.

He did arrive in Denver after Broncos football operations boss John Elway made some quick adjustments to his offseason blueprint.

"We thought Welker was going back to New England," Elway said. "The reality came in a hurry when they had a tough time working something out there. It was 24 hours where we went from 'Hey, we've got a chance to get Wes Welker' to actually getting him."

The Patriots made Welker the kind of offer they seemingly wanted him to refuse — a two-year contract worth $10 million. The Broncos got him for two years and $12 million. He got more than a nice contract. He got Colorado.

"Love it," Welker said. "The weather, the outdoor activities. There's always something to do just walking around. The people. Just really enjoy it."

By the way, as Welker was talking about Colorado, he wasn't worried about what Patriots coach Bill Belichick was thinking.

"No, no," Welker said, referring to the Sports Illustrated cover story this summer. "That was an interview done 2½ months ago where I spent six hours with a (reporter)."

It wasn't Colorado's scenery that brought him here, though. Welker is here because the Broncos of 2013, like the New England teams he played for, have a chance to win it all. The Patriots had a chance largely because Tom Brady was their quarterback. The Broncos have a chance largely because Manning is their quarterback.

Between them, Brady and Manning have represented the AFC in seven of the past 12 Super Bowls.

Welker was asked to describe one difference between Manning and Brady.

"Different names," Welker said.

Thanks, Wes.

"I'm never giving that one," he said.

For a guy who never feels like he's arrived, Welker wasn't about to upset his stay.

Best catch?

"I had a nice one-hander in the AFC playoffs against the Texans last year down the sideline." He had eight catches for 131 yards in that game.

First NFL catch?

"It would have been my second year in Miami. I want to say it was against Denver. It was hot. I think I ran an over route." It was the 2005 season opener in Miami, a 15-yard reception from Gus Frerotte with just three minutes gone in the game. Welker finished that game with four catches for 60 yards in a Miami win.

What I do when I score a touchdown

"Nothing much anymore. I've always been taught to act like you've been there before. I just give the ball to the referee and go out and try to do it again."

Favorite memory of a catch?

"In the 16-0 year, I helped ice a game against Indianapolis that year, late in the game, that I got pretty fired up on." In Game 9, Peyton Manning's Colts were up 20-10 on the 8-0 Patriots early in the fourth quarter. The Pats scored two touchdowns, one by Welker, to take a 24-20 lead. They got the ball back, but it was third-and-6 at the Indy 42 just before the two-minute warning. Tom Brady completed a 10-yard pass to Welker for a first down.

Biggest drop?

"The Super Bowl." In the 2011 season's finale against the New York Giants. With about four minutes left in the fourth quarter and New England leading 17-14, Brady threw to a wide-open Welker down the left seam. The ball was behind Welker, who had to leap and corkscrew his body, but had two hands on the ball when it got away.

I knew I was an NFL receiver when ...

"I thought maybe I'd return kicks and punts for a long time. But I guess going into my second (NFL) year, I thought I could be a receiver."

Demaryius Thomas has physical ability for Broncos that others dream of

By Christopher Dempsey
The Denver Post
September 5, 2013

The typical Demaryius Thomas catch looks a lot like this practice scene from early in training camp: Full speed, Thomas hits his break on an out pattern and quarterback Peyton Manning hits him in the hands with the football. Two defenders — something else commonplace in Thomas' world these days — converge.

Instead of tackling him, they simply melt away. Too big and too strong, Thomas barely breaks stride and heads toward the end zone.

When athletes talk about their body being their temple, Thomas lives it. Tight ends want his sprinter's speed. Fellow wideouts want his size. He has the most natural of all gifts — superior genetics — one of the biggest reasons he has grown into one of the NFL's most dangerous wide receivers.

Thomas knows it, loves it and smiles wide while talking about it.

"Man, I've been big since I was a little boy," he said. "I was 10 pounds as a baby. I was 217 coming out of high school. I've been big. I'm 225 right now, but I've been up to 245."

In other words, he has always been a handful.

But then there is this twist — speed.

"When I was 238 pounds, I ran a 4.38," said the 6-foot-3 Thomas of his time in the 40-yard dash, a clocking most cornerbacks would be thrilled to run.

Thomas is one of the draft picks former coach Josh McDaniels got right. And yet Thomas' arrival didn't come without controversy. The Broncos took him No. 22 overall in the 2010 draft and ahead of Dez Bryant, who was much more highly publicized.

When Manning arrived in the spring of 2012, it didn't take him long to understand the gift he had in Thomas.

"His size and strength and speed allow you to do certain things with him that other players just can't do," Manning said.

Thomas has much more than size or strength. He has developed into a top-notch receiver, but he recognizes why he's so tough to cover.

"I like that I'm able to be one of the biggest guys in the league," he said. "It's a big advantage because sometimes you just don't beat a defensive back the way you want to. Say I'm going against Champ (Bailey) and I want to try to beat him, but I just don't beat him like I want to beat him.

"If I get him in a certain position, I know he can't come through my body because I'm so big and heavy. Then the quarterback places the ball where only you can get the ball. So, sometimes if I have a go route, and I just don't beat him deep, I might have him on my inside hip. If he tries to come through my body, it's hard because I'm big and he can't break it up most of the time. I'm just going to shed him off. It's hard to knock a big guy off."

In 2012, Thomas' 94 catches for 1,434 yards (he also had 10 touchdowns) not only led the Broncos but were among the best in the league. Since 2000, only Brandon Lloyd had more yards in a Broncos season. Since 2001, Thomas' 94 receptions were eclipsed only by three 100-catch seasons by Brandon Marshall.

"He's one of the best in the game," Broncos safety Rahim Moore said. "He's going to be a great player in this league."

And before you think Moore hasn't lined up against Thomas, he has. And talking about him is one of his favorite subjects.

"He's a big guy," Moore said. "The thing is, he can run past you too; he's 4.3 (speed). He can body you. He has a Shannon Sharpe body with Calvin Johnson speed. Great hands too. Strong at the point. You can have great coverage on D.T., but if he catches the ball and you try to swat-hook it or you try to bat it out, his forearms are so strong he just reels that ball in."

The injuries that dogged Thomas early in his career — broken foot, sprained ankle, concussion, torn Achilles and fractured finger — seem a distant memory. Thomas attributes his improved health to taking better care of himself, starting with his diet.

Gone are his fatty-food favorites such as catfish. In are lean muscle-sculpting staples such as chicken.

"Once I got in the NFL, I was having a conversation with Brian Dawkins and he was telling me, 'You've got to take care of your body,' " Thomas said. "You've got to stay on it, you've got to get massages, you've got to get in the cold tub. You've got to do all of that. And the main thing he said is you've got to watch what you eat."

All of that has led to this: Thomas is in the best shape of his career. He is taking care of a body that is his biggest advantage.

"And I can run, and also when I run my routes, most big guys can't stop," Thomas said. "I've been working on it so much that now I'm able to stop, shift my weight and drop my weight, and that's one of the main things. Then, when I get the ball in my hands, I feel like I'm explosive. I try to make things happen, and most of the time I do."

Favorite catch?

"I'm going to have to go with Kansas City, in the back of the end zone." It was the regular-season finale vs. the Chiefs last season at Sports Authority Field at Mile High on the opening drive of the second half. Quarterback Peyton Manning purposely threw the ball high so that no one but Thomas could catch it. Thomas leaped high and reached up and back with his right hand to snag the pass, control it and come down with two feet inside the end line for a touchdown.

First catch?

"In a game? I was in high school, probably 10th grade. It was against Brooks County (Ga.)."

What I do when I score a touchdown

"Oh, no. I don't do nothing. I'm boring. I don't know what to do when I get in the end zone."

I knew I'd be an NFL receiver when ...

"Once I went to college. I was in a pro-style offense and I was learning things from Calvin (Johnson). Then I had a real good receivers coach. I heard all the time I had the potential, just had to work hard. I listened and started working hard."

Broncos start season with previous defensive stalwarts

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
September 5, 2013

It can be argued the Broncos' three best defensive players the past two seasons were Von Miller, Champ Bailey and Elvis Dumervil.

There were three Broncos players named as Pro Bowl starters in 2011: Miller, Bailey and Dumervil.

In 2012, there were three Broncos defensive players, and only three, who were named to the Pro Bowl team: Miller, Bailey and Dumervil.

But when the Broncos open the 2013 season Thursday night at Sports Authority Field at Mile High, Miller, Bailey and Dumervil will not be playing against $20 million quarterback Joe Flacco and the Baltimore Ravens.

Miller will begin his six-game suspension for violating the NFL's drug policy, Bailey has an injured left foot, and Dumervil is now playing for the Ravens.

"You can look at Baltimore, and people can argue some of their best players aren't there, either," Broncos coach John Fox said. "(Paul) Kruger, Ed Reed, Anquan Boldin, Ray Lewis. That's this league. That's part of the game. It happens to every team every year."

Let the Ravens deal with their own problems. They're the defending Super Bowl champions, so they have fewer worries than most.

For the Broncos, no Miller, no Dumervil and no Bailey leaves the Broncos with a clear concern as they embark on a new season: generating a pass rush.

Miller and Dumervil combined for 29½ sacks last season, 50½ in the past two years. Bailey was the Broncos' top cornerback who helped cover the opponents' top receiver until Miller and Dumervil could reach the quarterback.

With those three top defenders out, Jack Del Rio will have to come up with some defensive coordinator magic against the Ravens.

"My approach won't change," Del Rio said. "It really comes down to players being selfless, being willing to sacrifice for each other. Playing fast with one another. Trusting each other. I don't spend a lot of time contemplating what-ifs or

hypotheticals. I focus on being the best that I can be, and making sure that I'm helping the guys around me be the best they can be and then collectively we go out there and compete."

Yeah, but the selfless Broncos will have to trust without Von Miller. It stung to lose Dumervil, but inevitable business decisions are made all the time.

Losing Miller might still be a shock to the Broncos' system. With 30 sacks through his first 31 NFL games, Miller seemingly was on his way to becoming one of the most potent defensive players since Derrick Thomas, or even Lawrence Taylor.

"A lot of times you say, 'OK, Von will get there,' " said Derek Wolfe, a defensive end on running downs, defensive tackle in passing situations. "But now he's not going to be out there, so we'll all have to get there."

John Elway, the Broncos' front-office boss who was responsible for constructing the team's roster, has said better coverage in the secondary this year should help manufacture a pass rush up front. Even with Bailey down, the Broncos added Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie to one cornerback position and developed a promising young strong safety in Duke Ihenacho. Two other young cornerbacks, Chris Harris and Tony Carter, should benefit from an additional year of NFL experience.

If the secondary can cover a tick or two longer, it might allow Wolfe, who had six sacks as a rookie last year, or Shaun Phillips, who had 9 ½ sacks with San Diego, to harry Flacco.

"Von's a pretty good pass rusher, but the good thing about football is it's never about one guy, but 11 guys," said Phillips, who will essentially fill Miller's role on passing downs. "Of course our pass rush is less without him. But Von wouldn't get there as easily if the other 10 guys weren't doing their job."

Besides, everybody has burdens. For the past decade, the Ravens' heart and soul were Lewis and Reed.

"Those guys are going to miss 16 games this year," Phillips said. "Von's going to miss six. They're not going to cancel the game because of who's not playing. They're still going to kick the ball off, and we're still going to have to play the game."

Champ Bailey ruled out with injury for Broncos vs. Ravens in Denver

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
September 4, 2013

Champ Bailey has been ruled out of the season opener Thursday night against the Baltimore Ravens in the team's final injury report released Wednesday afternoon.

A 12-time Pro Bowl selection, Bailey hasn't practiced since he injured the bottom of his left foot during a preseason game Aug. 17 at Seattle. He returned to observe practices this week, and lined up with the first-team defense during a walkthrough portion Tuesday, but he never participated in 11-on-11 work.

With Bailey out, Chris Harris will start at one cornerback spot, joining free-agent addition Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, who will start at the other.

"I do believe we acquired a really good football player in Dominique," said Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio. "But we also have one that's going to be sitting out in Champ. We'll tee it up and play. I'm not really big on making predictions. I'm big on getting our guys ready to the best of their ability, going out there and competing."

The Broncos will have to figure out how to defend Ravens receiver Torrey Smith, who beat Bailey for two long touchdown receptions during Baltimore's 38-35 double-overtime playoff victory at Sports Authority Field at Mile High on Jan. 12.

At 35, Bailey is the NFL's third oldest defensive back behind safeties Charles Woodson and Yeremiah Bell. However, Bailey is coming off one of his better seasons as he consistently held down the opponents' No. 1 receivers in 2012 until Smith gave him the slip on two plays in the playoff game.

The Broncos also list tight end Joel Dreessen as "out" for the game against the Ravens. Dreessen underwent arthroscopic knee surgery last month, his second of the offseason.

Kiszla: Broncos should forget worst loss by having best season

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
September 5, 2013

The city of Denver is having a devil of a time forgetting.

"That game," Broncos receiver Eric Decker said this week, "will always be with me."

There's no mistaking which game Decker was talking about. The game that must not be named. It's the stuff of recurring football nightmares in Colorado.

And it's way past time to move on.

But there's only one way for the Broncos and their hometown to truly move forward: Denver has no choice except to beat Baltimore.

The Ravens haunt the dreams of Broncomaniacs. Losing 38-35 to Baltimore in double overtime during the NFL playoffs was bad enough. But there was linebacker Ray Lewis on Sports Authority Field at Mile High, his defiant words billowing with white smoke in the freezing cold, preaching "God believes in the impossible!" as if it were divine intervention rather than a knucklehead play by Denver safety Rahim Moore that allowed the upset.

Oh, shut up, Ray.

In the darkest hours of Jan. 12, e-mails raging with hate toward the Broncos began pounding my inbox. Ravens fan Steve Murfin wrote:

"God is having his revenge. Ray Lewis is the messenger to John Elway and John Fox for cutting his player: Tim Tebow. And for Elway stiffing Baltimore in 1983."

Way to stay classy, Baltimore.

It all hurt too much, because pro football counts for too much in Denver, where Mayor Michael Hancock is the first to admit he feels the hangover in the streets of his fair city on the morning after the Broncos lose.

Somebody do the math. It has been what, 236 days since Denver lost in the playoffs?

It hurts like yesterday, or so I'm told by Broncos fans, who seem to have a tougher time than the players when letting go of the pain. For example: Is getting furious at a banner of Baltimore quarterback Joe Flacco really rational behavior?

Could the Broncos lose again to Baltimore in the 2013 NFL season opener?

Let's not think about it. Lose to the Ravens again, and the sun might be told to stay home because Friday would be canceled in Colorado.

Manning is admired in Denver. But is he loved the way Elway is in this town? No way. Of course not. That would be impossible. Elway turned this dusty old cow town into a major-league city. As diligently as Manning has tried to turn the page, he is a Colt first, a Bronco second.

Maybe the lone way Manning can change that narrative in a major way is to go out and produce the greatest season by a quarterback in the history of the Broncos, then end the ride with a victory parade after the Super Bowl.

At age 37, Manning is fully capable of doing it.

Age is just a number, but here's a statistic worth talking about: 50 touchdown passes. Tom Brady threw 50 for New England in 2007 to set the league record.

Manning can do better.

Football is moving at 20 miles over the speed limit all across the league, and in Adam Gase, Manning has a new offensive coordinator riding shotgun, with both men at the controls of the Denver offense in love with the punching the pedal to the metal.

Yes, Broncos coach John Fox is conservative by nature. But, at age 58, Fox is in a hurry to win a Super Bowl before his time in the league runs out.

What if Fox gets cold feet and wants the Denver offense to pump the brakes? Well, a smart, veteran quarterback knows all the tricks.

As Manning joked to me one day early in training camp, "There's always enough static in the helmet speaker that if I don't really like a play, I can pretend the volume cut out and change it."

The road to the Super Bowl begins here. The Broncos need to make it a high-speed race.

Denver could start by hanging 40 points on the Ravens.

Make 'em pray for mercy.

Broncos and their fans dream of orange revenge and redemption

By John Ingold
The Denver Post
September 4, 2013

Denver, wake up!

You were having that nightmare again.

The one where the clock is ticking, ticking and the Super Bowl is almost in sight for the Broncos. And then suddenly the ball's in the air and the Baltimore Ravens wide receiver is sprinting and Broncos safety Rahim Moore is backpedaling and waving his arms and ... and ... he's not going to get there, is he?

It's been a long football off-season in Colorado. Two hundred thirty-six days.

But today's the day to put that nightmare to bed.

"I've been mad the whole off-season," Broncos fan Ricky Barton said Wednesday. "I'm ready for a bit of revenge."

When the National Football League's 2013 Kickoff extravaganza rolls into Denver on Thursday, it will find a city looking for redemption from last season's horror-show ending. That the opponent in the Broncos' first game — and the first game in the entire NFL season — is the (Super Bowl champion) Ravens only adds to the intensity that fans say they will bring to Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Remember last season, Baltimore? Nevermore.

"I think it's going to set the tone," said Broncos fan Andre Rudolph, who, like Barton, was shopping Wednesday at the team's stadium store for last-minute gear to wear to the game.

"United in Orange," is the buzz-phrase Denver leaders are using for fans on Thursday. People are encouraged to wear orange to work or school. The Denver City and County building — plus a number of buildings downtown — will be lit up in orange lights.

Denver Mayor Michael Hancock plans to lead fans on a bicycle procession from the City and County building to the game at about 3:30 p.m. He will be joined by Miles, the Broncos mascot.

A special message from Hancock will be played on Denver International Airport trains throughout the day, and DIA welcome signs will display "Go Broncos" to arriving travelers.

Even the man setting the 500 different LED light fixtures on the Denver City and County building to orange on Wednesday was feeling the spirit.

"I get to show my Broncos pride in a different way than anyone else. That's pretty awesome," said Nate Webb, whose company, Blaze Illuminations, is based in Loveland and who calls being a Broncos fan "a no-brainer."

The NFL, too, plans to bring its A-game.

Legendary broadcaster Al Michaels will call the game for NBC. The Today Show's Al Roker will host live segments from outside the stadium Thursday morning.

This town's even getting Seacrested. "American Idol" host Ryan Seacrest will front a pre-game show from Denver, promising that the show would be "an auspicious beginning to another incredible NFL season."

Which is great and all, but what Barton — from his old Brandon Marshall jersey down to his orange sneakers — wants is an end to his off-season nightmare. Barton lives in Las Vegas but has been a Broncos fan for more than three decades, since John Elway's earliest days with the team. He tries to attend one game a year.

"Usually, I like to come to one of the cold-weather games," he said. "But I couldn't resist this one."

A few feet away from where Barton spoke inside the Broncos stadium store, eight orange jerseys hung on a discount rack, awaiting their own kind of redemption.

Retail price: $240.

Closeout price: $99.97.

Name on the back: Moore.

BroncosRide transit service altered for Thursday night game

By Monte Whaley
The Denver Post
September 4, 2013

Broncos fans must be aware of changes in BroncosRide service to Sports Authority Field at Mile High on Thursday night if they want to get to the showdown with the Baltimore Ravens on time, says the Regional Transportation District.

BroncosRide service usually starts operating two hours before kickoff. But for Thursday's game, the BroncosRide bus service will start operating 1½ hours before game time.

Officials say this is because the start of the game coincides with RTD's regular rush hour service, limiting the number of buses available.

RTD says it cannot guarantee arrival by kick-off and is urging fans to leave early for the game.

Also, the Federal Shuttle no longer serves Federal Boulevard north of 18th because parking is no longer available at 47th and Harlan. The private owner of that lot could not guarantee parking availability for all Broncos home games so RTD chose not to renew the lease.

The Federal Shuttle now runs from Lincoln High School to Federal and 18th. Because of this change, RTD is encouraging customers from the north to use the Ward Road or Olde Town Arvada park-n-Rides to catch the BroncosRide.

And, because of the large number of buses needed for normal commuter service, RTD is not able to provide BroncosRide bus service from the Federal Center Station on weeknight games.

Riders are encouraged to take the new West Line light rail from the Federal Center Station and use the stop at the Decatur-Federal Station, which is near the south stadium entrance.

RTD said it notified riders last week about this change via flyers on vehicles. An RTD supervisor will be on site to director customers to the train.

RTD will be able to provide BroncosRide bus services from the Federal Center Station for weekend games.

RTD is encouraging riders to take advantage of light rail service to get to the game. The C, E, and W light rail lines stop at Sports Authority Field at Mile High Station, and the W light rail line stops at the Decatur-Federal Station.

Additional trains will be placed into services beginning three hours before the game for light rail routes that serve the stadium.

For more information, visit RTD's website.

Broncos predictions for 2013 are up and down with Peyton Manning in and Von Miller out

By The Denver Post
September 4, 2013

The Broncos have Peyton Manning at quarterback. That's gotta be worth a lot for their over-under, right? Then again, they will be without their best defensive player, Von Miller, for six games.

For the record, Las Vegas has the Broncos' over-under at 11.5 games. So how will the Broncos do this season?

Here are six predictions from The Denver Post for the Broncos' 2013 record. Get your prediction in now so you can say "I told you so" later. What will their record be?

CHRIS DEMPSEY
12-4: Not many — or maybe any — in the AFC are in the Broncos' class. Falling short of the Super Bowl would be a disappointment.

TERRY FREI
9-7: Division will be at least a little better. Say that every season; this time I mean it. But mostly, starting to wonder if this is a bad karma year.

BENJAMIN HOCHMAN
12-4: Broncos will finish second in the AFC and win the Jan. 19 title game at Houston … while it's 30 degrees in Denver.

MARK KISZLA
11-5: Tell you what: I'll trade two victories in regular season for two in January. Deal?

MIKE KLIS
11-5: But to finish the prediction, the Broncos will play their first and last road games in New Jersey.

WOODY PAIGE
11-5 : In spite of all that has happened and will happen.

Preview: Three Amigos and a look back at Haven Moses of M&M Connection

By Terry Frei
The Denver Post
September 4, 2013

In the Broncos preview section Thursday, which will focus on Denver's current wide receiver threesome, my story is on another set of receivers from the franchise past — Vance Johnson, Mark Jackson and Ricky Nattiel.

The Three Amigos.

All three were small and fast, so as a trio, they were quite unlike Demaryius Thomas and Eric Decker, especially. But with John Elway keeping plays alive and throwing them the ball, they managed to be effective … and were showmen as they did it.

The above is Johnson and Jackson appearing with the Bronco caravan in Longmont last year.

I had fun doing the story, and even in going through the microfilm to read about their breakout game — the 1987 victory over the Chicago Bears on Monday Night Football in which Johnson, Jackson and Nattiel each caught a TD pass from Elway.

(Whatever happened to that Elway guy, anyway?)

I was heartened to see that Post beat writer Mike Klis included Haven Moses on the list of top 8 Denver receivers of all time, at No. 6. I don't mind admitting that Haven is a favorite of mine. His chemistry and collaboration with Craig Morton especially, memorialized in the "M and M Connection" nickname, was integral in the season that led to the Broncos' first Super Bowl trip.

Also, Haven's recovery from a stroke is an inspiration.

Here are a couple of my pieces about Haven from the Post archives:

Amazing Grace, about Haven's background.

Haven's battle back from the stroke.

Oh, although it isn't mentioned elsewhere, I also pitched in with a requested prediction on how the Broncos will do in the regular season.

Top 8 best wide receivers in Broncos history — topped by an old-timer

By The Denver Post
September 4, 2013

Check out the print edition of The Denver Post on Thursday for a giant, 16-page color preview of the 2013 Broncos with features on Peyton Manning, the “Three Amigos,” and the NEW Three Amigos (have they earned a name yet?).

There will also be predictions from Woody Paige, Mark Kiszla and Benjamin Hochman and a complete position-by-position breakdown, along with other extra only in the paper.

In the meantime, here’s a preview of the preview. The top eight best receivers in Broncos history, as ranked by The Denver Post’s Mike Klis:

1. Lionel Taylor (1960-66)
Played linebacker for Bears in 1959, then led AFL with 92 catches (in just 12 games) in 1960 and 100 in 1961. How good is that? Led the AFL in receptions three more times.

2. Rod Smith (1995-2006)
One of the NFL’s all-time best undrafted players. Franchise leader in career receptions (849), yards (11,389) and touchdowns (68).

3. Brandon Marshall (2006-09)
Had three consecutive 100-catch seasons but his production was partially offset by off-field disruptions.

4. Ed McCaffrey (1995-2003)
Rod Smith’s partner ranks fourth on franchise list in receptions (462) and yards (6,200), and third in TDs (46).

5. Demaryius Thomas (2010-present)
Has the chance to become No. 1 as he’s the most physically talented of this group. Won playoff game in 2011 and had 94 catches for 1,434 yards last season.

6. Haven Moses (1972-81)
Averaged 18.0 yards per catch in his 10 seasons with the Broncos.

7. Steve Watson (1979-87)
Tied for NFL lead with 13 TDs in 1981. Was John Elway's first favorite receiver from 1983-85.

8. Vance Johnson (1985-93, 95)
The best of the Amigos, he had 76 catches, 1,095 yards and seven TDs in AFC championship season of 1989.

Hey, Broncos: What about the hated Ravens scares you most?

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
September 4, 2013

They’re baaack. The Ravens, which put the nevermore in Denver’s dream of winning a Super Bowl last season, are back in town for the 2013 NFL lid-lifter. What concerns you the most about this game?

I say it’s Baltimore pass-rusher Elvis Dumervil, back to get revenge and create mayhem. Oren Lomena of The Press Box is worried about young Denver running backs playing good assignment football against Baltimore’s stout defense. And Peter Burns? He ain’t worried about nuthin’.

Watch us discuss what Denver needs to worry about against Baltimore up above.

What must the Broncos do to avoid another upset against the Ravens? You tell us. And make a prediction of a final score, if you like.

Broncos hope playoff failure is springboard again

By Arnie Stapleton
The Associated Press
September 5, 2013

DENVER (AP) — John Elway the executive is about to find out if he's as good at bouncing back as John Elway the quarterback was.

Elway compares the heartbreak of Denver's loss to Baltimore in the playoffs last January to Jacksonville's upset of the well-rested Broncos 17 years earlier when they also were 13-3 and the AFC's prohibitive Super Bowl favorite.

The Broncos bounced back to win the next two Super Bowls.

"And believe me, that's what I'm praying that we're going to do these next two, three, four years is to use last year and be able to get over the hump and get to the Super Bowl and be able to win it," said Elway, now the Broncos executive vice president.

As a player, Elway trudged through the tunnel at Mile High in deafening silence after a stunning 30-27 home loss to the Jaguars.

He made the same lonely walk in a suit and tie eight months ago following Denver's 38-35 loss to the Ravens at Sports Authority Field.

The Broncos kick off the new season against the Super Bowl champion Ravens on Thursday night at Sports Authority Field, site of Joe Flacco's 70-yard touchdown toss to Jacoby Jones over Rahim Moore that tied the game at 35 with a-half minute left in regulation.

As a player, Elway used the heartbreak off the loss to the Jaguars to stoke his internal fire as he guided the Broncos to a Super Bowl win over Green Bay a year later.

"It was a great incentive for us to come back and have an even better year the following year," Elway said.

This time, he's using the gut-wrenching early exit from the playoffs to make sure there's no complacency at Dove Valley again. He added Wes Welker, Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie and Louis Vasquez as the crown jewels of a $125 million offseason spending spree.

Peyton Manning said Elway created an "uncomfortable atmosphere" at team headquarters to keep everyone motivated this offseason.

"We still kind of have a scar from losing that playoff game and I think players need to kind of be reminded of that daily," Manning said when the Broncos gathered for training camp.

"You'd better have a drive," Manning said. "You'd better have a goal for every season and when you have a hunger, whatever you want to call it, a thirst, a little fire in your belly. So, I think certainly our team's had that and it's about trying to go a little further, trying to finish."

Former Broncos such as Alfred Williams, who was a defensive end in Denver in the late 1990s and now is a radio personality in the Mile High City, said the only way to turn the pain of a playoff failure into something good is to "keep it on the dashboard, not in the rearview."

It's something you want to get over, but never forget, he said.

"They had about four to five minutes of bad football toward the end of that game that cost them. A lot," former Broncos great Terrell Davis said of Denver's latest playoff heartbreak. "It was like one decision after another after another. And so now you have to say, 'Listen, if we ever get back into that situation, we're going to do something different.'

"And that's what we did. We knew we were the better team — we weren't that day against Jacksonville — but we just tell ourselves that nobody could stop us if we don't stop ourselves. And that's the way we would play."

Hall of Fame tackle Gary Zimmerman put off retirement for a year so he could make amends in 1997 after the loss to the Jaguars, keeping the defeat fresh in his mind as motivation.

"That was embarrassing. It was, you could use every adjective. It devastated me because I thought (a win) was going to happen. I had gone my whole career, had never been there, I thought this was it, I could retire, be happy. And then it didn't happen. We came back the following year, we went through so many obstacles, went in as a wild card, nobody gave us a chance, we fight our way to the Super Bowl," Zimmerman said.

"So, I think they'll be really poised for some adversity this year. If some adversity hits them, it won't be anything compared to what hit them last year. I think this will be a positive for them in the long run for them, as it was for us."

Broncos, Ravens meet again 8 months later

By Arnie Stapleton
The Associated Press
September 4, 2013

DENVER (AP) — John Elway has been down this lonely road before, trudging through the tunnel in deafening silence after a stunning loss at home as the AFC's prohibitive Super Bowl favorite following a 13-3 regular season.

It happened to Elway the quarterback after the 1996 season when Denver lost to Jacksonville 30-27. It occurred again for Elway the executive in January when the Broncos were beaten 38-35 by Baltimore in the divisional round.

Elway rebounded the first time to win back-to-back Super Bowls. He said the pain of that pratfall against the Jaguars was the impetus to make them into champions.

"It was a great incentive for us to come back and have an even better year the following year," Elway said.

After engineering a $125 million offseason spending spree and acquiring wide receiver Wes Welker and massive right guard Louis Vasquez — to help new center Manny Ramirez fend off the likes of Ravens nose tackle Haloti Ngata — Elway is aiming for history to repeat itself after this latest heartbreak.

Five things to watch for as the Broncos kick off the season Thursday night against the champion Ravens:

ROAD RAVENS: Joe Flacco looms larger than life in Denver, and not just because he engineered the stunning playoff upset with his 70-yard touchdown throw to Jacoby Jones that tied it at 35 with 31 seconds left in regulation.

The NFL's marketing machine put up gigantic banners of Flacco alongside Peyton Manning on the Broncos' stadium to promote the league's first game of the 2013 season.

Fans are furious, Manning is miffed and Flacco is flummoxed.

Still, Flacco reasoned, "being hated is not a bad thing."

This flag flap could have been avoided had baseball's Orioles moved their game Thursday night to accommodate the champs for a customary home kickoff.

"I'm not too worried about it," Flacco said. "It's not like they're taking a home game away from us. They're just making us play on the road maybe earlier than we wanted to."

ELVIS RETURNS: "Doom & Gloom" is what Elvis Dumervil and Von Miller called themselves in Denver, where the Pro Bowl pass rushers combined for 29½ of the Broncos' league-leading 52 sacks in 2012.

Dumervil signed with the Ravens in free agency after his infamous fax foul-up in Denver led to his release by the Broncos.

He won't see Miller on Thursday night because Denver's All-Pro linebacker is serving a six-game drug suspension.

"He's like a younger brother," Dumervil said. "We've spoken. We talk all the time. He's dealing with tough times and he'll fight through it."

RAHIM'S REDEMPION: Safety Rahim Moore is out to make amends for the most memorable mistake in Denver's playoff loss, when he mistimed his jump on Flacco's heave to Jones.

"I haven't seen it from him one snap or one second where he's dwelled on that," Broncos secondary coach Cory Undlin said. "If anything, he's used it as motivation."

Veteran cornerback Champ Bailey appreciates Moore's accountability but noted there were plenty of goats in that game.

"He wasn't the guy that put us in that situation," Bailey said. "So, we've all got to own that one."

RAVENS REBUILT: For the first time in the Ravens' 18-year existence, Ray Lewis isn't manning middle linebacker. Daryl Smith, who signed a free agent deal in June, is the veteran replacement. He's a sure tackler entering his 10th season and could help provide some of the veteran presence the Ravens lost.

Smith was part of a Ravens defensive revamp as they also said goodbye to starters Ed Reed, Bernard Pollard, Paul Kruger and Cary Williams, and hello to Dumervil, Chris Canty, Marcus Spears and Michael Huff.

Flacco parlayed his fantastic playoff run into a six-year, $120.6 million contract, but also lost his two favorite targets as receiver Anquan Boldin was traded and tight end Dennis Pitta is sidelined with a fractured hip.

RECORD RETURNER: As a former special teams coordinator, Ravens coach John Harbaugh said he had "reluctant admiration" for Trindon Holliday, who piled up an NFL-record 248 yards in returns against the Ravens in January.

Denver's diminutive returner became the first NFL player to take back both a punt and a kickoff for TDs in a playoff game. Those touchdowns were the longest punt (90 yards) and kickoff (104 yards) returns for scores ever in the postseason.

Of course, Holliday was a footnote when Jones' tying TD grab made him the star instead.

Otherwise, it might have been Holliday and not Jones putting his fingerprints on the Lombardi Trophy, appearing on Jimmy Kimmel's late show and then prancing across the floor with Karina Smirnoff on "Dancing With The Stars."

Bailey to miss Broncos opener with ailing foot

By Arnie Stapleton
The Associated Press
September 4, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. (AP) — Champ Bailey won't play in the Denver Broncos' opener against the Baltimore Ravens on Thursday night because of a sprained left foot.

The 15th-year pro was ruled out Wednesday. He hasn't practiced since getting hurt in a preseason game at Seattle on Aug. 17.

Denver will start Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie in Bailey's place alongside right cornerback Chris Harris with Tony Carter getting work at nickel.

Although Bailey was beaten twice by Ravens receiver Torrey Smith in the playoffs, his absence for the "NFL Kickoff" may prove less critical because Joe Flacco is without his top two targets from last season in Anquan Boldin (trade) and Dennis Pitta (hip).

Bailey plans to play against the New York Giants in Week 2.

Pot advocates post billboard near Broncos' stadium

By The Associated Press
September 5, 2013

DENVER (AP) — Marijuana advocates are trying to grab some attention from the NFL's season opening game in Denver.

The Marijuana Policy Project wants the league to stop punishing players for using marijuana. It's put up a billboard near Sports Authority Field at Mile High for Thursday night's Denver Broncos-Baltimore Ravens game.

The sign asks the NFL to "stop driving players to drink." Marijuana supporters have long insisted that drinking poses a bigger danger than pot.

Denver's All-Pro linebacker Von Miller will miss Thursday's game and five others for violating the league's substance abuse policy. The reasons are confidential. But The Denver Post has reported that Miller tested positive for marijuana and amphetamine use during his rookie season in 2011.

What to watch for: Broncos-Ravens

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
September 5, 2013

It’s been months of waiting and hand-wringing for many in the Rocky Mountain empire, but Thursday night the Denver Broncos and the Baltimore Ravens will open the NFL’s regular season.

And the Broncos will take the first step toward trying to regain all they let slip away last January when the Ravens shredded the Broncos' postseason plans and scattered them across Sports Authority Field at Mile High as if they were confetti. So, when things get down to football business this evening, here are some things to consider:

- A certain right arm. Broncos receivers, right from Peyton Manning’s workouts at Duke University early in the offseason, have said Manning’s arm strength is noticeably better, and Manning has flashed the improvement throughout training camp and the preseason. But this will be the first under-the-bright-lights exam. There were personnel executives in the league last season who felt Denver's passing game was limited at times because Manning wasn't pushing the ball downfield. Teams usually decide coverage is the way to defend Manning -- to drop seven players and take their chances in the passing lanes -- because blitzing him is often a waste of time and a potential touchdown waiting to happen. But given the Broncos didn't always consistently protect Manning in the preseason, there is the chance the Ravens take a few risks in the pass rush, and the opportunities for Manning to put the ball up the sideline would be there. Also, the Broncos will finally show what the real plans are for Wes Welker, who will have a greater variety of routes in the Broncos' offense than he did with New England.

- No Champ, no Elvis, no Von. For one reason or another the Broncos' defense will be missing 29.5 sacks from last season and 17 career Pro Bowl appearances. That’s a lot of star power somewhere besides in the Broncos' defensive huddle. Champ Bailey is out with a foot injury, Von Miller is suspended for six games and Elvis Dumervil will be working for the Ravens this evening. That puts players such as Derek Wolfe, Robert Ayers and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie under the magnifying glass. Wolfe is essential to the defensive front because of his versatility, even when Miller’s in the lineup. He is all the more important now. Look for the Broncos to move him all along the line of scrimmage to find him some room to work. Ayers has

consistently said he could do far more in the rush than his 6.5 career sacks in four seasons. He’s never going to have a better chance to prove it than in these next six games, and he's in a contract year. The Broncos signed Rodgers-Cromartie because they believe he still possesses the skills to play like a No. 1 corner if he would commit to it and take care of the details. He will often line up in Bailey’s left cornerback spot in this game, and his athleticism makes him the best matchup against Ravens wide receiver Torrey Smith.

- Play big. The Broncos’ starting defense struggled at times in the preseason when its base formation matched up with a heavier look on offense. But the San Francisco 49ers and Seattle Seahawks plowed through the Broncos’ regulars with extended scoring drives. The 49ers put together a 13-play scoring drive in the preseason opener against the Broncos starters, with nine of those plays against the Broncos’ base defense. The Seahawks put together a 10-play touchdown drive against the starters, with nine of the plays against the Broncos’ base defense. Granted those two figure to be among the NFC elite this season, but the Ravens can -- and have -- played out of those heavy two-tight end, two-back looks with plenty of success in the past. The Broncos are going to have to muscle up a bit at times in this one. Wesley Woodyard certainly has the skills, the savvy and the physical edge to play at middle linebacker in the Broncos' defense. But he is 233 pounds, and the Ravens figure to test him early in this one.

- Mix and match. Broncos coach John Fox has said the team intends to use all hands on deck at running back, and this will be the first regular-season glimpse at the plan. They all bring a little something different to the mix: Montee Ball is a more traditional early-down back, Ronnie Hillman has speed and big-play potential and Knowshon Moreno is still more comfortable than the other two as a receiver out of the backfield and as a blocker in pass protection. But no matter who has the ball, the Broncos want more impact in the ground game and hope to stress defenses outside the numbers more than they did last season.

- Rahim Moore. The safety had a far better season in 2012 than the only play anyone wants to talk about would indicate, and some of his teammates owe him plenty for taking the heat after the playoff loss when mistakes were made all over the formation that night, including Tony Carter giving Jacoby Jones a free release off the line of scrimmage on the fateful play. But some offensive coordinators believe Moore is a little too overzealous in his pursuit of the ball at times and can be reeled in with play-action. The Ravens will test him, and Moore, who had a quality preseason, will have to play with discipline.

- Trindon Holliday. Say you had perhaps the greatest playoff performance of any kick returner in league history and nobody -- as in nobody -- really talks much about it. That’s Holliday after he became the only player in NFL postseason annals to take a kickoff and a punt back for touchdowns in the same game last January. If the Broncos get one more first down on offense in the final minutes of regulation or make one more tackle on defense, Holliday's efforts are the stuff of remember-when discussions for decades. Instead, those efforts were forgotten in the wake of the double-overtime loss. The Ravens have had some bobbles on special teams in the preseason -- a 74-yard punt return by Ted Ginn being the biggest -- and have plenty of new faces in the units after their post-Super Bowl makeover.

Double Coverage: Ravens at Broncos

By Jamison Hensley and Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
September 4, 2013

It was 236 days ago when Joe Flacco threw that fateful, 70-yard touchdown pass to Jacoby Jones, leading the Baltimore Ravens to a double-overtime playoff win at the Denver Broncos. The Ravens went on to win the Super Bowl, and the Broncos were left to think of what might have been. Flacco and the Ravens return to Denver's Sports Authority Stadium on Thursday night to kick off the 2013 season in a rematch of two of the top teams in the AFC.

The stakes are different, and so are the teams. Gone are Ray Lewis, Ed Reed and Anquan Boldin from the Ravens. Baltimore is expected to have 10 different starters from the team that hoisted up the Lombardi trophy, and that doesn't include former Broncos defensive standout Elvis Dumervil, who is expected to play in passing situations.

The Broncos won't have Dumervil or Von Miller, who has been suspended for six games, rushing after Flacco this time. But Peyton Manning is back, along with the addition of Wes Welker to an already dangerous wide receiver group.

Broncos team reporter Jeff Legwold and Ravens team reporter Jamison Hensley discuss whether the opener will be a repeat of that memorable AFC divisional playoff game.

Hensley: Much has been made of the 50-foot Flacco banner hanging at the Broncos' stadium. Flacco has embraced the hate, saying it's not a bad thing for opposing fans to dislike you. The Ravens' focus, as it has been all offseason, has been to move forward. It's the start of a different era in many ways for the Ravens in their first game without Lewis and Reed. But it's easier to move forward when you're the ones sitting on top of the football world. How much will the "revenge factor" play into this game for the Broncos?

Legwold: Broncos coach John Fox, much like John Harbaugh with his "What's Important Now" mantra to leave the championship season behind, has tried to leave the past in the past. But questions about the kneel-down in the waning seconds despite Manning at quarterback and two timeouts in hand, as well as a third-and-7 running play late in the game, have trailed him all through the offseason. A lot of the Broncos players are willing to say memories of the playoff loss pushed them through the tedium of May and June. But over the past two

weeks, they've stuck to the script -- that it's a new year, a new team -- but deep down they all know they let a potential Super Bowl trip, home-field advantage and a seven-point lead with less than a minute to play get away. And Dumervil's departure does add a little spice as well. How has Dumervil fit in and what kind of year do you think he'll have?

Hensley: Terrell Suggs has talked about Dumervil having the right mentality to play for the Ravens, and Harbaugh commented how Dumervil is already taking a leadership role. He really is a perfect fit for the Ravens on the field, too, where they have never had an elite pass-rusher to pair with Suggs. Over the past six seasons, Suggs has had only one teammate record more than seven sacks in a season. And being a pass-rusher is Dumervil's primary role. The Ravens will use Courtney Upshaw on early downs to set the edge against the run, which should keep Dumervil's legs fresh in pass-rushing situations. The Ravens have a familiarity with Dumervil because inside linebackers coach Don Martindale was Denver's defensive coordinator in 2010 and was Dumervil's position coach in 2009, when the linebacker-end led the NFL with 17 sacks. Baltimore is catching a break Thursday night with Dumervil now wearing purple and Miller serving his suspension. How are the Broncos going to generate a pass rush on Flacco?

Legwold: That is the $380,687.50 question, which is how much of Miller's base salary he'll surrender during the six-game suspension. But without Miller (18.5 sacks in '12) and Dumervil (11.0 last season), the Broncos will mix and match on a variety of down-and-distances. Derek Wolfe is a key player, because of his ability to play inside and outside along the defensive line and still create matchup problems. Jack Del Rio believes Wolfe is ready to take an enormous step in his development, and among the defensive linemen only Dumervil played more snaps up front than Wolfe did as a rookie last year. The Broncos will ask Shaun Phillips, who they think has plenty left to give after 9.5 sacks for the struggling Chargers last season, to be a spot rusher. And Robert Ayers, who was a first-round pick in 2009, has always said he could put up the sack numbers if given the chance. He's played through four different coordinators -- Del Rio is his first to be on the job for two consecutive seasons -- but has just 6.5 career sacks. Now is his time. On Flacco, how has he dealt with all that comes with a Lombardi trophy and a nine-digit contract?

Hensley: The money and increased notoriety haven't really affected Flacco. If anything, he's become more vocal. There was a playful trash-talking exchange during training camp between Flacco and Suggs, who told his quarterback that the defense's "swag is on a thousand million." Flacco responded: "Then what's my swag at? I get paid more than you. A lot more!" What has really changed is the wide receiver group around Flacco. This unfamiliarity led to four interceptions in six quarters of work this preseason. His top two receivers from a year ago won't be

there Thursday. Boldin was traded to San Francisco, and tight end Dennis Pitta is out indefinitely with a dislocated hip. They accounted for 36 receptions in the postseason, which was nearly half of Flacco's completions. That being said, it was Torrey Smith and Jones who did the most damage in the playoff game in Denver. The Ravens are hoping wide receiver Brandon Stokley can move the chains on third downs and tight end Ed Dickson (hamstring) can contribute in the season opener. There has to be more confidence in the Broncos' passing attack with Manning and his bunch of talented receivers.

Legwold: There is plenty of confidence in what the potential can be with Welker in the mix. The Broncos loved Stokley as a slot receiver, but Welker is younger and offers a bigger upside in terms of production. Welker will also have the best receivers to his outside shoulders in Eric Decker and Demaryius Thomas, the best combo he's had since the Patriots decided they didn't want Randy Moss around any longer. The 229-pound Thomas and the 214-pound Decker make the Broncos a tough matchup for any secondary. In the preseason, teams simply backed off into coverage and took their chances they could allow the catch and make the tackle before too much damage was done. The pace, especially at altitude, is a little something new as well. The Broncos ran 49 plays, excluding penalties, in the first half alone against the Rams in the preseason. They won't always go that fast, but if they get the look they want from a defense, they'll put the pedal to the floor and not allow a substitution. The key issue will be protection: Left tackle Ryan Clady missed plenty of the preseason after offseason surgery, and Denver has surrendered pressure in the middle of the field at times. The three-wide look is what the Broncos want their base formation to be on offense, but they can't do it if they can't protect Manning. It has to be a strange thing for a Baltimore defense that has been the franchise's signature for so long to have so many changes.

Hensley: There were a lot of changes to the Ravens' defense, but there were necessary changes. The Ravens weren't a top-10 defense for the first time since 2002. This defense had slumped to No. 17 in the NFL. It's never easy to part ways with the likes of Lewis and Reed. But the Ravens aren't replacing two Hall of Fame players in their prime. Baltimore had to replace two aging players who weren't the same playmakers from a few years ago. The additions of Dumervil, defensive lineman Chris Canty, linebacker Daryl Smith and safety Michael Huff have made this a stronger and more athletic defense. The Ravens' defense is going to be significantly better in two areas: stopping the run and pressuring the quarterback. The biggest concern, especially when you're starting two new safeties, is the communication in the secondary. One mistake there and Manning will burn you for a touchdown. How is the Broncos' secondary holding up this summer?

Legwold: The Broncos would feel better if Bailey felt better. Bailey did not practice

Sunday or Monday because of a left foot injury he suffered in the preseason loss in Seattle and is still a major question mark for Thursday's game. Bailey has been on the field for practice, but has not participated in any of the drills. The end result means Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie would likely line up much of the time in Bailey's left cornerback spot. Rodgers-Cromartie is one of the more athletic sidekicks the Broncos have had for Bailey since Bailey arrived in 2004. Chris Harris and Tony Carter, the player who gave Jones a free release off the line of scrimmage on the game-tying bomb last January, will play in the nickel and dime as well. But overall the Broncos kept 11 defensive backs -- six corners, five safeties -- and can mix and match for almost every situation. They have flexibility and use it, so every defensive back in uniform Thursday night could see some action in the defense.

Week 1 Bottom Line

The final word on Thursday's matchup at Sports Authority Field at Mile High:

MATCHUP ANALYSIS

Jamison Hensley: The Ravens' defense will be better than last years, but its going to take time for all the new parts to build chemistry, especially in the secondary. You cant have breakdowns against Manning because hes going to make you pay.	Jeff Legwold: Denver's pace on offense could affect a Ravens defense that hasn't played together very long. The Broncos will certainly miss Miller, and their base defense will be tested by the Ravens' heavier two-back, two-tight-end looks on offense, but I still see the Broncos opening strong.
Prediction: Broncos 31, Ravens 23	Prediction: Broncos 30, Ravens 20

Champ Bailey out for opener

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
September 4, 2013

The Denver Broncos went through their usual-day-before game work at their practice facility Wednesday and released their final injury report of the week. It contained no surprises as cornerback Champ Bailey, who has not practiced since suffering a left foot injury Aug. 17 in the preseason loss in Seattle, was listed as "out."

It means Bailey will miss the first season opener of his award-filled career. Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie is expected to start at Bailey's left cornerback spot Thursday night against the Ravens. Chris Harris and Tony Carter will play plenty as well.

Tight end Joel Dreessen (knee) and rookie running back C.J. Anderson (knee) -- neither practiced this week -- were both ruled out of the game as well. Guard Chris Kuper was listed as doubtful and is expected to be a gameday inactive.

Quarterback Brock Osweiler (left, non-throwing shoulder), defensive end Robert Ayers (Achilles/ankle), wide receiver Wes Welker (ankle) and left tackle Ryan Clady (shoulder) were all listed on the injury report through the week and all will be in uniform and play against the Ravens.

All four were formally listed as probable.

Broncos-Ravens matchup of the day

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
September 4, 2013

Ravens RB Ray Rice vs. Broncos LB Wesley Woodyard

The Ravens can be a difficult challenge for most any defense, not only because of the speed they put outside in the formation at wide receiver, but because they are proficient at a part of the game most offenses are drifting away from in these pass-happy times. The Ravens can throw for both consistency and impact out of heavier formations.

When they work out of their two-back and two-tight-end looks they get routinely bigger defensive personnel as the response. If a team tries to counter with a bigger nickel package, with three safeties among the five defensive backs, the Ravens put the ball in the air and if the team stays with a traditional nickel look (with three cornerbacks), the Ravens pound away in the run game.

And if the defense stays in a base look the Ravens can either play it straight with both backs in the backfield, or they open the formation a bit, putting a fullback or tight end in the slot, pulling one of the linebackers out of the middle of the field. While some teams, including the Broncos, go entire games without showing a two-back set, the Ravens had games last season when they lined up with two backs over three dozen times, including 38 times against the Redskins last December.

Many in the league believe getting Rice the ball more was one of the deciding factors in Ravens coach John Harbaugh’s decision to fire Cam Cameron as the team’s offensive coordinator just before the Ravens faced the Broncos last December and replaced him with Jim Caldwell. So, with this year’s tweaks to the offense still an unknown, the Ravens do like to work against base defenses because they feel like they can still routinely get Rice loose behind a big offensive line in the run game and then have the athletic advantage when they choose to put Rice in the pattern as a receiver against bigger defensive personnel.

The Ravens' cause is hurt at least some in this regard with tight end Dennis Pitta's injury, but they still have the ability to move the ball out of those packages.

Woodyard, in his new role as the middle linebacker in the base defense, will have to show he can stand up to the pound-it-out teams in the run game and figures to get tested in the season’s early going. He’s always been one of the Broncos' top choices

at linebacker in coverage, along with Danny Trevathan, but Rice's abilities as a receiver may force the Broncos to use a safety on him in coverage.

But Woodyard's role in slowing Rice down will have a lot to say about how things go Thursday night.

Dan Graziano's MVP Watch

By Dan Graziano
ESPN.com
September 4, 2013

It may not be on your mind just yet. You're more focused today on the injury reports, wondering who's going to be healthy enough to play for your favorite team (or your fantasy team!) in Week 1. But before long, you know you'll be wondering: "Should _____ be in the MVP conversation?"

So why not start it now?

It is my great pleasure to take over from Mike Sando the stewardship of ESPN.com's weekly individual-performance NFL horse race. Each week, you can check back here to see who's moving up and who's moving down in contention for the 2013 NFL MVP award. It's a race that annually captures the imaginations of NFL fans as they debate who's more essential to his team's success, how much more important quarterback is than any other position, whether a player on a non-contending team can really be considered "most valuable."

This list will be based on 2013 performance, and of course there is none yet from which to draw. So as a means of kicking off the 2013 MVP Watch, I present to you one man's opinion on which players are most likely to win it, and why. Enjoy.

1 Peyton Manning

QB

Denver Broncos

NEXT: 9/5 vs. BAL

ODDS: 3/1

CMP: 400

ATT: 583

PCT: 68.6

YDS: 4,659

TD: 37

INT: 11

ANALYSIS

The only four-time winner in the award's history, Manning finished second last year and is set up to make a run at it again in 2013. Denver looks like a top AFC team in a soft division with a relatively easy path to the playoffs. Elvis Dumervil's departure and Von Miller's suspension have banged up the defense, meaning it may fall to Manning and the offense to put up even more points this year. But the addition of longtime Tom Brady favorite Wes Welker to the wide receiver corps should put Manning in position to do just that. The numbers, the pedigree and the team's likely success should conspire to make Manning a leading candidate all season long.

2 Aaron Rodgers

QB

Green Bay Packers

NEXT: 9/8 at SF

ODDS: 7/1

CMP: 371

ATT: 552

PCT: 67.2

YDS: 4,295

TD: 39

INT: 8

ANALYSIS

He's the best in the game right now at the position that's won the award nine of the past 12 years. Rodgers has to contend with changes in his receiving corps, as Greg Jennings and Donald Driver are gone (and ripping him publicly) and Jordy Nelson is dealing with physical issues. And the Packers seem to want to incorporate the run game more. But there's no quarterback more accurate than Rodgers, and the 2011 MVP is Green Bay's best bet if it needs to rely on someone to get the Packers back into the playoffs.

3 Matt Ryan

QB

Atlanta Falcons

NEXT: 9/8 at NO

ODDS: 8/1

CMP: 422

ATT: 615

PCT: 68.6

YDS: 4,719

TD: 32

INT: 14

ANALYSIS

Huge things are expected of the Falcons, who finally won a playoff game but fell a game short of the Super Bowl. They are loaded up for a run at it all, having bolstered the run game around Ryan and his brilliant receivers. Ryan and the Falcons were the top team in the league, record-wise, throughout the 2012 regular season, and when you are the quarterback of a team that makes that claim, you are a candidate. Ryan is 28, in his prime and has increased his passing yards, touchdowns and passer rating in each of the past three seasons. The offense is built around him to make him an MVP candidate.

4 Tom Brady

QB

New England Patriots

NEXT: 9/8 at BUF

ODDS: 10/1

CMP: 401

ATT: 637

PCT: 63.0

YDS: 4,827

TD: 34

INT: 8

ANALYSIS

Like the Broncos, the Patriots should build a strong record and coast into the playoffs in an easy division. Brady, who won the award in 2007 and 2010, has a serious challenge ahead of him with Welker, Aaron Hernandez and so much of his 2012 receiving corps gone. But he's made magic before when things changed around him, and if he has a big year throwing to Danny Amendola and Kenbrell Thompkins, it's going to be hard to convince anyone he's not the most valuable player in the league.

5 Adrian Peterson

RB

Minnesota Vikings

NEXT: 9/8 at DET

ODDS: 12/1

ATT: 348

YDS: 2,097

AVG: 6.0

LNG: 82

TD: 12

ANALYSIS

The defending champ. Peterson broke a five-year quarterback stranglehold on this award with a historic year that saw him nearly break the NFL's single-season rushing record. He WAS the Vikings' offense as Minnesota made a surprise run to the playoffs. And he did it all on a rebuilt knee, which added an aura of mysticism to the whole thing that likely helped his case. For Peterson to win the award again, all of those things (minus the knee thing) would probably have to happen again. I wouldn't be surprised to see him repeat what he did. The bigger question may be whether the Vikings can really be a playoff team again.

6 J.J. Watt

DE

Houston Texans

NEXT: 9/9 at SD

ODDS: 18/1

TACK: 69

AST: 12

SACK: 20.5

FF: 4

FR: 2

PD: 16

ANALYSIS

The best defensive player in the league plays on the AFC's version of the Falcons -- a team that has been feeling very close for a couple of years now but can't knock down that door to serious Super Bowl contention. Houston should roll in yet another weak-looking AFC division, and Watt should be right in the middle of it. But the last defensive player to win this award was Lawrence Taylor in 1986. That's a lot of history to swat down.

7 Drew Brees

QB

New Orleans Saints

NEXT: 9/8 vs. ATL

ODDS: 20/1

CMP: 422

ATT: 670

PCT: 63.0

YDS: 5,177

TD: 43

INT: 19

ANALYSIS

The return of coach Sean Payton should invigorate the Saints, and Brees is at his best when the two of them are working together. But even without Payton last year, and with his lowest completion percentage since 2003, Brees went over 5,000 yards passing for the third time in his career and over 40 touchdown passes for the second year in a row. On the numbers, Brees will always be an MVP candidate. The issue in New Orleans is whether the Saints' historically awful defense can improve enough to make them contenders. Non-contenders have a hard time chucking their way into MVP contention.

8 Calvin Johnson

WR

Detroit Lions

NEXT: 9/8 vs. MIN

ODDS: 22/1

REC: 122

TGTS: 205

YDS: 1,964

AVG: 16.1

LNG: 53

TD: 5

ANALYSIS

You think it's tough for a defensive player to win the award? No wide receiver has EVER won it. And truth be told, if Johnson has a big enough year to win it, the more likely candidate is Detroit quarterback Matthew Stafford. Johnson's presence on this list is a testament to his personal greatness. He set the NFL's single-season record last year for receiving yards, and as any fantasy writer will tell you, he was tackled or pushed out of bounds inside the 5-yard line 10 times. If he can convert those, and if the Lions rebound to their 2011 playoff form, you'll have a wide receiver making a strong case.

9 Robert Griffin III

QB

Washington Redskins

NEXT: 9/9 vs. PHI

ODDS: 25/1

CMP: 258

ATT: 393

: 65.6

YDS: 3,200

TD: 20

INT: 5

ANALYSIS

His biggest obstacle is health. Griffin is coming off of January knee surgery and hasn't practiced much or played at all since then. Even if he's 100 percent to start the season, which seems unlikely, questions remain about his ability to make it all the way through the season fully healthy and as effective as he was last year. Questions remain about how much he'll run compared to last year. Lots of questions. But if the Redskins win the NFC East again, it'll be because Griffin had an MVP-worthy season.

10 Tony Romo

QB

Dallas Cowboys

NEXT: 9/8 vs. NYG

ODDS: 40/1

CMP: 425

ATT: 648

PCT: 65.6

YDS: 4,903

TD: 28

INT: 19

ANALYSIS

Yes, I could have put any number of less controversial names here. But where's the fun in that? I just think the Cowboys have a chance to be very good this year. Romo himself was very good last year... until he threw three interceptions in the division-deciding Week 17 game in Washington. One of these years, he's not going to screw up that big game. And with an emerging Dez Bryant to throw to, his numbers are going to be MVP-caliber. If this is the year Dallas delivers, Romo is going to be a big reason, and a worthy candidate for MVP.

Our experts' NFL predictions for 2013

By ESPN.com
September 3, 2013

Our national writers have predicted the 2013 division winners, wild cards, individual award winners, conference champions and Super Bowl titlist. AFC writers | NFC writers

NFL Season Predictions

	Bill Barnwell, Grantland	Jeffri Chadiha, ESPN.com	John Clayton, ESPN.com	David Fleming, ESPN.com
SUPER BOWL CHAMPION	Seahawks	49ers	Broncos	Packers
AFC East	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots
AFC North	Steelers	Bengals	Bengals	Bengals
AFC South	Texans	Texans	Texans	Texans
AFC West	Chiefs	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos
AFC wild cards	Broncos, Bengals	Ravens, Chiefs	Chiefs, Ravens	Chiefs, Colts
NFC East	Giants	Redskins	Redskins	Redskins
NFC North	Packers	Packers	Packers	Packers
NFC South	Buccaneers	Falcons	Falcons	Falcons
NFC West	Seahawks	49ers	Seahawks	Seahawks
NFC wild cards	49ers, Lions	Seahawks, Bears	49ers, Saints	49ers, Eagles
AFC champion	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos
NFC champion	Seahawks	49ers	Falcons	Packers

	Bill Barnwell, Grantland	Jeffri Chadiha, ESPN.com	John Clayton, ESPN.com	David Fleming, ESPN.com
Coach of the year	Andy Reid	Andy Reid	Marvin Lewis	Andy Reid
MVP	Russell Wilson	Peyton Manning	Peyton Manning	Michael Vick
Offensive ROY	Tavon Austin	Tavon Austin	Tavon Austin	Giovani Bernard
Defensive ROY	Kenny Vaccaro	Barkevious Mingo	Alec Ogletree	Ziggy Ansah

NFL Season Predictions

	Ashley Fox, ESPN.com	KC Joyner, ESPN Insider	Rick Reilly, ESPN.com	Mike Sando, ESPN Insider
SUPER BOWL CHAMPION	Falcons	Broncos	Broncos	Seahawks
AFC East	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots
AFC North	Ravens	Bengals	Bengals	Ravens
AFC South	Texans	Texans	Texans	Texans
AFC West	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos
AFC wild cards	Chiefs, Colts	Ravens, Dolphins	Ravens, Colts	Steelers, Bengals
NFC East	Redskins	Cowboys	Giants	Giants
NFC North	Packers	Packers	Packers	Packers
NFC South	Falcons	Falcons	Falcons	Falcons
NFC West	Seahawks	Seahawks	49ers	Seahawks
NFC wild cards	49ers, Saints	49ers, Redskins	Seahawks, Redskins	49ers, Bears
AFC champion	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Texans

	Ashley Fox, ESPN.com	KC Joyner, ESPN Insider	Rick Reilly, ESPN.com	Mike Sando, ESPN Insider
NFC champion	Falcons	Falcons	Seahawks	Seahawks
Coach of the year	Andy Reid	Rob Chudzinski	Marvin Lewis	John Harbaugh
MVP	Peyton Manning	Aaron Rodgers	Peyton Manning	Aaron Rodgers
Offensive ROY	Tavon Austin	Eddie Lacy	Tavon Austin	Tavon Austin
Defensive ROY	Tyrann Mathieu	Tyrann Mathieu	Matt Elam	Jarvis Jones

NFL Season Predictions

	Adam Schefter, ESPN	Kevin Seifert, ESPN.com	Seth Wickersham, ESPN The Magazine	Matt Williamson, ESPN.com
SUPER BOWL CHAMPION	Seahawks	49ers	Falcons	Packers
AFC East	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots
AFC North	Bengals	Ravens	Ravens	Ravens
AFC South	Texans	Texans	Texans	Texans
AFC West	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos
AFC wild cards	Colts, Steelers	Bengals, Colts	Bengals, Colts	Bengals, Steelers
NFC East	Cowboys	Giants	Giants	Redskins
NFC North	Packers	Packers	Packers	Packers
NFC South	Falcons	Falcons	Falcons	Saints
NFC West	Seahawks	49ers	49ers	Seahawks

	Adam Schefter, ESPN	Kevin Seifert, ESPN.com	Seth Wickersham, ESPN The Magazine	Matt Williamson, ESPN.com
NFC wild cards	49ers, Saints	Seahawks, Saints	Seahawks, Saints	49ers, Bears
AFC champion	Patriots	Texans	Colts	Patriots
NFC champion	Seahawks	49ers	Falcons	Packers
Coach of the year	Marvin Lewis	Jim Harbaugh	Mike Smith	Sean Payton
MVP	Tom Brady	Colin Kaepernick	Matt Ryan	Aaron Rodgers
Offensive ROY	Eddie Lacy	Tavon Austin	Eric Fisher	Eddie Lacy
Defensive ROY	Tyrann Mathieu	Ziggy Ansah	Ziggy Ansah	Alec Ogletree

Rare dynamic: Elway, Manning form special bond

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
September 5, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — The dining room at Augusta National Golf Club should be the type of place where even the most recognizable of American sports royalty can blend in, enjoy a steak or some good old-fashioned Southern comfort food and a cocktail after a round of golf.

It's a buttoned-up place, where members and guests aren't typically fazed by the wealth or celebrity of their fellow diners.

In his half-dozen or so previous visits as a guest to Augusta, Denver Broncos coach John Fox has delighted in the golf and the dinner conversation, but he never saw anything like the scene in May, when he sat down to eat with his companions, who happened to be two of the best quarterbacks in NFL history.

As Peyton Manning and John Elway ate and drank and talked and laughed, they were approached, several times, by people wanting to pose for photographs.

"Usually people at Augusta, and especially in the meal room, are, what would be the word — curbed? Ray Floyd could be there. Jack Nicklaus could be there," Fox said. "Between the two of them, people actually took pictures. I've never seen that before."

Manning, Elway and Fox escaped Denver for a guys' weekend, invited to Augusta by a friend of Fox. They shared a cabin and played three rounds of golf over two days. It was a social trip, sure, but also a rare chance for Elway and Manning to spend long hours together, talking Broncos football and trying like hell to beat each other on the golf course.

"What I learned is he is inherently competitive. There's a certain seriousness that I take to my golf game, that I like to play with. And so when you play with a guy that has the same type of thing, that makes it that much more enjoyable, because it means something," Elway told USA TODAY Sports. "Instead of just telling jokes and laughing all the way around, you have the competitive side with two people who want to play well. There's a serious edge. We have fun doing it, but there's an edge."

Elway left Augusta with bragging rights — winning two rounds to Manning's one — but Manning has at least one trump card back in Colorado. Elway, despite playing thousands of rounds of golf on courses across the state, has never sunk a hole-in-one here. Manning did it in his first round as a member at the Castle Pines course in Castle Rock this year.

The NFL careers of Elway and Manning overlapped by one season, in 1998. But Elway's Super Bowl champion Broncos and Manning's 3-13 Indianapolis Colts didn't face each other. Their football lives didn't intersect until last year, when Elway — in his second year as the Broncos' top football executive — lured Manning to Denver to restart his Hall of Fame career after he had been sidelined by neck surgeries and then released by the Colts.

The union has created one of the most interesting dynamics in professional sports, with a pair of pre-eminent quarterbacks teaming up, one on the field and one in the front office, with the lone goal of winning a Super Bowl.

"It's pretty unique and pretty special. You're talking about two of the greatest players to ever play the game and at the premier position," said former Broncos safety John Lynch, a longtime friend of Elway. "That's what was so cool about this process was that you've got these two guys working together to try to achieve something."

Inside the Broncos training facility, seeing Manning in the locker room and Elway in his office upstairs has become so commonplace that most players and coaches have become almost immune to the historical significance of the pairing.

Together they have 30 years' experience as a starting quarterback (Elway retired after his 16th year, while Manning is starting his 15th healthy year), five league MVP awards, 21 Pro Bowl selections, seven Super Bowl appearances, three Super Bowl wins and two Super Bowl MVP trophies.

Broncos CB Champ Bailey will not play in season opener

By Lindsay H. Jones
USA TODAY Sports
September 4, 2013

DENVER – Denver Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey will not play in Thursday's season-opener against Baltimore.

The cornerback has been ruled out because of a sprained foot, a person with knowledge of Bailey's status told USA TODAY Sports on Wednesday.

The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the Broncos have not released their final injury report.

Bailey sprained his foot in the Broncos' second preseason game, on Aug. 17 at Seattle, and has been unable to practice since. He and the team were hoping there was a chance he would be ready for the Sept. 5 opener, but he still felt pain in the foot this week.

The Broncos will have 10 days between the Baltimore game and their next game at the Giants giving Bailey more time to recover.

With Bailey out of the lineup on Thursday, third-year cornerback Chris Harris will start at left cornerback, with free agent addition Domonique Rodgers-Cromartie making his Denver debut at right corner. Tony Carter will be the Broncos' third cornerback in the nickel package.

Bailey earlier this week told reporters he was hoping he could play against the Ravens in order to get some redemption for his performance against Baltimore in the divisional playoffs, when he was beaten deep twice for touchdowns by receiver Torrey Smith.

USA TODAY Sports' 2013 NFL predictions

By USA TODAY Sports
September 4, 2013

The 2013 NFL season is finally here, and Super Bowl XLVIII will be here before you know it.

If you believe USA TODAY Sports' NFL experts, there may be a good chance Russell Wilson's Seattle Seahawks and Peyton Manning's Denver Broncos will meet in East Rutherford, N.J., next February in the first Super Bowl scheduled at a cold weather outdoor site.

We also like four-time MVP Manning to rack up more personal hardware and think he might be playing with a special rookie.

Here are the teams and individuals we expect big things from in 2013.

2013 NFL preseason predictions

	Jarrett Bell	Jim Corbett	Nate Davis	Lindsay H. Jones	Pete O'Brien	Tom Pelissero
AFC East winner	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots
AFC North winner	Ravens	Bengals	Bengals	Ravens	Ravens	Bengals
AFC South winner	Colts	Texans	Texans	Texans	Texans	Colts
AFC West winner	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos
AFC wild card 1	Texans	Ravens	Steelers	Bengals	Dolphins	Chiefs

AFC wild card 2	Steelers	Colts	Chiefs	Chiefs	Chiefs	Texans
NFC East winner	Cowboys	Redskins	Giants	Giants	Cowboys	Cowboys
NFC North winner	Lions	Packers	Packers	Packers	Packers	Packers
NFC South winner	Falcons	Falcons	Falcons	Falcons	Buccaneers	Falcons
NFC West winner	49ers	Seahawks	Seahawks	Seahawks	49ers	49ers
NFC wild card 1	Saints	49ers	49ers	49ers	Seahawks	Seahawks
NFC wild card 2	Seahawks	Saints	Saints	Redskins	Falcons	Rams
AFC champion	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos
NFC champion	49ers	Falcons	Seahawks	Seahawks	49ers	Seahawks
Super Bowl XLVIII champion	Broncos	Falcons	Seahawks	Broncos	49ers	Seahawks
Super Bowl MVP	Peyton Manning	Matt Ryan	Russell Wilson	Peyton Manning	Colin Kaepernick	Russell Wilson

NFL MVP	Drew Brees	Peyton Manning	Aaron Rodgers	Tom Brady	Peyton Manning	Peyton Manning
Offensive player of the year	Adrian Peterson	Drew Brees	Calvin Johnson	Aaron Rodgers	Chris Johnson	Tony Romo
Defensive player of the year	Terrell Suggs	J.J. Watt	J.J. Watt	J.J. Watt	Aldon Smith	Cameron Wake
Offensive rookie of the year	Aaron Dobson	Montee Ball	Montee Ball	Giovani Bernard	Montee Ball	Giovani Bernard
Defensive rookie of the year	Jarvis Jones	Jarvis Jones	Jon Bostic	Ziggy Ansah	Alec Ogletree	Desmond Trufant
Coach of theyear	Jim Harbaugh	Sean Payton	Andy Reid	Pete Carroll	Jim Harbaugh	Bill Belichick
Comeback player of the year	Darrelle Revis	Robert Griffin III	Darrelle Revis	Darrelle Revis	Darrelle Revis	Brian Cushing

USA TODAY Sports' Week 1 NFL predictions

By USA TODAY Sports
September 4, 2013

Week 1 of the 2013 NFL season not only marks the return of pro football, it will be the first time that New Orleans Saints coach Sean Payton has been on a sideline since his team lost a heartbreaking thriller to the San Francisco 49ers in the 2011 divisional playoffs.

His season-long suspension for the Bountygate scandal served, Payton will be back under the headset in front of the hometown fans as the Saints host their bitter NFC South rivals, the Atlanta Falcons.

Atlanta has won the division and the NFC's top seed two of the past three seasons. But they're only 1-6 in the Superdome since Payton was hired prior to the 2006 season, including a 31-27 defeat last November which Payton presumably watched from his couch.

Sunday's showdown will provide an early barometer for divisional supremacy in one of the weekend's most high anticipated and debated contests.

	Jarrett Bell	Jim Corbett	Nate Davis	Lindsay H. Jones	Pete O'Brien	Tom Pelissero	Simon Samano
2013 regular season	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Lock of the week	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Baltimore at Denver	Ravens	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos
New	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots

England at Buffalo							
Cincinnati at Chicago	Bengals	Bengals	Bengals	Bengals	Bears	Bears	Bengals
Miami at Cleveland	Browns	Dolphins	Browns	Browns	Dolphins	Dolphins	Browns
Atlanta at New Orleans	Saints	Falcons	Saints	Falcons	Falcons	Falcons	Saints
Tampa Bay at N.Y. Jets	Bucs	Bucs	Bucs	Bucs	Bucs	Bucs	Bucs
Tennessee at Pittsburgh	Steelers	Steelers	Steelers	Steelers	Steelers	Steelers	Steelers
Minnesota at Detroit	Lions	Vikings	Vikings	Lions	Lions	Lions	Lions
Oakland at Indianapolis	Colts	Colts	Colts	Colts	Colts	Colts	Colts
Seattle at Carolina	Panthers	Seahawks	Seahawks	Seahawks	Seahawks	Seahawks	Panthers

Kansas City at Jacksonville	Chiefs	Chiefs	Chiefs	Chiefs	Chiefs	Chiefs	Chiefs
Arizona at St. Louis	Rams	Rams	Rams	Rams	Rams	Rams	Rams
Green Bay at San Francisco	49ers	49ers	49ers	49ers	49ers	49ers	49ers
N.Y. Giants at Dallas	Cowboys	Cowboys	Cowboys	Giants	Cowboys	Cowboys	Cowboys
Philadelphia at Washington	Redskins	Redskins	Eagles	Redskins	Redskins	Redskins	Redskins
Houston at San Diego	Texans	Texans	Texans	Texans	Texans	Texans	Texans
Preseason Super Bowl Picks	Jarrett Bell	Jim Corbett	Nate Davis	Lindsay H. Jones	Pete O'Brien	Tom Pelissero	Simon Samano
AFC champion	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Bengals
NFC champion	49ers	Falcons	Seahawks	Seahawks	49ers	Seahawks	49ers

Super Bowl XLVIII champion	Broncos	Falcons	Seahawks	Broncos	49ers	Seahawks	49ers
Record book	Jarrett Bell	Jim Corbett	Nate Davis	Lindsay H. Jones	Pete O'Brien	Tom Pelissero	Simon Samano
2012 regular season	168-87-1 (.658)	166-89-1 (.650)	174-81-1 (.682)	64-32 (.667)	168-87-1 (.658)	--	175-80-1 (.686)
2011 regular season	169-87 (.660)	170-86 (.664)	171-85 (.668)	--	169-87 (.660)	--	--
2010 regular season	156-100 (.609)	160-96 (.625)	168-88 (.656)	--	162-94 (.633)	--	--
2009 regular season	169-87 (.660)	163-93 (.637)	173-83 (.676)	--	176-80 (.688)	--	--
2008 regular season	161-94-1 (.631)	161-94-1 (.631)	170-85-1 (.666)	--	--	--	--
2007 regular season	163-93 (.637)	--	174-82 (.680)	--	--	--	--
2006 regular season	143-113 (.559)	--	158-98 (.617)	--	--	--	--
2005 regular	156-100	--	172-84	--	--	--	--

season (.609) (.672)

Note:Picks are made straight up,not against the spread.

Broncos will try three-headed RB

By Mike Garafolo
FOXSports.com
September 4, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo.
Montee Ball said there's no such thing as pass protection for running backs in high school. In college, he was merely introduced to it.

The Denver Broncos' rookie running back has quickly learned that, at the NFL level, taking on pass rushers is nearly as important as carrying the ball.

"My problem is I'm coming from Wisconsin, a power school, and I had 900 carries in four years. Whenever I was out on the field, I was getting the ball a majority of the time," Ball told FOX Sports this week. "But with this offense and No. 18..."

Ball didn't finish that sentence with words. Just an exhale. That said it all.

As the Broncos prepare for Thursday's NFL regular-season opener against the defending Super Bowl champion Baltimore Ravens, it's clear one of the big keys to their offense will be the play of their running backs following the departure of Willis McGahee.

The wide receivers and linemen have had success at this level before. And "No. 18" - Peyton Manning - figures to be even better this season after one year of getting acclimated to his new surroundings and getting healthier. But in the backfield, it's a rookie (Ball), a second-year player trying to prove he's not fumble-prone (Ronnie Hillman) and a veteran trying to show he can run and stay healthy (Knowshon Moreno).

Sources have told FOX Sports all three will play in a running-back-by-committee approach. The team is high on Ball, whom they drafted in the second round in April, but protecting Manning is a priority, so expect to see plenty of Moreno and Hillman against Baltimore and beyond - until Ball proves he can protect a commodity even he knows is much more important than him.

"He's not RG3. He sets his feet and gets the pass off," Ball said when asked about protecting a stationary quarterback. "Great things happen downfield when you protect him. That's the thing. When I mess up, I understand getting yelled at because you don't want a big hit on him. He's extremely valuable. Big plays happen downfield when everybody does their job."

Manning isn't shy about doing the yelling, either.

"Oh yeah, for sure. We're all grown men," Ball said. "We have our own debriefing meetings where players fess up to making mistakes. That's how you grow, that's how you build chemistry and head toward success as a team. ... It's better to fess up than just sit in the back of the room with your head down."

Hillman's head isn't down after fumbling twice in the preseason.

“I don’t really have fumbling problems; it was just two bad weeks," he said. "It’s done.”

Hillman fumbled twice last season. If he can protect the ball, he'll have more carries than the 84 he got in 2012. He's listed as the starter right now on the team's depth chart, with Ball behind him and Moreno as the third-stringer. But don't pay too much attention to that ranking order, as Moreno could be the starter and play the most against Baltimore, whose edge rushers (including former Bronco Elvis Dumervil) Denver will be blocking and chipping with their backs.

Expect all three backs to play, which could challenge a rookie used to getting a lot of carries.

"I guess in a way, yeah, getting in the flow, getting in rhythm, getting lathered up is a challenge, if they're doing the by-committee thing," Ball said. "But we talked about it and we like it. Whoever the hot hand is, whoever is doing the right things the entire game is going to be out there to play. It's a great decision by the coaches."

THE DUKE

{ Denver's most-beloved sports figure still reigns }

THE MILE HIGH INTERVIEW

JOHN ELWAY

FOREWORD BY DOUG OTTEWILL

INTERVIEW BY WOODY PAIGE

When Woody Paige stated his case for John Elway's induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, he didn't give the typically lengthy, statistically driven, personally biased speech to the selection committee; those campaigns, in fact, are the norm.

Instead, Paige kept things appropriately short and sweet.

"Gentlemen, I give you John Elway."

That's all he said. As legend tells it, that speech earned Paige a standing ovation from the committee members. The group appreciated, and applauded, the brevity. And why wouldn't they? There's no sense in wasting time "selling" Elway to anyone who knows the game of football.

So, as I offer prelude to an incredibly fascinating conversation between two of Denver's most-iconic sports figures, I'll take Paige's lead and waste neither time nor words.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you John Elway and Woody Paige. Enjoy. ➔

Would it be fair to say that one of your best achievements is the fact that you have only one draft choice who is not among the 85 guys who entered this year's camp? You go back through the years, and there are always some flubs. We're talking about three drafts and approximately 25 guys. Is that one of your best achievements?

We've done a good job in the draft. We've added some quality college free agents that have really come in and helped us, which is big. And then, the mix that we've had with the veterans, we've been able to put it together, mesh it all together. It's been good. On the personnel side we've all worked together, and it's been a good combination of ideas, and we've gotten it to where it's gotten. I guess I don't feel, even though I feel good about where we are, that we've really done anything yet. Even though we were 13-3 last year, and that was fine, I still don't feel like we've done anything yet. So, therefore I don't count it as an accomplishment, even though it looks good on paper. Now, I'd like to see it go work on the field. Sure, you look at it on paper and it looks pretty good. But you don't win games on paper.

Sure. But you know – from when you came here as player…

I would look at this, as a player coming in here, that I'd be excited and really feel like I had a chance to win a championship with the team we have, if we go out and play like we're capable of playing. And really, as a player, that's all you want – that opportunity to compete for a championship.



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JOHN ELWAY

THE MILE HIGH INTERVIEW BY WOODY PAIGE

When did you first feel that as a player?
When I started knowing about it? I think when you're young, you feel like you can come in and you're going to be able to win every year. Especially the way we did it. When Mike (Shanahan) got here, and then those teams – '96, '97 and '98 – those teams were capable of (it).

You were fearful, around '94 or '95, that…
…I was going to run out of time? Yea. That it was never ever going to get to the right spot. But, fortunately, it did.

I've asked Peyton Manning about it. He keeps telling me that there's a constant sense of urgency. I assume that extends over to you, not that you're going to give this up in a couple of years.
Well, a lot of people say, "You're about winning *now*." And I say, "No, we're not about winning now; we're about winning 'now on.'"

I like that.
Right? So, it is "now on." But we do want to win now. But we're also preparing – we're not selling out, we're not selling the future of the organization out for one, two, three or four years. We're going to build through that draft and continue to get good through the draft, and then try to plug in quality veterans as we see fit. But, you know, it's one year at a time, and this is the year that's right in front of us.

Someone asked me, "What does John really think about what happened in the playoff game?" And I said, "He probably feels the same way as when the Broncos lost to Jacksonville." It was kind of fluky when it happened. In the Jacksonville game, a guy wouldn't get his big fat ass off the field.
You know, the thing is, it was fluky, but the bottom line is you look at the way we played – and we didn't play well at all. It was a bad game – by far the worst game we played all year. So, I know everyone wants to point at one play, but we played terrible the whole game. We had plenty of opportunities to put the dagger in them – put the dagger in them and bury them – but couldn't ever do it.

As you talked about not accomplishing something, is that the most important aspect of this – the bigger the game, the better you've got to play?
Yes. The bottom line is that I wouldn't have been nearly as disappointed in that game if we would have played like we were capable of playing. To me, I look at it, and if we play like we're capable of playing and a fluke beats us, sure, I'd be disappointed, but it is what it is. The other team played better than you did. But the way we played, and we played so poorly, is what I don't like. That's what upsets me. We've got to learn from that and how we played that game. We have to play better in playoff situations.

"I know everyone wants to point at one play, but we played terrible the whole game. We had plenty of opportunities to put the dagger in them – put the dagger in them and bury them – but couldn't ever do it."

Who's the model for that? Would you say that the Pittsburgh Steelers of the '70s and '80s? They've continued on. The Cowboys, even though they've had a bad run? The Broncos from the '80s and '90s? Is there a model? The Steelers and Packers have done it by building through the draft and tacking on players.
It's also important who's pulling that trigger for you, too. You build around that trigger.

Don't say "trigger" again. The last time you said that, you said, "Pull the trigger, Tim."
Oh yeah. But, you know, the Steelers have done a great job. They've stuck to their philosophy and their name comes up every single year in the fact they're going to be competitive. And the Packers with Brett Favre. They had Favre for so long, and now (Aaron) Rodgers. Tom Brady in New England. So, that's what I look at – you look at those teams that have been consistently good over a period of time, you can look at that quarterback position. That's what they've had.

It's like the PGA Championship. Jim Furyk played great, but Jason Dufner just played better.
Right. (Furyk) has nothing to be ashamed of. When that happens, you've done everything you can.

Going back to what we were talking about, do you feel like you've given John Fox the materials to work with?
With the staff, (it's) working *with* them – that's why it's a great working relationship. But I think that John is happy with what he's been provided. Obviously, it's never going to be perfect, and they're (not) going to have everything they want, but for the most part, if you look at where we are, and if you look at it on paper, (the staff) has got to be as happy as any team in the league. You know, as far as looking at it on a piece of paper and saying, "We've got a chance to go out and compete," especially with the guy you've got pulling the trigger.



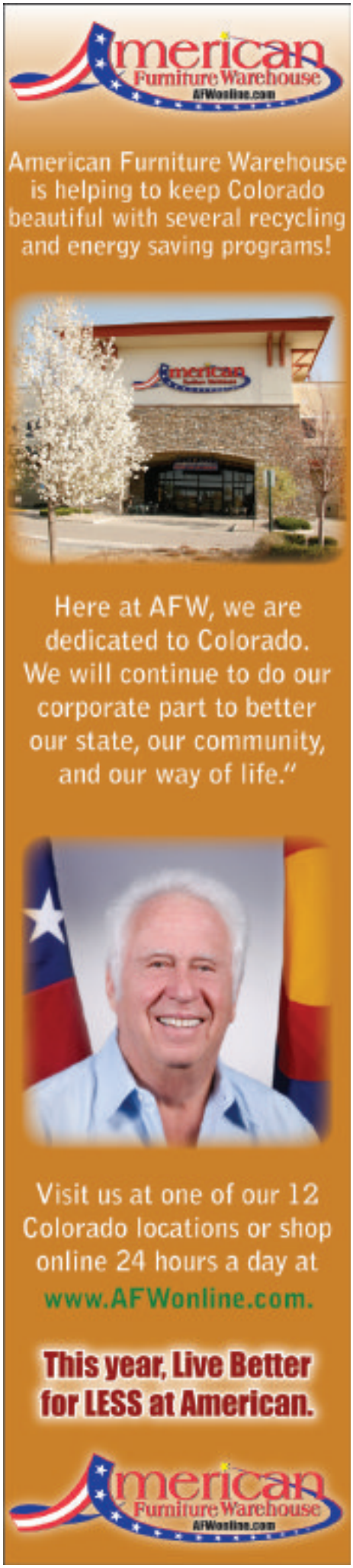
There's that pulling the trigger again. Again.

I said to Peyton, "You've been characterized now as the best regular-season quarterback of all-time." And he said, "Well, I don't think that's a compliment." I then said, "I don't think it was a compliment when John Elway was judged that way when he was 35 or so. He had more regular-season victories than anybody." He said that's not the legacy he wants. He has heard you talk about the way you "finish." You were talking about "pulling the trigger" – he said "finishing." Finishing the game. Finishing the season. Finishing his career. He wants to do that the way you did it. To me, that's an incredible compliment. Is there any point where you can continue to talk to him about what you went through at this age? At this age, you won. Is there a way he can accomplish all of that?

The reason why I won at that age was because it was the best team I'd ever had around me. So with Peyton at (this) age, my job is to try to put the best football team around him, to give him that opportunity. And the right staff. It's to give him the right opportunity and put the best people around him that I can. I'm proud of what we've put around him. I think we've done a good job with what's around him – what's up front, the weapons that are around him; defensively, we're playing good defense, too. So, I want to be able to give him that opportunity to finish like I did. And that's to have that team around him that I had around me. I think we're pretty darn close.

How meaningful is it that Stanford is now going to retire your number?

Obviously, I'm pretty thrilled. The older you get, when these things happen, the more special they become. It's a great honor because they haven't done a lot of that; there are only two other numbers retired – two





JOHN ELWAY

THE MILE HIGH INTERVIEW BY WOODY PAIGE



great players (Ernie Nevers and Jim Plunkett). With the school being what it is, plus what the football program and what it's become, plus the experience that I had there, it's really an honor to say the least.

At this year's Mizel Awards Dinner, the four Broncos Hall of Famers – you, Floyd Little, Shannon Sharpe and Gary Zimmerman – were all standing up on stage with Pat Bowlen. That was a great evening for me, to look at that and see the five of you all up there. The five of you really created something. Did you feel that way?
I know what you mean. To me, it's kind of the nostalgic side of it. You get a chance to really look back. You know, life moves so fast; you don't always take time to look back.

I hadn't really seen all of you together.
I think that was the first time we'd all been together like that. It brings back so many great memories. Obviously, I didn't play with Floyd, but still, so many great things have happened over the years. I just reflect. I don't think we take enough time to reflect sometimes.

Earlier in this conversation, you differentiated between "now" and "now on." I'm not trying to pressure you on any timeframe, but how are you doing? Are you in the moment?
Yes. I really am. Things are pretty good in my life. I enjoy doing this. I don't keep looking into the future; I enjoy doing what I'm doing. So, I don't want to put a timeframe on how long I'm going to do it. I enjoy it. I want to keep doing it.

So you could see yourself being 75 still doing this?
Not 75. No.

Sixty-five? Sixty-seven?
I could see myself being 60 and still doing it.

Isn't there a "next step," though?
Yes. But we'll see what happens. That's why I don't look too far into the future, because you never know what it's going to hold.

At this point in your life, can you ever see leaving Denver? Are you here permanently?
I like it here. Again, I don't (see that). But then again, you don't know what's going to happen. I never say never. You know what I mean? I guess I've never really thought of it.

How are your kids?
They're all really good. Jessie is in Oakland. She got a promotion. She's coaching. She was in the classroom for four years and now she's teaching teachers for a charter school system in California. Jordan got married this summer. She's a nurse for DPS. Jack is selling cars; he's learning the car business out in Ontario. Juliana just graduated from Arizona and she's in Scottsdale teaching preschool.

I have a daughter. Do you now feel like you've "got them all out of there," (so to speak)?
Yes and no. I'll tell you what; when I walked Jordan down the aisle, it got me. It was really – I'd never had that feeling before. Where, all of a sudden, it was like these kids are really growing up. I mean, even though they get older, and even when she said she was engaged, it really didn't get me – until I walked her down that aisle. That really got me. Really got me. This whole deal is changing; my kids are really grown up.

How will you be able to gauge this team at the beginning of the year? Is this team going to be hot out of the gate or is this a developing situation during the course of the season?
I think we're further along this year than we were last year at this point in time. Peyton is more familiar with the offense. The offensive line is more familiar with it. There's familiarity on both sides – last year we were putting in a new defense.

You've got the continuity of having John Fox. You've got Jack Del Rio.
And Adam Gase moved up; he was here, so it's the same offense. There are some different flairs, but continuity-wise, this is the first time we've had this in this in a long time – way before I was



here. We should be there. That should lead to the fact that we can get off to a quick start.

Adam seems like he's headed toward one day being a head coach in this league. He's got that mindset that Mike (Shanahan) brought in.
Yep. Bright. Smart. Works his ass off. Yes, he's got that potential.

You and I were together when you turned 50. You wanted to do this – that's what you told me then. But, could you believe that it really worked as it did? Some crappy things had to happen with Josh McDaniels, but you really wanted to do this whether it was here or with an expansion team.
Yes. That's why I got into the Arena Football League. Obviously, my preference was to do it here, but yeah, this is what I really wanted to do. I wanted to be in football. I didn't want to coach, because I watched my dad coach, and I didn't want to spend that time – the amount of time that has to be spent to be a coach. But I did want to be in football and be on the management side. So, this is exactly what I wanted to do. It is ironic, kind of tough, in that all the Broncos had to go through for this to all come to fruition. But the way it came about is what it is.

There's one thing that's undone for you, and that's winning it all on this level.
Yes. And that's what the goal is. I love having that goal, and being able to chase that goal. That's the most important thing. And the good thing is that we've got an owner that has the same mindset, so it allows us to get it done.

It won't be acceptable if it doesn't happen this year. That's a statement; it's not a question. But, will it be acceptable if it doesn't happen?
Sure. I guess I want us to make strides. The bottom line is that there are so many things that are out of your control. Because I know how hard it is to win it. You do have to get a little bit lucky. You've got to have things go your way. So, there are a lot of factors that go into being able to win a world championship. But I want to see us make strides over last year, and if we do that, get in and get into the playoffs – to be able to make strides over what we did last year is the key to this year's success.

Now that you've gone through it, are there surprises about this job? What are the things you couldn't comprehend going into it? You've been a CEO. You've been around football forever.
The hardest thing is having a personal relationship and also the money – dealing with money and personalities and trying to blend those. The last thing I want to do is be phony about it. So, it's a difficult blend for me; you're dealing with money, you're dealing with players, you're dealing with lives. But you're also trying to put a football team together. You realize that, in my position, everyone is not going to agree with what you're doing. It's a difficult thing to do. But you're also trying to get everybody under this roof going in the same direction and feeling good about it. But that's also the challenging part of it, which I enjoy.

At the end of the day, it's still fun.
Yeah. It's different. It's not like (being) a winning quarterback. It's the business part. I enjoy winning on the business side, and I enjoy winning on the football side. I enjoy being good at both. My job is to take care of Mr. Bowlen on the business side, and be smart with his money, but also give him the best football team I can on the football field. That to me is a great challenge, and I enjoy it. I enjoy that challenge because it's hard.

But you've been doing that since you quit football. You've been taking on that challenge on several different levels.
The only thing that's really different is the fact that you're dealing with humans rather than cars or steaks. How the human reacts to a certain situation, the car doesn't react the same way.

And the steak just lays there.
Right.

To read the entire Q&A with John Elway, log onto **milehighsports.com** and search "Elway." **MHS**



Klee: How to prepare Broncos for Ravens? Show them the tape

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
September 4, 2013

DENVER - Ready or not, the Ravens return.

As the Broncos make final preparations for the biggest, baddest season opener in club history, one more humble suggestion from the cheap seats:

Show them the tape, coach.

To make certain the Broncos are ready to beat the Ravens, this time on a sweaty Thursday night at Sports Authority Field, add this to the motivational handbook.

Replay the Mile High Mistake.

Press play through all the forgettable details of Ravens 38, Broncos 35 (2OT).

Blast the A/C in the video room until it drops to 14 degrees, the temperature at kickoff.

Pop in the DVD from the playoff game and send the players a last-minute reminder: That happened.

"If he were to do that, guys would get jacked," veteran running back Knowshon Moreno said when I asked him if this was a good idea.

Bingo!

"But I think without watching that tape of that game, guys are going to be jacked. Not only to play them; but to get this season going," Moreno continued. "We want to play fast. We want to start fast.

"I do think guys would be fired up if he showed that tape, though."

Double bingo!

How often do we hear this coachspeak after a game: We need to watch the tape first.

Well, here's the perfect opportunity to actually mean it.

"I've watched it tons of times. I'll watch it again," cornerback Chris Harris said. "I mean, the teams are different. But it's still the Ravens. They've still got (Joe) Flacco. They've still got Ray Rice. They've still got a lot of their core guys. That's the only thing I'm looking at.

"It's the Ravens, man. That's the last team that beat us. That's what matters."

This is no time for playing nice. You know the dirty birds from Baltimore won't.

These Broncos are nice. Maybe too nice, on defense. Who is the thumper? The big hitter other teams fear?

Wesley Woodyard. That's one. Derek Wolfe? You hope. Duke Ihenacho? Kayvon Webster? Maybe, maybe. Von Miller is out until Week 7 at Indianapolis.

I see a team that hums through a bad AFC West and excellent regular season to win 11, 12, maybe 13 games - on finesse, not force.

In their locker room Wednesday, I heard one Bronco tell another Bronco: "Stick with the clich?, man."

Hogwash.

The rematch of the Mile High Mistake is no place for clich?, or playing nice.

Every day in real life, we're told to uphold the politically correct. Be nice. Hug your neighbor, or a kitten. Don't offend anyone.

Sports should be the escape.

If the Broncos aren't offended by what transpired Jan. 12 - 235 days ago, if it seems like yesterday - their competitive spirit should be drug tested.

If the Broncos don't seem offended by the Ravens, show 'em the tape.

Show how the NFL's top pass rush sacked the Ravens quarterback only once.

Show how Miller was inches away from batting down Flacco's fling.

Show the clutch third-and-13 completion from Flacco (he's back, this time with a banner) to Dennis Pitta (he's back, but injured) from their 3-yard line.

Show how the Broncos wasted Trindon Holliday's twin touchdown returns.

Show Peyton Manning going 24 of 37 for 261 yards and three touchdowns in regulation and then taking a knee to accept overtime.

Show Jacoby Jones crossing the goal line.

"That is stunning," CBS analyst Dan Dierdorf said then.

My toes are frozen, I said then.

(Shoot), the crowd said then.

"I'm happy to be out there," safety Rahim Moore said Wednesday. "You never know when it's going to be your last day on this earth, on that field. You never know. Tomorrow is never promised."

Just once I want to hear a player tell us the next one isn't just another game.

Set free from the stoic Patriot Way, Wes Welker came close. He's new here, but the Ravens ended his season, too, in New England.

"It's just another game, but at the same time I don't think you can help having a little extra juice for this one, kicking off the season like this," Welker said.

The past 10 Super Bowl champs were 7-3 in their openers. To open their Super Bowl seasons in 1997 and 1998, the Broncos beat the Patriots (27-21) and the Chiefs (19-3). Neither came easy; neither will this one.

Moore will be glad when this game is over.

The Broncos, in general, will be glad to press forward. First, they should press rewind.

How did the Broncos lose to the Ravens? After 11 straight wins, they got comfortable.

Top executive John Elway said during the offseason he wants an "uncomfortable" feeling in this Broncos locker room.

What better way than this: Show them the tape.

RAMSEY: Turmoil could carry these Broncos straight to the Super Bowl

By David Ramsey
Colorado Springs Gazette
September 4, 2013

Questions surround the Denver Broncos. Von Miller suspended for six games. Offensive line in tatters. A mere suggestion of a running game.

These questions depress much of the state of Colorado. Following the Broncos serves as our state's collective obsession. Over most of the summer, the Broncos were clear favorites to ride to the Super Bowl, but now, as they prepare to tangle with the Ravens in the season opener, we're not so sure.

The Broncos have not resembled a Super Bowl team during the preseason, but here's a soothing thought as the opening kickoff approaches:

The past two Super Bowl champs often did not even resemble playoff teams.

The regular season is overrated. Over the past two seasons, the New England Patriots won 25 regular-season games. The Broncos won 21. The past two Super Bowl champs - the Giants and the Ravens - combined for 19 wins.

Heading into Christmas Eve in 2011, the Giants were 7-7 after enduring a three-game stretch in which their defense surrendered 123 points. The Giants looked unlikely to even make the playoffs.

In a four-game drive to the title, the Giants dropped the NFC's No. 2 seed (49ers) and No. 1 seed (Packers) before barely conquering the Patriots. The Giants once-porous defense allowed only 14 points per game in the playoffs. While the Giants struggled and bumbled, the Patriots enjoyed a breezy regular season.

Too breezy, as it turned out.

Last season, the Ravens opened the season with their best player, linebacker Terrell Suggs, sidelined with a torn Achilles tendon. Fellow linebacker Ray Lewis suffered from an ailment known as old age.

The Ravens stumbled through a stretch when they lost four of five games. They got pulverized by 30 points against the Texans. But the trials toughened the Ravens, who blended and revived when it mattered most.

Baltimore seemed to have no hope when it invaded Denver on Jan. 12. The Broncos, the AFC's No. 1 seed, had won 11 straight games.

Strange, but the Ravens played as if unaware they had not a chance. Suggs, after a shockingly rapid recovery, sacked Manning twice. Old man Lewis provided inspiration along with bone-rattling hits. And, yes, the Ravens got more than a little lucky when Broncos Rahim Moore lost track of Joe Flacco's towering pass in the final minute of regulation.

The Broncos enjoyed a smooth ride through most of the 2012 season. Too smooth. They averaged 31.8 points in those 13 victories. They enjoyed the great blessing of competing in the AFC West, which consisted of The Three Stooges (Raiders, Chiefs, Chargers) and the Broncos.

The good times failed to prepare the Broncos for the anarchy and violence the Ravens delivered on a wickedly cold Saturday afternoon in January.

Trouble is here for the Broncos. Miller is out until Oct. 20, when the Broncos play Manning's old team, the Colts. The offensive line is still jelling after a season-ending injury to center Dan Koppen. The Broncos cut creaky, injury-prone Willis McGahee, which was the right move, but no strong candidate has emerged to replace him at halfback.

And yet .

I see almost no possible way for the Broncos to miss the playoffs. Miller will return with fresh legs and extreme hunger to bury his past mistakes. Manning will lead an offense that should lead the NFL in scoring and passing yards.

While watching games this season, you'll probably see the Broncos suffer through a couple of beatings. The running game must improve. The pass rush will struggle with Miller gone, especially with his fellow sack master Elvis Dumervil residing in Baltimore.

Don't worry. The 2011 Giants and the 2012 Ravens proved an old adage is true:

Adversity is good for you.

Broncos CB Champ Bailey ruled out for opener against Ravens

By John Breech
CBSSports.com
September 4, 2013

Suspended linebacker Von Miller won't be the only defensive starter missing when the Broncos kick off their regular season on Thursday against the Ravens. Cornerback Champ Bailey has also been ruled out.

Bailey hasn't practiced since injuring his foot on Aug. 17 against the Seahawks in the Broncos second preseason game. The 35-year-old Bailey has only missed a total of four games since 2009.

With Bailey out, the Broncos starting corners on Thursday will be Chris Harris and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie. Rodgers-Cromartie, who was signed in the offseason, started eight games in 2012 for the Eagles.

"I do believe we acquired a really good football player in Dominique," Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio said, via the Denver Post. "But we also have one that's going to be sitting out in Champ. We'll tee it up and play. I'm not really big on making predictions. I'm big on getting our guys ready to the best of their ability, going out there and competing."

The Broncos will also be without tight end Joel Dreessen, who is still recovering from kneecap surgery. In his first season with Denver last year, Dreessen finished fifth on the team with 41 receptions.

Total of 20 NFL players suspended for Week 1, NFC West leads way

By John Breech
CBSSports.com
September 4, 2013

On the field, the NFC West is arguably the best division in the NFL. Off the field, the NFC West is the best at something too: player suspensions. The Rams, Seahawks, Cardinals and 49ers accounted for five of the league's 20 suspensions handed out since the 2012 season ended.

A total of 16 NFL teams had a player suspended this offseason. The tally includes players suspended for violating the league's policy on performance-enhancing drugs and players suspended for violating the league's substance abuse policy.

Besides the NFC West, the AFC North was next in line with four suspensions. The AFC West and NFC East each had three player suspensions, while the NFC South was the only division with zero suspensions.

As for individual teams, the Ravens, Redskins, Vikings and Rams led the way with two suspended players each. The Broncos, Bengals, Seahawks, Raiders, Jets, Jaguars, Colts, Giants, Cardinals, Browns, 49ers, Chiefs all had one suspended player.

Here's the complete list:

Players suspended for violating the NFL's policy on performance-enhancing drugs

Eight games: Ravens defensive back Asa Jackson and Bengals defensive end DeQuin Evans.

Four games: Seahawks linebacker Bruce Irvin, Raiders receiver Andre Holmes, Redskins defensive lineman Jarvis Jenkins and Vikings offensive lineman DeMarcus Love. Former Rams linebacker Jo-Lonn Dunbar is also suspended for four games, but he was cut by St. Louis on Tuesday, meaning his suspension won't start until he signs with a team.

Players suspended for violating the NFL's substance abuse policy

Six games: Broncos linebacker Von Miller.

Four games: Jets running back Mike Goodson, Jaguars wide receiver Justin Blackmon, Colts receiver LaVon Brazill, Giants safety Will Hill, Redskins linebacker

Rob Jackson, Cardinals linebacker Daryl Washington, and Ravens safety Christian Thompson.

Three games: Vikings fullback Jerome Felton.

Two games: Browns receiver Josh Gordon.

One game: 49ers tight end Demarcus Dobbs, Rams running back Isaiah Pead and Chiefs offensive lineman Rokevious Watkins.

Pot group goes after NFL drug policy

By Tully Corcoran
FOXSports.com
September 4, 2013

Some Colorado marijuana supporters are using football as a reminder about alternative medicine.

“Stop driving players to drink!” a billboard reads. “A safer choice is now legal (here).”

The billboard is sponsored by MarijuanaPolicy.org — a website dedicated to marijuana legalization. Colorado and Washington voted to legalize marijuana in the 2012 election, and numerous other states have decriminalized the herb.

A big part of the movement is the sentiment that, if people are going to get their buzz one way or another, they should be encouraged to choose something that is supposedly less destructive than alcohol.

Nothing goes together quite like booze and football, and so here you go: A sign, next to a football stadium, marketing marijuana as an alternative to liquor.

You’ve just got to convince Roger Goodell.

The organization is trying to do that by going after the NFL’s drug policy.

”For years, the NFL has been punishing players despite the fact that it is far less harmful than alcohol,” reads a Marijuana Policy Project press release. ”The league would never punish a player simply for having a couple of beers, so why does it penalize him for using a substance that is less toxic, less addictive, and less likely to contribute to violence.”

Marijuana Policy Project calls out Goodell directly.

”We hope commissioner Goodell will explain why they NFL is willing to promote the use of alcohol among its players and fans, but unwilling to recognize a safer alternative is now legal.”

The Audibles Preseason All-Pro team

By Chris Burke & Doug Farrar
Sports Illustrated
September 4, 2013

The predictions just keep on coming, as Chris Burke and Doug Farrar assess which players will be noted as the NFL's best with All-Pro nominations at the end of the 2013 season.

Quarterback

Doug Farrar: Aaron Rodgers, Green Bay Packers

As long as he's healthy, Rodgers is the NFL's most dominant offensive force. No single player is better able to dissect defenses, given his combination of mobility, velocity and accuracy.

Chris Burke: Tom Brady, New England Patriots

I started with Aaron Rodgers here, but Brady got my MVP pick for SI's preseason awards so I would be remiss to exclude him. Brady finds a way to make the talent around him better, and he'll do it (again) this year with a depleted cast.

Running Backs

Consensus: Doug Martin, Tampa Bay Buccaneers/Adrian Peterson, Minnesota Vikings

Farrar: Martin was impressive in his rookie year, but I think he'll be even better in 2013. He gained almost 1,500 yards with both of his guards (Carl Nicks and Davis Joseph) out of the lineup for lengthy stretches, and he's got everything it takes to be the center of an offense — much like Peterson has been in Minnesota. The only question about Peterson is whether he'll be able to overcome the typical decline in production after a 2,000-yard season.

Burke: Peterson's a gimme if he stays healthy. And the Bucs plan to use Martin even more than they did in 2012, when he racked up 368 touches (319 carries, 49 receptions). Should Tampa Bay stick to that scheme, Martin should soar over 2,000 total yards.

Fullback

Farrar: Vonta Leach, Baltimore Ravens

The Ravens played contract chicken with Leach this offseason, but there's no doubt about his value on the field. He's an imposing lead blocker, especially in the red zone, and his re-signing allows Baltimore to use the more versatile Kyle Juszczyk as an H-back.

Burke: Greg Jones, Houston Texans

Jones was a steady, if underappreciated, member of the Jaguars' offense from 2004 until he signed with Houston this offseason. He'll get the job done there, too, playing under a brighter spotlight.

Tight End

Consensus: Jimmy Graham, New Orleans Saints

Farrar: The Saints' receiving corps is in turmoil, which makes Graham all the more valuable to quarterback Drew Brees. Graham has rare talent, and even more importantly, the former Miami basketball player understands that he still has some growing to do as a football player. Now that coach Sean Payton is back from his suspension to "yell at me again, making sure that I am perfect on every play," as Graham recently put it, expect him to be even better in 2013.

Burke: Graham was a Pro Bowler in 2011, but then suffered a bit of a statistical drop-off during New Orleans' lost '12 season. He could be the most dominant tight end in football this season, especially since he's in line for a new contract next summer.

Receivers

Consensus: Calvin Johnson, Detroit Lions
Farrar: Demaryius Thomas, Denver Broncos
Burke: Julio Jones, Atlanta Falcons

Farrar: There's not much we can say about Megatron that hasn't already been said. At his best, he's impossible to cover, and if quarterback Matthew Stafford can be more consistent, who knows how ridiculous Johnson's stats will be? Thomas has all the attributes common to the best NFL receivers, and he should get more isolated coverage on downfield routes with Wes Welker running slants over the middle.

Burke: Picking Megatron is like picking Peterson — if he stays on the field for 16 games, there is little evidence opposing defenses can stop him. Jones has been building toward superstardom throughout his first two seasons. He gets there in Year 3.

Offensive Tackles

Farrar: Ryan Clady, Denver Broncos/Russell Okung, Seattle Seahawks

Clady is the best pass-blocking tackle in the league, and he's got a quarterback in Peyton Manning who knows how to make his linemen look even better. Okung has a rare combination of power and agility — he's had medical issues, but when he's fully healthy, he simply erases edge-rushers.

Burke: Duane Brown, Houston Texans/Sebastian Vollmer, New England Patriots

Brown earned his first All-Pro nod last year, in his fifth NFL season. Vollmer's on the same career arc — after four years of pretty steady development, the Patriots' tackle is set to make the leap into the NFL's elite.

Offensive Guards

Consensus: Jahri Evans, New Orleans Saints
Farrar: Marshal Yanda, Baltimore Ravens
Burke: Logan Mankins, New England Patriots

Farrar: Yanda doesn't get enough credit (even though he plays for a Super Bowl-winning team) but he's the one who sets the tone for the Ravens' offensive line. Evans has more upfield speed than any other guard in the NFL — he will frequently be seen blocking 15-20 yards upfield, with authority, on the Saints' litany of complex passing plays.

Burke: Evans has made the last four All-Pro teams, and with the Saints set to improve offensively in 2012, there's no reason to think that his streak will end in 2013. Mankins will join Vollmer as an All-Pro, as the Patriots' elite offensive line gets its due.

Center

Farrar: Stefen Wisniewski, Oakland Raiders

Wait — a Raiders lineman as an All-Pro? No, this is not a joke. Wisniewski has shown impressive strength, agility and consistency, especially considering that there's so little talent around or behind him. If Oakland continues with Terrelle Pryor as their starting quarterback, Wisniewski will learn a new challenge — blocking the middle for a QB who will run himself into sacks.

Burke: Chris Myers, Houston Texans

Myers has been in the middle of the Texans' impressive line for five seasons, but has not one All-Pro honor to show for it. That changes in 2013, as voters continue to warm to what Houston has cooking.

Defensive Ends

Consensus: J.J. Watt, Houston Texans
Farrar: Charles Johnson, Carolina Panthers
Burke: Cameron Wake, Miami Dolphins

Farrar: Johnson was boom-and-bust as a pass-rusher last year, but the addition of Star Lotulelei on the Panthers' defensive line will free things up for him to force pressure more consistently. Watt is simply the NFL's best defensive player — there's nobody else more capable of creating havoc from so many different gaps and angles.

Burke: About as easy a position to pick as there is. Watt and Wake were the First Teamers here in 2012, and they are two of the most dominant defenders in all of football. Teams have not figured out how to stop either guy yet.

Defensive Tackles

Consensus: Geno Atkins, Cincinnati Bengals
Farrar: Jason Hatcher, Dallas Cowboys
Burke: Nick Fairley, Detroit Lions

Farrar: Little-known fact — as a 3-4 defensive end in 2012, Hatcher had as many quarterback hits (11) and nearly as many hurries (20.5) as did Cowboys linebacker DeMarcus Ware. Hatcher will force similar pressure as a tackle in new Dallas defensive coordinator Monte Kiffin's fronts. No interior lineman splits more double teams and causes more anarchy between the guards than Atkins — he's a rare force in power situations.

Burke: Atkins, with a loaded new contract, has developed into a complete wrecking ball on the defensive line. Fairley's closing the gap, though, and he is primed to leapfrog teammate Ndamukong Suh in the defensive tackle pecking order.

Outside Linebackers

Consensus: Lavonte David, Tampa Bay Buccaneers
Farrar: Ryan Kerrigan, Washington Redskins
Burke: Clay Matthews, Green Bay Packers

Farrar: David is the most athletic example of the NFL's new wave of smaller, faster linebackers, and he's ready to become the leader of the Bucs' upgraded defense. Kerrigan had a great season in 2012 without Brian Orakpo as a bookend — look for him to take his place among the elite at his position in 2013.

Burke: Rolling the dice a bit that David, off a stellar rookie year, continues to develop as an all-around linebacker. Matthews missed out on First Team honors last season, despite registering 13 sacks in just 12 games.

Inside Linebackers

Consensus: Luke Kuechly, Carolina Panthers
Farrar: Bobby Wagner, Seattle Seahawks
Burke: Daryl Smith, Baltimore Ravens

Farrar: In an amazing preseason performance against the Ravens, Kuechly showed that he is already the league's most versatile and effective linebacker. Nobody else sets the edge against the run or plays the pass as well (in the same package) as he does — but Wagner's coming close.

Burke: Anyone who saw Kuechly in 2012 or this preseason knows that he's the real deal, even if he is not yet finished developing. Smith is one of my All-Pro wild cards. He fits in with Baltimore's imposing defense well and should be better in 2013 than Ray Lewis was in '12.

Cornerbacks

Consensus: Richard Sherman, Seattle Seahawks
Farrar: Kareem Jackson, Houston Texans
Burke: Patrick Peterson, Arizona Cardinals

Farrar: Sherman became an elite cornerback in trail coverage last year; he's nearly impossible to beat on deep seam and sideline routes. He's now refining his game in new ways. In 2012, Jackson was the best cornerback that nobody ever talked about — and it's time for that to change.

Burke: Peterson has one All-Pro berth under his belt as a kick returner. He will add another as a lock-down CB this season. But Peterson may only be the second best cornerback in his division, with the confident Sherman patrolling Seattle's secondary.

Safeties

Consensus: Eric Weddle, San Diego Chargers
Farrar: Earl Thomas, Seattle Seahawks
Burke: Troy Polamalu, Pittsburgh Steelers

Farrar: Thomas has replaced Ed Reed as the NFL's prototypical center-field safety — he covers so much ground, and he's improving as a tackler in the box. Weddle isn't in Thomas' class as a pass-defender, but he crashes down on run plays with force and precision and reads routes very well.

Burke: Weddle is among the league's most underrated players — that he wasn't a Pro Bowler or First Team All-Pro in 2012 was a travesty. Polamalu may be in line for Comeback Player of the Year honors, if he has the impact I expect him to have in Pittsburgh.

Punter

Farrar: Bryan Anger, Jacksonville Jaguars
Burke: Pat McAfee, Indianapolis Colts

Farrar: The Jags have to wonder what might have been — they took Anger with the 70th overall pick in the 2012 draft with some guy named Russell Wilson still on the board. But hey — at least they have a punter who ranked sixth in the league in gross average (47.8) and forced 29 fair catches, second in the NFL behind the Cardinals' Dave Zastudil. One thing's for sure — Anger will have his share of punting opportunities in 2013.

Burke: The Colts' franchise player, McAfee downed 26 punts inside the opposing 20 a year ago. He's extremely good at his craft … and at age 26, he may only be getting better.

Kicker

Farrar: Blair Walsh, Minnesota Vikings
Burke: Matt Prater, Denver Broncos

Farrar: Walsh wasn't just great as a field-goal kicker — he also greatly affected the Vikings' kickoff and opponent field-position numbers in a positive sense. He made 10-of-10 tries from 50 yards or more, and nailed 11-of-12 field goals in December, as Minnesota was charging to the playoffs. Not bad for a rookie.

Burke: Prater has a huge leg (aided by Denver's thin air) and continues to be about as clutch as they come late in games — he is 28-of-29 on field goals in the fourth quarter or in overtime.

Returner

Farrar: Darius Reynaud, Tennessee Titans

Farrar: The Titans put Reynaud on the field after regular returner Marc Mariani suffered a shoulder injury, and Reynaud responded by ranking in the top 10 in kick-return average, by running one kickoff back 105 yards for a touchdown and by finishing third in punt-return average. Tennessee signed Reynaud to a one-year, $1 million contract in the offseason, and knows that he's the guy now.

Burke: Cordarrelle Patterson, Minnesota Vikings

Burke: This is where you can bank on Patterson really making an impact as a rookie. He averaged 28 yards per kick return and 25.3 on punt returns last season at Tennessee, and he might help Minnesota fans forget Percy Harvin.

Champ Bailey out for Broncos-Ravens season-opener

By Tim Polzer
Sports Illustrated
September 4, 2013

The Broncos announced Wednesday that cornerback Champ Bailey will not play in Thursday's NFL season-opener against the Ravens.

USA Today reported Bailey would miss the nationally televised season kickoff game prior to the Broncos' releasing their final injury report.

Bailey told reporters earlier this week that he hoped to play against the Ravens while seeking redemption for the last time the two teams met. Bailey was beaten for two deep touchdown passes from Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco to receiver Torrey Smith in the AFC divisional playoffs.

But Bailey has been unable to practice since spraining his foot in the Broncos' second preseason game, on Aug. 17 at Seattle. He said he was still experiencing pain in the foot this week.

In Bailey's absence, the Broncos are expected to start third-year cornerback Chris Harris on the left side and free-agent acquisition Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie at right corner.

Champ Bailey to sit out Denver Broncos' season opener

By Dan Hanzus
NFL.com
September 4, 2013

The Denver Broncos will start the regular season without Champ Bailey.

The veteran cornerback has been ruled out for the Thursday night season opener against the Baltimore Ravens, the Broncos confirmed Wednesday.

It's an expected development for Bailey, who's been unable to participate in a full practice since suffering a sprained left foot during an Aug. 17 preseason game.

The Broncos know they have to take extra precaution with Bailey, who remains a starter in John Fox's defense despite his status as a 14-year veteran. It's certainly possible that Bailey will sit out longer than one week, though that could be determined by how Chris Harris and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie perform in his absence.

"I do believe we acquired a really good football player in Dominique," Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio said, according to The Denver Post. "But we also have one that's going to be sitting out in Champ. We'll tee it up and play. I'm not really big on making predictions. I'm big on getting our guys ready to the best of their ability, going out there and competing."

The Broncos have the potential for a very strong secondary if Bailey can get healthy and Rodgers-Cromartie can recapture whatever he lost in Philadelphia. Both players are question marks for the time being.

Ravens, Broncos kick off NFL season after summer of discontent

By Rick Maese
The Washington Post
September 4, 2013

After an offseason of playing defense, the NFL returns to action Thursday night, the bright stadium lights in Denver illuminating a sport in the midst of change, both on and off the field.

Little stays the same in today's league, and oddsmakers have slotted the defending champion Baltimore Ravens as underdogs against the Denver Broncos in the season opener.

While the year-to-year parity and evolving style of play underscore the NFL's constant state of commotion, the league emerges from an especially tumultuous offseason, one in which the very nature of the game was scrutinized daily.

The NFL is trying to emerge from a dark cloud of player health and safety concerns and last week reached a proposed settlement with about 4,500 former players who were suing over concussions. The league has also instituted new rules this season that will bar runners and tacklers from initiating contact with the crowns of their helmets and has stepped up its efforts to educate youth players on proper techniques. In Baltimore to announce a new initiative related to concussion research along with Under Armour and GE, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell proclaimed, "There's never been a better time to play the game of football or be a fan of the game of football. I couldn't be more optimistic about the future."

Of the lawsuit settlement, Goodell said, "I don't know how it's going to be remembered. I know what its effect is going to be, which is going to provide help for the players and the families that have cognitive issues. . . . Rather than litigating for years, the owners, the NFL and frankly, the plaintiffs, all said let's go do something that's great for the game and great for the people and get help to the people that need it. And that's a good thing."

Meantime, offseason headlines were dominated by less-than-flattering football news: former Patriots tight end Aaron Hernandez was arrested on murder charges, and armchair orthopedists monitored daily the rehabilitation of Redskins quarterback Robert Griffin III, a rising star who injured himself in the playoffs and needed a total reconstruction of his knee.

On the field, defenses have never been more complex, and offenses never so versatile. Pocket passers such as Matt Ryan, Aaron Rodgers and Tom Brady are still effective, but a new generation of athletic quarterbacks — Griffin, Russell Wilson, Colin Kaepernick — have sent ripples of change across the league. The addition of former Oregon coach Chip Kelly in Philadelphia leaves few doubts: This isn't your granddaddy's NFL.

Former coach Jon Gruden says the style of play in 2013 is similar to what fans would see at a college or high school game.

"Players are playing it differently, wide open, no-huddle, spread systems, and that's what's in college football. That's how we're training coaches and players," said Gruden, now an analyst for ESPN's "Monday Night Football." "It's a big part of the National Football League.

"I think it's here to stay. I'm not saying it really excites me as much as maybe it does some other people because I like the conventional way of moving the football, throwing it in a traditional style of offense. But some of these quarterbacks can really make it happen, and it'll be fun to watch."

The NFL opener will feature two passers from more of a traditional quarterback mold, though Peyton Manning and Joe Flacco are among the game's best at running a fast-paced no-huddle system. Flacco, the Super Bowl XLVII MVP, is coming off a career year and threw 13 touchdowns and no interceptions in his final six games last season. He may lack the sparkle and pizzazz of the new crop of quarterbacks, but the Ravens rewarded him this offseason with a $120.6 million contract, tying their future to the cannon attached to his right shoulder.

"He can literally do everything," said Jim Caldwell, the Ravens' offensive coordinator. "He's one of those guys who can roll to his left, roll to his right. He's a very, very fine athlete, and so there are hardly any limits with him."

The Ravens, who've won their past five season openers, scored more points (119) and posted more touchdowns (15) than any other team in the preseason. But most analysts have focused more on what they've lost from last year's championship squad: linebacker Ray Lewis (retired), center Matt Birk (retired), safety Ed Reed (Houston) and wide receiver Anquan Boldin (San Francisco) among them.

Baltimore has added defensive ends Chris Canty and Elvis Dumervil via free agency and drafted safety Matt Elam, who is expected to come off the bench Thursday night.

"We all live by that motto around here: 'In Ozzie we trust,' " linebacker Terrell Suggs said of Baltimore General Manager Ozzie Newsome. "In the spring,

everybody was hitting the panic button on us because of the guys we lost. Even though we were very sad to see those guys go, the show must go on."

Across the league, 32 teams have reloaded with new coaches, new players, new goals. In Baltimore, there isn't much talk about last year's Super Bowl. While the NFL spent the offseason managing controversy and change, the Ravens were able to bask in their incredible playoff run, from that thrilling double-overtime win at Denver to the three-point nailbiter in the Super Bowl. But that's over now.

"You start a new year, a new chapter," Rice said, "and you go through camp, and obviously, when you win a Super Bowl, you can say you feel the pressure. But when you get out of a training camp like we just got out of, and you build the camaraderie that we've built, just having Week 1 again is exciting."

Broncos Tickets Still Available But They’re Not Cheap

By CBS4 Denver
September 4, 2013

DENVER (CBS4) – Denver Broncos fans can still find tickets for the game, but they aren’t cheap.

Thursday’s game against the Baltimore Ravens is one of the most talked about NFL games and one of the most anticipated rematches since last season.

According to StubHub, tickets for the Broncos and Ravens rematch are pricey but selling. Currently there are about 900 tickets still available. Demand for the rematch is outpacing last year’s AFC divisional thriller by 8 percent as a ticket to Peyton Manning’s first playoff game as a Bronco sold for $266.

The following are some stats for Thursday’s game, according to SeatGeek.com:

- The average ticket price is $293.
- The game is the second-most in-demand game played at Sports Authority Field at Mile High since 2009, only second to Peyton Manning’s Denver debut against the Steelers last September. Ticket prices averaged $360.
- Price demand for this game is greater than when the two teams played in the AFC divisional round back in January.
- Thursday’s kickoff game is the most in-demand game of a Week 1 game for the NFL.

Be careful when buying tickets on websites like Craigslist. Before plugging in the credit card, do homework. There are too many examples of fans who have bought tickets and wound up watching the game from their couch.

Tonight’s game more than just a rematch for Ravens, Broncos

By Matt Zenitz
Carroll County Times
September 5, 2013

OWINGS MILLS — Tonight’s game has been billed as a rematch, as a chance for the Broncos to avenge their stunning playoff loss to the Ravens in this same stadium eight months ago.

And for Baltimore, it’s been billed as a return to the place it produced one of the most improbable wins in NFL playoff history and maybe the defining individual moment of its Super Bowl run last season — Joe Flacco’s 70-yard game-tying touchdown pass to Jacoby Jones in the final minute of the fourth quarter that forced overtime, where the Ravens eventually came out victorious.

There are other storylines and subplots as well, including Denver quarterback Peyton Manning having a chance to get revenge against the defense that intercepted him during overtime of that game, setting up a game-winning field goal.

But more than anything, tonight’s game will provide the first real gauge of just how good this year’s versions of the Broncos and Ravens will be.

Both teams are considered playoff-caliber with the talent to make legitimate pushes for a Super Bowl title, but both teams enter the regular season with question marks.

“Last year is last year,” Broncos coach John Fox said during a conference call. “One of the exciting things about opening the season is you’ve got to open the day of a whole new season. Everybody is 0-0, and you start fresh. I guess you’d say [last year] is water under the bridge.”

Most Vegas oddsmakers have Denver as around a touchdown favorite heading into tonight.

Baltimore is enthusiastic about its defense, and the defense shined during training camp and the preseason, but the Ravens’ offense, for as great as it was during Baltimore’s Super Bowl run last year, is somewhat of an unknown heading into tonight.

The Ravens still have Flacco and some talented skill position players like Ray Rice and Torrey Smith, but how much production Baltimore can get from the other wide

receivers besides Smith could be a big factor in how successful the Ravens can be on offense — both tonight and throughout the course of the year.

Baltimore's offense struggled during the preseason, but it should be aided by the return of tight end Ed Dickson, who missed the preseason with a hamstring injury. Baltimore is also optimistic because Jacoby Jones, the starting receiver opposite Smith, improved after an uneven start to the summer and because rookie Marlon Brown has progressed into a player who many of his teammates said could make an impact tonight against a depleted Broncos defense.

Denver was one of the top-ranked defenses in football last year, but outside linebacker Von Miller is suspended for the first six games of the season, fellow pass rusher Elvis Dumervil is now a Raven, and cornerback Champ Bailey will miss tonight's game because of a sprained foot.

And as far as Baltimore, Smith said the Ravens feel "great" about where they are as an offense despite the struggles during the preseason.

"We go more by how we practice," Smith said, later adding, "We've been having great practices, we've been working hard, and it's only a matter of time before it shows. … We plan on it being [tonight]."

The Ravens are confident regarding their defense as well, but the it will surely will be tested by Manning and a Broncos offense that is arguably the league's most dynamic.

Baltimore's defense, which features six new starters, has flashed the potential to be a dominant unit during the summer, especially against the run and as a pass rush, but the secondary is a question mark for the Ravens, and tonight will show whether that group is something to be concerned about.

"We take an exam every week in this league, and I'm pretty excited about having an opportunity to play against a great team on the road," Baltimore defensive coordinator Dean Pees said. "It's going to be a really festive atmosphere to say the least, and we're looking forward to it. It presents a great challenge for us, but I think our team is one that loves a challenge, and we've been preparing for this for quite some time.

"It's always good to see how we react. Literally, we have a lot of new guys as well, so that's going to be a lot of fun."

Yes, tonight's game is technically a rematch of that classic AFC divisional playoff game from January and a chance for the Broncos to exact revenge on the Ravens.

And yes, everything that happened during that game makes tonight's matchup that much more compelling.

But in reality, this game is important for reasons much greater than anything that happened last season.

"Once the ball is kicked off, once the game has started, that last game is gone," Baltimore outside linebacker Terrell Suggs said. "We'll see what happens in this one."

Montee Ball knows he needs to be a better pass blocker

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
September 4, 2013

Even though they took Montee Ball with the 58th overall pick and cut Willis McGahee, the Broncos will open the season without a clearly defined pecking order in the backfield.

One of the reasons for that is Ball's lack of polish as a pass blocker. Peyton Manning isn't a player that Denver wants to see getting hit very often, which makes the ability to pick up rushers a crucial part of the skill set for their running backs. Like many rookies, it's not a strong suit of Ball's and he knows that he needs to get better at it after not being asked to do much blocking at Wisconsin.

"He's not RG3. He sets his feet and gets the pass off," Ball said of Manning, via Mike Garafolo of FOXSports.com. "Great things happen downfield when you protect him. That's the thing. When I mess up, I understand getting yelled at because you don't want a big hit on him. He's extremely valuable. Big plays happen downfield when everybody does their job."

Garafolo reports that Ball, Knowshon Moreno and Ronnie Hillman will all see time in the backfield with the latter two likely to see "plenty" of time because of their edge in the blocking department. Hillman has had a hard time holding onto the ball, though, and Moreno has had a hard time staying on the field, so there may be an opportunity for Ball to take the reins as soon as he can show the team that Manning won't be at undue risk when the rookie is in the game.

Report: Champ Bailey won’t play on Thursday night

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
September 4, 2013

Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey’s return from a sprained foot has led to a couple of false starts at practice this week and now it will reportedly keep him out of Thursday night’s game against the Ravens altogether.

Mike Klis of the Denver Post reports that Bailey will be ruled out for the game, leaving the Broncos without another key defensive starter while linebacker Von Miller starts his six-game suspension. The news isn’t particularly surprising given Bailey’s difficulties getting back on the field and that getting him back for the first week doesn’t do the team much good if he winds up aggravating the injury and missing more time.

Per the report, Chris Harris and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie are expected to start at cornerback against the Broncos with Bailey on the sideline. The Broncos kept 11 defensive backs on the 53-man roster, including veteran Quentin Jammer, so they should be okay with depth if not the same talent that Bailey brings to the table.

Klis also reports that tight end Joel Dreessen will miss the opener. Dreessen had arthroscopic surgery on his knee in August.

Demaryius Thomas: Peyton Manning's arm is significantly stronger

By Michael David Smith
Pro Football Talk
September 4, 2013

Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning was awfully good last year. Broncos receiver Demaryius Thomas says Manning is noticeably better this year.

Thomas said in an interview on ESPN that in his first season with Manning last year, he thought Manning's arm was fine in 2012. But Thomas says he now realizes that Manning hadn't completely recovered from his 2011 neck surgeries last year, and Manning throws the ball much better now than he did during the 2012 season.

"The biggest difference is his arm strength," Thomas said. "I never thought anything was wrong with him my first year, but coming back to OTAs and minicamp and seeing the strength he's got, the zip that's on the ball, it's a big difference. I think he got a lot of strength back that he didn't have last year."

Manning completed 68.6 percent of his passes last season, while throwing for 4,659 yards, with 37 touchdowns and 11 interceptions. If he was doing that without his full arm strength, the rest of the league should be worried about what Manning can do in the Broncos' offense now that he's completely healthy.

PFT Live: Peter King, Scott Pioli live from Denver

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
September 4, 2013

As Annie once sang, tomorrow is only a day away and that means the return of football is only a day away as well.

PFT Live is in Denver this week for the season opener between the Ravens and Broncos, bringing you everything you need from the site of the start of the 2013 NFL season.

Peter King and Scott Pioli of Football Night in America will join Mike Florio on Wednesday's edition of the show to share their insights about the game and anything they've learned about the two teams during the week. They'll also make sure that you're all caught up on all the latest news and notes from the rest of the teams in the league even though they'll have to wait until Sunday or Monday to start their own seasons.

You can watch it all live at noon ET by clicking right here.

Ball's Rookie Journal: Ravens Week

By Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
September 4, 2013

Running back Montee Ball will chronicle his rookie season on DenverBroncos.com. Check out his entry on preparing for Week 1.

Editor's note: Rookie running back Montee Ball, who kept a training camp journal on DenverBroncos.com, will continue his blog entries thoughout the 2013 season. See below for his first entry about his preseason, the Broncos' running back rotation and two particular Broncos fans he's excited to have in the crowd Thursday.

Montee here.

I haven't caught up with you all since training camp, so I want to catch you up to speed.

Speaking about training camp and preseason, it all went well, actually, for my first time around the ropes. It was good. I made some improvements that I needed to have made to stay here, to make the 53, so I'm happy about that. I'm blessed. Now that the preseason's over, I'm happy to get to the regular season.

As everyone knows, we've got the Ravens tomorrow. They're the defending champs for a reason, so they all have high motors, they all play with heart. They have a great coach over there and a lot of great players. So for us, we're most definitely going to use the energy at our home field. The crowd is most definitely going to play a huge factor in this one.

The crowd, they're very important just because they give extra motivation to us. Crowd noise is huge for us whenever Baltimore is on offense. Everything -- keeping us fired up. They play a huge factor in our success.

In the running backs room, we all know how important pass blocking is to our role. And it doesn't take much more to really instill that this week than knowing guys like Terrell Suggs and Elvis Dumervil are coming. It's no secret that they're great players. Dumervil did some great things here for the Broncos. We wish him the best -- other than this game. But they do a great job. They have high motors and we're most definitely going to match it and most definitely try to go over top of it.

Mainly we're just going to do what we've been doing this week in practice in preparing for it and make sure we come out with the win.

As far as that preparation, it's actually kind of weird, to be honest, because I'm used to college when you wear pads 24/7, all day. Then here, you wear pads a day and then -- it's more mental, I'll say that. It's more mental than physical because they want everybody to be fresh. Coach Fox has been doing a great job with his schemes and his patterns of how we practice and when to take us off our legs and stuff like that to keep us fresh for the game. So that's been good.

For right now, the coaches made a great decision by letting us backs go out there, 1A, 1B, 1C, however you want to put it, and whoever is the hot hand, whoever is playing the best is going to take the position. The reason why I think that's a great decision is because of all the talent we have in that room, and just because we've all had our hurdles we've had to jump over this preseason, struggling in certain situations. But we've most definitely been attacking them and working on them in our running back room.

The relationship between all of us is really good, and I'm not just saying that. It's really good. There's no bad blood between any of us. I always say we're all grown men. You can't get mad at somebody because they're doing better than you. We all want to be the starter. So when someone gets it, we're not going to be mad at the other person or anything like that, because we're all here to be that starter that the Broncos need.

I'm just ready to do whatever I can to help the team win, starting tomorrow. And my parents will be there to see it. This will be their first NFL game here in Denver. They came to a couple preseason games, but this is their actual first NFL game. It's a different environment. Different speed of the game. So it's going to be good. I'm glad that they're coming.

See you tomorrow night. We'll be ready.

Ravens Week: Final Injury Report

By Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
September 4, 2013

The final injury reports, including game statuses, for the Baltimore Ravens and Denver Broncos have been released. Among the players listed as out are CB Champ Bailey and TE Joel Dreessen.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- The final injury reports from the Baltimore Ravens and Denver Broncos have been released a day ahead of the season-opening matchup. Four players are listed as out for the game, including three on the Broncos. Below is the full injury report:

DENVER BRONCOS

PLAYER	INJURY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	GAME STATUS
RB C.J. Anderson	Knee	DNP	DNP	DNP	OUT
CB Champ Bailey					
TE Joel Dreessen	Foot	DNP	DNP	DNP	OUT
G Chris Kuper					
DE Robert Ayers	Knee	DNP	DNP	DNP	OUT
T Ryan Clady					
QB Brock Osweiler	Ankle	Limited	Limited	Limited	DOUBTFUL
WR Wes Welker	Achilles	Full	Full	Full	PROBABLE
	Shoulder	Full	Full	Full	PROBABLE
	Left Shoulder	Full	Full	Full	PROBABLE
	Ankle	Full	Full	Full	PROBABLE

BALTIMORE RAVENS

PLAYER	INJURY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	GAME STATUS
DT Art Jones	Illness	Out	Out	Out	OUT
T Ryan Jensen	Foot	DNP	DNP	DNP	DOUBTFUL
WR Deonte Thompson	Foot	DNP	DNP	DNP	DOUBTFUL
DT Brandon Williams					DOUBTFUL
DE Pernell McPhee	Toe	DNP	DNP	DNP	
TE Ed Dickson					PROBABLE
	Knee	--	Limited	Full	PROBABLE
	Thigh	Full	Full	Full	

Five Keys: Broncos vs. Ravens

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
September 4, 2013

A look at the five keys to victory for the Broncos against the Ravens on Thursday.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- Four months of chatter since the schedule was released is about to cease. Now it's about the Broncos, the Ravens, the start of a season and a rematch of a game destined to be long remembered in NFL annals.

It's rich with storylines, but from a football perspective, five stand above others. After the game, I'll revisit these and discuss how each turned out.

1. DICTATE THE PACE.

Whether that means snapping the football with 20 or more seconds left on the play clock or slowing it down if the Broncos are in front by multiple scores so they can hammer away with Montee Ball running behind two-tight end formations, the Broncos want to always keep the game at their pace. The Ravens would like to do something similar, but their best bet will probably not involve extensive no-huddle work -- although it is an arrow in their quiver that they have polished and worked on throughout the summer.

For the Broncos, a quick offensive tempo has two purposes: to tire out the defense and limit its substitutions, so they can perhaps catch the Ravens in a personnel grouping that they can exploit. Baltimore rotated Courtney Upshaw and Elvis Dumervil in the preseason -- Upshaw played 58 snaps, Dumervil 38 -- and Peyton Manning could respond to whichever linebacker is on the field by tailoring his line-of-scrimmage calls to account for the strengths and weaknesses of each.

But the exhaustion factor will likely be the most important. Denver's practice in up-tempo play at high altitude will also help its defense when Joe Flacco pushes the accelerator; they're accustomed to this, while the Ravens, on both sides of the line of scrimmage, are not.

2. CONTAIN RAY RICE.

Quite a bit goes into this: interior pressure to clog running lanes and force Rice outside, and solid tackling from the linebackers and defensive backs who come forward to respond to Rice's penchant for bouncing outside when a hole up the middle doesn't exist. The improved play of Kevin Vickerson and Terrance Knighton working together in the third preseason game offers hope that the two massive

tackles can occupy space and build a wall up the middle, but the work at containing Rice when he bounces outside will pass to plenty of players without much experience: namely safety Duke Ihenacho and outside linebackers Nate Irving (strong side) and Danny Trevathan (weak side), whose career regular-season starts collectively total zero. Their readiness for newly expanded roles will help determine whether the Broncos can keep Rice in check.

3. DON'T LET TORREY SMITH GET A QUICK JUMP OFF THE SNAP.

The Ravens wide receiver has such a burst that if he can get a free release off the snap, he'll be upfield and beyond man-to-man coverage. Smith's acceleration led to a pair of touchdowns in January's playoff loss. Giving him a wide cushion isn't the answer; Atlanta did that in the preseason and got torched for a 77-yard touchdown, because a safety was slow to react and stumbled after Smith caught a slant.

With Champ Bailey out, how the Broncos deal with Smith will be worth watching. Will they assign either Chris Harris or Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie to him, or will they keep their cornerbacks in their depth-chart assigned spots on the right and left side, respectively? If the latter proves to be the case, then Tony Carter, arguably the fastest cornerback on the Broncos' roster, will also bear some responsibility when he lines up in nickel packages. Carter has the straight-line speed to catch up to Smith, but whether he can contain the Ravens receiver will likely depend on his ability to turn and react off the snap.

4. USE THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE.

The Broncos kept their defensive plans fairly straightforward in the preseason. This has two functions -- it allows for a clearer evaluation of personnel, and it offers a minimum of tactics that the Ravens can analyze in their film study. They can guess, but they don't know what to expect from a defense that will be without Bailey, Miller and Dumervil. This is only the fourth game the Broncos have played since 2006 without both Bailey and Dumervil; they went 1-2 in the previous three games, all of which were played in a four-game stretch between January and September 2011.

This gives the Broncos plenty of options. Surprise blitzes, each one more surprising than the last? Unusual alignments? Disguised coverages? Why not? It will likely take some creativity for Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio to mount the pressure he wants, and that will take a few gambles he might not have otherwise needed to make. But it will be crucial for him to not use all the tricks in his bag this week … after all, there's five more games before Miller comes back.

5. DON'T LET OPPORTUNITY SLIP AWAY.

Much of the blame for the divisional-round loss last January landed at the feet of safety Rahim Moore for his misplay on the late touchdown pass from Flacco to Jacoby Jones, but you can point to myriad other mistakes and letdowns, from a failure to generate a push on clock-chewing run plays in the fourth quarter to a missed field-goal attempt when Matt Prater's foot caught a clump of the field to a pair of near-interceptions by Mike Adams and Chris Harris in overtime that could have set up a game-winning kick. Moore wasn't the only player who retreated to the locker room after that loss and muttered, "If only I had ..." -- indeed, the missed chances piled up, any one of which could have reversed the outcome.

Credit is due to the Ravens for capitalizing on the Broncos, but the succession of misplays and lost chances is a reminder of how much had to go in the Ravens' favor for them to win. It's important for the Broncos to realize this and not press; if they play within themselves, they should be able to hang step for step with the defending world champions.

Sharpe Returns, Relives Broncos Memories

By Mike Morris
DenverBroncos.com
September 4, 2013

Legendary Broncos tight end Shannon Sharpe made his return to Denver on Wednesday, participating in a nearly hour-long Q&A session.

DENVER -- The commanding voice, radiant grin and larger-than-life sense of humor that filled the Broncos' locker room at Sports Authority Field at Mile High was unmistakable – Shannon Sharpe was indeed back in the building.

The Hall-of-Fame tight end and longtime Broncos great returned to Denver on Wednesday for the Broncos' "Lunch with a Legend" event, during which Sharpe took part in a nearly hour-long Q&A session, took pictures and interacted with fans.

Dave Logan, 850 KOA's voice of the Broncos, hosted the event – which was presented by Verizon, IMA, FedEx and Integrated Resources.

And as Logan led Sharpe down memory lane with an assortment of questions about his career, Sharpe reflected on his time with the Broncos – beginning with Sharpe's serendipitous position switch from wide receiver to tight end that happened during his rookie season in 1990.

"It didn't happen in training camp. It actually happened seven or eight weeks into the season," Sharpe said, noting that starting tight ends Clarence Kay, Orson Mobley and Chris Verhuist were all hobbled with injuries. "So I'm the biggest wide receiver we've got. Obviously, the Three Amigos couldn't move to tight end. So (former Broncos Head Coach) Dan Reeves called me in and asked me, 'Would you be willing to play tight end?' I was like, 'If I get an opportunity to play, I'll play anything.'"

Fourteen seasons and 10,060 receiving yards later, and Sharpe retired as one of the NFL's greatest tight ends.

Sharpe attributed his relationship with then-quarterback and Broncos legend John Elway with helping him develop the confidence to blossom into a great player.

"For whatever reason, John and I really bonded, even as a rookie," Sharpe said. "He gave me the opportunity to make plays, and the more that I got it, the more that I was like, 'I belong.'"

But before Sharpe became a two-time Super Bowl champion or Hall-of-Famer, he suffered a stunning 30-27 loss to the Jacksonville Jaguars in the 1996 AFC Divisional playoffs – a loss that Sharpe said still haunts him today.

“To this day, I’ve never watched the tape of that game. It still hurts me to talk about it,” Sharpe said.

One play in particular from that game stuck with Sharpe – a dropped two-point conversion attempt in the first half that swung the momentum irreversibly in Jacksonville’s favor.

“I ran a slant and John threw it a little behind me,” he said. “Instead of opening my hips to catch the ball, I just threw my hands back. It would have put us up 14-0.”

Sharpe said that he understands the comparisons between the 1996 Broncos and last year’s team that lost to the Ravens in the AFC Divisional playoffs, but he added that the two opponents and the two losses came under very different circumstances.

“The Ravens were a good football team. People forget, the Ravens were a dropped touchdown away from being in the Super Bowl the year before,” he said. “The Jags were upstart. They were just two years old. They didn’t exist three years before.”

But after revisiting the Jacksonville loss, Sharpe quickly moved onto happier times – specifically the Broncos’ back-to-back Super Bowl championships in the 1997 and 1998 seasons.

Sharpe fondly recalled his pivotal catch for a first down late in the fourth quarter of the Broncos’ 24-21 victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers in the 1997 AFC Championship game – noting that the team hadn’t practiced the play that former Head Coach Mike Shanahan called in weeks.

“I said, ‘John, we don’t have that play in,’” Sharpe recalled. “John said, ‘Well, we do now.’ I said,’ Well, what do you want me to do?’ He said, ‘Go get open.’”

And he did. Barely.

“(The defender) chopped at the ball and by the time that he did that, John had stuck the ball in my shoulder pad,” Sharpe said, and then chuckled, “I’m running and I’m like, ‘Man, I’m going for a touchdown.’ Then I said to myself, ‘What if they tackle me and I fumble? I’d better get down.’”

Sharpe’s catch sent the Broncos to the unforgettable Super Bowl XXXII, where they played the heavily favored Green Bay Packers – and Sharpe noted that from the moment the Broncos answered the Packers’ opening touchdown with a score of their own, he knew Denver would win the game.

“We go right back down the field and score,” Sharpe said. “I think when they realized we had come to play, it was too late.”

Sharpe also recalled Elway’s immortal helicopter-spin late in the game’s third quarter, when Elway absorbed the hits of two Packers defenders and dove for a crucial first down.

“To see a 37-year-old guy do that. Once he gave that kind of effort, nothing less from you would be acceptable,” Sharpe said before jokingly adding, “I was kind of hoping for the ball because that play was really for me. And then (the Packers) doubled me. I was like, ‘Geez, I just want to score one touchdown in one Super Bowl to say that I scored in a Super Bowl.’ But hey, I’ll take it.”

Sharpe added that he thought the Broncos’ first Super Bowl champion squad was its best.

“I still say the 1997 team was better than the 1998 team, even though we won more ballgames and seemingly looked more convincing in winning.”

Sharpe also made it clear who he would want at quarterback if he had one game to win.

“I want Elway. You can take any quarterback,” Sharpe said. “I told Joe Montana this. I said, ‘Joe, I love you. I played in the Pro Bowl with you and I’m disappointed I didn’t get an autograph. But if I had one game to win, I’ve got to ride with 7.’”

The response that Sharpe said Montana gave him drew one of the biggest laughs of the afternoon.

“(Montana) told me, ‘I understand, I’d probably take Brent Jones as my tight end,’” Sharpe chuckled.

Sharpe added that he’s enjoying his post-football experiences as a studio analyst for the NFL on CBS, noting that he’s comfortable with moving on from his own career and appreciating the careers of today’s NFL stars.

“We were all great once upon a time, but it’s not about us now,” Sharpe said. “We’re up there talking about what we see from guys today.”

Holliday Leaves Impression on Ravens

By Mike Morris
DenverBroncos.com
September 4, 2013

After a record-breaking performance against the Ravens in last season's playoffs, Trindon Holliday knows he'll be on Baltimore's radar on Thursday.

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- No one who witnessed the record-breaking pair of return-touchdown odysseys Trindon Holliday embarked upon in the Divisional Round of the 2012 NFL playoffs will soon forget his special-teams performance.

That includes the Baltimore Ravens.

“Well, I didn’t think very well of them. You know, I was disappointed," Ravens Head Coach John Harbaugh said Sunday. "It was an amazing turn of events for a divisional game to have two returns for touchdowns, so from that standpoint I guess I had reluctant admiration (as a former special teams coordinator) for what they accomplished and what he accomplished in such a big setting. They did a great job and he’s really got spectacular ability.”

Holliday’s 90-yard punt return and 104-yard kickoff return resulted in a pair of game-changing touchdowns – and although the Ravens ultimately prevailed, Holliday’s returns certainly left a lasting impression.

Nine months later, Holliday knows that he’ll be on the Ravens’ radar when the teams meet again on Thursday night.

“Well, they know what I can do,” he said. “I’m sure they’re going to have a decent game plan against me this Thursday, so we just have to be ready for what they have.”

Holliday’s 248 total return yards and two touchdowns – the first time in NFL postseason history that a player returned multiple kicks for touchdowns in the same game – were a testimonial to the constant threat he poses as a returner. And for that reason, Holliday said that he expects the Ravens to try to keep him out of his comfort zone in the season opener.

“I’ll be ready for anything,” he said. “They’re going to try to do some things that try to make me uncomfortable, so I’m just going to be ready whenever it happens.”

While Holliday’s penchant for returning kicks is his most renowned attribute, he also took snaps at wide receiver during training camp and the preseason – and he noted

that he would be prepared to contribute on offense if called upon against the Ravens.

“That’s going to be very exciting for me,” he said. “I’m just going to go into this game and try to contribute on special teams on my team and if I get called up on offense, I’ll be ready.”

And while it’s only par for the course that players feel some season-opening jitters, Holliday said that he’ll feel right at home when he looks up to the sky to field his first return of the 2013 campaign.

“No. No nervousness at all,” Holliday said. “I’m just going to be more excited than anything that the season has kicked off.”

Gameday Advisory For Fans

By Brandon Moree
DenverBroncos.com
September 4, 2013

As the Broncos make their final preparations for their much-anticipated season opener against the Ravens, it's a perfect time for fans to have their own pregame walkthrough before heading to Sports Authority Field at Mile High for the big game.

Here's a look at some last minute considerations before the Broncos and Ravens kick off at 6:30 MST.

Public transportation is available in the form of Broncos Ride shuttles – running from Park-n-Ride Lots to the stadium started two and a half hours prior to kickoff — and both the Sports Authority Field at Mile High and Decatur-Federal light rail stations which provide service to the stadium.

The stadium can also be accessed by the South Platt Trail of the Denver bike trail system if you choose to bike to the game.

For those driving to the game, early tailgating spaces will open at noon and all stadium parking lots open 1:30 PM. Mountain Village, which is free to all fans with a ticket, opens at 2:30.

All stadium gates will be opened at 4:00 PM but United Club and suite ticket holders may enter Gate #2 or Gate #7 starting at 3:30 PM.

Fans are advised to get to their seats no later than 6:15 p.m. MST so that they may partake in the pregame ceremonies.

Remember that the new bag policy will be in effect for Thursday's game. This means that fans are only permitted to bring clear plastic bags into the stadium. Either the 12" by 6" by 12" bag with a logo on the front or a standard one gallon disposal. Fans may also bring a small clutch about the size of a hand.

Fans may still bring all items they would normally bring to a game with the exception of seat cushions, however seat cushions without concealable areas are still permitted. The new policy is designed to both keep the in-stadium experience safer and make entrance into the stadium quicker.

For more information on the bag policy, click here.

As always, fans are reminded to respect each other and respect the game. To anonymously report an issue to security text “RESPECT” and your message to 78247 or call the Stadium Hotline at 720-258-3850.

NBC to Hold Countdown to Kickoff with Ryan Seacrest

By Brandon Moree
DenverBroncos.com
September 4, 2013

Thursday night's Kickoff game is more than just the start of a new season but also the celebration of the return of professional football.

NBC and the Broncos are trying to make sure that Thursday night has all the trimmings befitting America's premier sports league's return to primetime.

Country music star Keith Urban is performing in on a floating stage in the Baltimore Harbor at 5:30 MT which will be shown on NBC pregame and the winner of NBC's 'The Voice,' Danielle Bradbery, will be performing the National Anthem at Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

"I am always honored to sing our national anthem but to be able to sing it at the NFL Kickoff game in Denver is like a dream come true," Bradbery said. "I am so excited!"

Al Michaels and Chris Collinsworth will be in the booth for NBC, presenting the game to television audiences.

The host of NBC's new game show 'Million Second Quiz,' Ryan Seacrest will also be a part of the festivities, making an appearance from Sports Authority Field to start the new season.

"I'm excited to join my friends at NBC Sports and the National Football League for the countdown to the 94th season opener between the Broncos and the Ravens. It's going to be an amazing pregame show, offering an auspicious beginning to another incredible NFL season," Seacrest said.

Just before the start of the game 32 NFL legends, one from each team, will help countdown the final moments leading up to the game. Shannon Sharpe will be the Broncos' representative in the countdown.

NBC's NFL Kickoff coverage beings at 5:30 MT and the game is scheduled to kick off at 6:30 MT.