Paige: XLVIII reasons Broncos will win Super Bowl XLVII

By Woody Paige
The Denver Post
February 2, 2014

NEW YORK — XLVIII valid explanations why the Broncos will win the Super Bowl:

I The weather will be mild with a kickoff temperature of about 45 degrees, and no snow.

II The Broncos will install two passing plays Seattle has not seen all year, and will score on both.

III The Broncos scored 41 points and the Seahawks 23 in their previous appearances at MetLife Stadium.

IV The Broncos have a decided advantage on kickoff and punt returns.

V The Broncos were penalized 183 fewer yards than Seattle in the regular season.

VI The Broncos' offensive line is ranked No. 1 in the NFL. The Seahawks are 26th.

VII Peyton Manning has been sacked only 2.4 percent of the time on pass plays; he was touched, not sacked, once in each postseason game.

VIII Shaun Phillips is the leading sacker in the game with 10, and Danny Trevathan is the leading tackler at 124.

IX Richard Sherman had eight picks, but the Broncos had three players with three each. Sherman will have none in this game; Champ Bailey will have one.

X Adam Gase is creatively superior to Seahawks offensive coordinator Darrell Bevell. Jack Del Rio has won a Super Bowl as a coach; Seattle defensive coordinator Dan Quinn hasn't coached in one.

XI Seven of the last 11 Super Bowl champions have scored at least 27 points. The Broncos will score more than 27.

XII When Eli Manning played the Super Bowl in Peyton's home stadium, brother helped brother in the week before the game, and Eli won. Eli has been helping Peyton this week.

XIII Julius Thomas.

XIV John Elway's fire-eating-dragon speech to the Broncos after they lost an exhibition to the Seahawks last summer.

XV Pot Roast (Terrance Knighton) will help hold Skittles (Marshawn Lynch) under 100 yards.

XVI Knowshon Moreno and Montee Ball combined will rush for more than 125 yards.

XVII The Broncos are relaxed; the Seahawks are uptight.

XVIII No. 18 for the Broncos.

XIX There is no Seattle 12th man here.

XX The Broncos score touchdowns almost 8-of-10 times they reach the red zone.

XXI The Seahawks averaged only 23 points a game away from Seattle; the Broncos averaged 36.2 points in road games.

XXII Eric Decker. Sherman will not be on him.

XXIII The Broncos will put a spy on Russell Wilson to keep him from running.

XXIV The Broncos will play one deep safety and make Wilson try to throw over the top.

XXV The Seahawks will play cover 3, and Manning will beat them underneath.

XXVI John Fox has lost two Super Bowls. Third time's a ...

XXVII The Broncos will have no turnovers.

XXVIII Trindon Holliday will have one long kickoff return.

XXIX Wilson has thrown five interceptions in his last six games and has been sacked seven times in the playoffs.

XXX The Broncos owe the Seahawks for the last postseason game they played.

XXXI The Seahawks have three good defensive backs. The Broncos have four great receivers. Somebody will be open.

XXXII The Broncos have never lost to a former Rockies minor-league player.

XXXIII The Broncos' third-down percentage in the playoffs is 61.5; the Seahawks' is 35.7.

XXXIV The Broncos have a better punter.

XXXV Percy Harvin will have only one big gain.

XXXVI The Broncos' brilliant offensive line consultant, Alex Gibbs, was the Seahawks' assistant head coach in 2011.

XXXVII The Broncos will score touchdowns at the end of the second quarter and the beginning of the third.

XXXVIII The Broncos have more postseason and Super Bowl experience.

XXXIX The Seahawks barely beat the Titans and the Texans; the Broncos crushed both.

XL With more than seven days to prepare, the Broncos are 6-0 this season.

XLI Manning will become the first quarterback to win Super Bowls and Super Bowl MVPs with two franchises.

XLII Madden 25 simulation picks the Broncos to win.

XLIII The Broncos will use some five-receiver sets, and Bubba Caldwell will catch a touchdown pass.

XLIV The Broncos will have 10 possessions and score four touchdowns. The Seahawks will have nine possessions and score two touchdowns.

XLV It's the year of the horse in the Chinese calendar.

XLVI The Broncos are 4-0 against NFC teams.

XLVII The last time a Denver team played a postseason game in New Jersey, the Avalanche beat the Devils 4-0 in Game 6 of the Stanley Cup Finals.

XLVIII Forty-eight points will be scored in Super Bowl 48, and the Broncos will win 28-20.

Kiszla: For victor in Super Bowl XLVIII, this one's for keeps

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
February 2, 2014

NEW YORK — This is why football players cry.

The Broncos arrived at the Super Bowl as a family: 53 players, one goal. Quarterback Peyton Manning, running back Knowshon Moreno and linebacker Wesley Woodyard will stand together for the national anthem before kickoff in MetLife Stadium, eyeing the Seattle Seahawks, united in orange.

But, win or lose, when Super Bowl XLVIII is done, this family will break up. This is one last chance for this specific group of Broncos to hoist the Lombardi Trophy and grab a little piece of football immortality.

"The legacy for us all is what we leave on the field as players," said Woodyard, who has endured injury and the loss of his starting job during the course of this season but stood tall as a team captain through it all. "Every individual player is his own brand. But we are all Broncos. And this is our chance to win a championship together as Broncos."

Football teams say they are family. It's a grand illusion. The hardest trick in the NFL is to transform a locker room of transients into a cohesive unit for 16 regular-season games and the stresses of a playoff run. From veteran defensive end Shaun Phillips to rookie running back Montee Ball, there are 20 first-year players of the Broncos on the 53-man roster.

Do the math. Nearly 40 percent of this Denver roster was new this season. Win or lose this Super Bowl, the extreme makeover figures to be the same before next season. This league is called the Not For Long for a reason.

"The significance of my Super Bowl rings is what those rings stand for. They stand for guys putting aside their egos and their personal agendas long enough to win a championship," said Byron Chamberlain, who won two championships during his stint from 1995-2000 as a tight end for Denver. "The most important thing for a championship team is to get all the guys to buy into one common goal of winning the Super Bowl. It's hard to do. That's why winning a Super Bowl is so rare."

From the beginning, the football gods gave signs to this edition of the Broncos. And the signs were not good. A stupid fax machine shipped pass rusher Elvis Dumervil

out of town. Linebacker Von Miller was suspended for violating the league's drug policy. Coach John Fox collapsed on a golf course in North Carolina and was rushed to the hospital for emergency heart surgery. Bad luck beat up Ryan Clady, Champ Bailey, Derek Wolfe and Rahim Moore.

When everything and anything invited the Broncos to collapse, everybody and anybody stepped up. "Next man up!" turned from standard football cliché to this team's motto. Through all the adversity, this team developed an attitude Fox believes is essential to become a Super Bowl champion. "There's a feeling you can't lose," Fox told me in the middle of a regular season that saw Denver win 13 games and claim the No. 1 seed in the AFC.

Next season, the business of football and contract negotiations might well take Woodyard and Moreno to different NFL towns. In one respect, the Super Bowl really is more than a game. For these 53 Broncos, this is the last supper.

It has been 15 long years since Denver last won the Super Bowl. That's a long time. Long enough for John Elway to see his marriage break up, watch his twin sister die and bury his father. Long enough to go from Broncos quarterback to team executive.

Neil Smith was a defensive end on the Denver teams that won back-to-back championships during the late 1990s. He arrived in Colorado after being a star in Kansas City to start over and begin the second chapter of his glorious NFL career, a foreshadowing of what the league required Manning to do.

Against the Green Bay Packers, who entered Super Bowl XXII as 11-point favorites against Denver on Jan. 25, 1998, Smith was asked by coaches to not do the very thing in football that made him famous. Instead of trying to sack Green Bay's Brett Favre, Smith was instructed to swallow his pride and contain the scrambling quarterback in the pocket.

It was the definition of 53 players, no ego, one goal.

"Don't try to be a hero. Just do your job," Smith told me Friday. As he spoke, the diamonds of a Super Bowl ring glistened on his finger.

As the clocked ticked away the final seconds of the fourth quarter, the scoreboard shined: Denver 31, Green Bay 24. The Broncos realized their dream was going to come true. Chamberlain will never forget the scene on his team's bench.

"Grown men, from players to owner Pat Bowlen, I mean everybody, started jumping up and down. We all turned into 8-year-old boys," Chamberlain said. "It was like Christmas morning and your birthday at the same time, all that joy wrapped together."

There are 53 Broncos on the active roster, 53 personal agendas and 53 stories.

Here's one maybe you don't know.

Almost exactly one year ago, on Feb. 6, 2013, Broncos tight end Jacob Tamme sent out a heartfelt message on Twitter: "I'd be very grateful if you'd say a short prayer for my wife, Allison, who has thyroid cancer. She has surgery tmrw."

Forget football. The whole world of Denver's tight end was turned upside down.

In the span of 365 days, Tamme saw his wife beat cancer and walked on a cruise ship docked in the Hudson River to talk about what a long, strange, wonderful journey from his wife's bedside on the eve of surgery to the dawn of Super Bowl morning.

"You hear the 'C' word, and it's a world shocker," Tamme said. "There's panic, depression and confusion, a little bit all of that, when you deal with cancer. But I'm so proud of her courage. We've been blessed. In so many ways beyond getting to the Super Bowl, this has been one crazy year, man."

At kickoff, the Broncos and Seahawks both will firmly and honestly believe this is their time.

Four quarters and 60 minutes of football later, time will expire on one dream.

The winners will jump up and hug with the gravity-defying joy of little boys, and no matter what happens next, that feeling will last forever.

Kiszla: Broncomaniac gets really lucky with Super Bowl lottery ticket

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
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NEW YORK — So this Broncomaniac walked into a midtown Manhattan bar and told me what sounded like a joke.

"I'm not spending $1,500 for a nosebleed seat to the Super Bowl," said Ron Katz of Denver. "But I'm hoping to get in the game for free by winning a contest."

After a long sip of beer to drown my smirk, I turned to Katz and said, "Well, good luck with that, my friend."

Katz has a crazy obsession with going to the Super Bowl, which this rabid 50-year-old fan has done eight of the last 13 years. The crazy part? Katz never attends the actual game.

Let him explain. In Katz's estimation, hanging out in an excited host city during the days prior to kickoff easily beats getting a tan in the Caribbean during the dead of winter, even if a big digital thermometer in Times Square reads a chilling 15 degrees.

"I'm a football purist. I'm having a blast," Katz said Wednesday, while nursing a soda.

He's an expert at doing the Super Bowl experience on a dime, boasting he was perfectly happy walking around the Big Apple wearing an orange-and-blue jester hat, while spending no more than $150 per day, including lodging and airfare.

Just this one time, with his beloved Broncos in the Super Bowl, didn't he think it was worth it to splurge on a ticket to the game?

"My backup plan is to watch it in a bar. But I might win a contest and go for free," Katz insisted.

I asked for the check. They're called Broncomaniacs for a reason. This guy was nuts.

During the unrelenting hype of Super Bowl week, a journalist's cellphone blows up 24/7 with silly prop bets from oddsmakers, marijuana advocates begging for

attention and the news of how quarterback Peyton Manning responded to his spirals being dissed as "ducks" by Seattle cornerback Richard Sherman.

But 24 hours after watching Katz disappear into the night on Seventh Avenue, I noticed a text message weirder than most. It read: "I've been in a catatonic state for the last five hours or so. You were the first person I messaged or called. No way in my dreams did I expect ..."

The text was from Katz. On Thursday, he had gone to a department store that flashed a giant electronic sign of soccer sex symbol David Beckham prancing around in his underwear. The attraction for Katz wasn't Beckham, but a contest for Super Bowl tickets that required nothing more than playing a video game to receive a scratch-off lottery ticket for the (slim and none) chance to win the grand prize.

Katz scratched. He did a double-take. Went into shock.

Yes, he won two tickets to Broncos vs. Seahawks. Upper-deck seats. Value: $1,000 each.

"This," Katz thought, "cannot be happening to me."

But it did.

Peyton Manning wins record 5th MVP Award

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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NEW YORK — Peyton Manning made his first pass on the MVP award before the rest of the NFL could start.

The Broncos opened the NFL season at home on a Thursday night, Sept. 5 against the defending champion Baltimore Ravens. Manning tied a record with 7 touchdown passes.

In an already marvelous 16-year career, Manning kept on chucking like never before. He threw 20 touchdown passes before his first interception.

"Unfortunately, we probably got his momentum going," Baltimore coach John Harbaugh said during the red-carpet ceremony prior to the NFL Honors show. "We didn't play well in the back end. We played better after that but that's what Peyton does, he finds where to attack a defense. (Tom) Brady does it to an extent but nobody does it like Peyton, nobody attacks a defense better than Peyton Manning."

The final maneuver by the Broncos' quarterback was to accept his record fifth MVP via videotape. An appointment with the Broncos' Super Bowl on Sunday against the Seattle Seahawks earned Manning an excused absence from the NFL Honors program at Radio City Music Hall.

"This is a very special award," Manning said. "I am extremely honored to have it presented by Joe Montana and Aaron Rodgers. I am humbled by this recognition and grateful to my family, Pat Bowlen, John Elway, John Fox and the entire Denver Bronco organization. And of course, my coaches and my teammates."

Manning then sent word for his dad, Archie, and son Marshall to accept the award. He received 49 of the 50 votes.

"I'd say a no-brainer right there," said New York Jets coach Rex Ryan. "I'm just happy I never had to go against him this year. I've been beat by him several times. It was good to get a break."

"I'm up for the honor of MVP but I'm not touching him," said Kansas City running back Jamaal Charles.

Manning was also named Offensive Players of the Year. His boss, football operations executive John Elway, accepted that honor on Manning's behalf.

Broncos running back Knowshon Moreno was nominated for Comeback Player of the Year but the award went to quarterback Philip Rivers of the rival San Diego Chargers.

Manning is the third Broncos player to win the MVP award, joining John Elway (1987) and Terrell Davis (1998). The Broncos quarterback wound up with 55 touchdown passes, 10 percent more the previous record of 50 set by Tom Brady in 2007, and 5,477 yards, breaking the previous record set by Drew Brees in 2011 by 1 yard.

He led the Broncos to a 13-3 record that tied for the NFL's best record with Seattle.

It was, simply, the best single-season by a quarterback in NFL history.

"It was the best I've seen anybody play the position," said former linebacker LaVar Arrington. "But there are rule changes so when I say he's as good as I've seen, he's as good as I've seen with the rules in place. But, still, you've got to do it."

At the awards show, the MVP award drew the least suspense.

"Who else is challenging him?" said former Manning teammate Robert Mathis of the Indianapolis Colts.

The vote wasn't close, but it wasn't unanimous, either. The lone dissenter, Jim Miller of Sirius XM NFL radio, cast his vote for New England's Brady.

"Congratulations to Peyton for winning his fifth MVP award," said Miller, who posted an 11-2 record with the Chicago Bears in 2001. "I'm confident in my vote. As someone who played the position, I felt Brady was on par with what Adrian Peterson did last year."

Manning nearly won the MVP award last season, his first with the Broncos, but finished second after a late-season surge by Peterson pushed the running back past the coveted 2,000-yard rushing milestone and his Minnesota Vikings into the playoffs.

This year, it was Manning who had the historic season. It was his fifth MVP award in a league where no other player has won more than three (Jim Brown, Johnny Unitas, Brett Favre).

"I think he's getting better," said Kurt Warner, a former two-time MVP. "I think it was a blessing in disguise going through what he went through."

Four neck injuries made Manning better? Warner said missing the entire 2011 season and getting released by Indianapolis forced Manning to start from the beginning with the most rudimentary of quarterback fundamentals.

"I think there's always times when people say you can't do it anymore," Warner said. "Sometimes those setbacks force you to focus a little bit harder. When you talk to him about things he did during rehab -- simulating games, going through every throw, making all those reads -- those are things you don't do when you're healthy."

Great debate rages about the best quarterbacks of all time

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
February 1, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. — There is so much debate about the "greatest quarterbacks of all time" list that two of the greatest quarterbacks disagree on whether there should even be a list.

Drew Brees has a long list. Peyton Manning has no list.

The ever-whirring Manning prefers an alternative mental exercise in which he plucks the prominent characteristics from the greats to make up the perfect quarterback.

"Take John Elway's arm (sorry about that, Jay Cutler), Dan Marino's release, Troy Aikman's dropback, Brett Favre's scrambling ability, Joe Montana's two-minute poise," Manning said. "So that's how I like to look at it. I don't have a list. I know a lot of people have lists."

Brees has a list. He is widely considered one of the top three quarterbacks of the past decade, along with Manning and Tom Brady. Brees and his New Orleans Saints beat Manning and the Indianapolis Colts the last time each was in a Super Bowl, after the 2009 season.

When asked about his top three quarterbacks of all time, Brees insisted on expansion.

"I have a top 15," Brees said at the Super Bowl media center in New York. "How can you possibly narrow it down to a top three? Here's a name for you: Why wouldn't you put Otto Graham in your top three? He had what, eight championships in 10 years?"

Graham led the Cleveland Browns to 10 championship games in 10 years (counting the team's place in the All-America Football Conference), winning seven.

"I actually looked at it at the end of the year," Brees said. "I was just curious. Fran Tarkenton played in three (Super Bowls). Marino and Elway. Of course, Johnny U. and Bart Starr.

"My point is, each set of guys you have to keep in their era and say these are the best in their time. I don't think you can compare. The game is different now than it

was 10 years ago, than it was 20, than it was 50. I think you have to section them off and say these are the guys who were the best of that era and then you put them all together and it gives you guys something to talk about and argue about. But at the end of the day, you can't narrow it down to a top three."

On most lists, Joe Montana is at the top. He wasn't close to being the most physically gifted. Some say he benefited from playing in Bill Walsh's West Coast system, an innovative, unsolvable offense at the time.

Manning said it well, though, when he mentioned Montana's two-minute poise. As a quarterback, nothing beats poise under pressure. Montana was 4-0 in Super Bowls, including victories against Marino and Elway. Put Montana No. 1.

But say Manning wins the Super Bowl for the Broncos on Sunday against the Seattle Seahawks. Does he join Montana at the top?

Manning would have only half of Montana's Super Bowl-ring collection, but he'd be the first to win one each with two teams. So it's two Super Bowls with a bonus. And Manning would become the only quarterback with multiple Super Bowls, five MVP awards and more than 400 touchdown passes. He would also finish perhaps the best season in NFL history, setting all-time records for touchdown passes and passing yards.

"There's no guy that deserves to be in that conversation more than Peyton," Brees said. "I mean, he's the guy who set the standard for all of us. At least since I've been in the game. Tom Brady being the other one. He's the one playing in this game, so he's the one who deserves to be talked about. He's the man of the hour."

This story, though, is about whether he's the man of all time. Say the Broncos don't beat the Seahawks and their No. 1-rated defense. Does Manning slide to say, sixth best, alongside Marino, but behind Montana, Brady, Elway, Johnny Unitas and Graham?

"Crazy," said former Dallas Cowboys defensive end Ed "Too Tall" Jones.

"Absurd," said former Baltimore Ravens coach Brian Billick.

Going from elite to the very top

This Super Bowl would give the Broncos' Pat Bowlen his third Lombardi Trophy as owner, and Elway his first championship as executive after winning two as a quarterback. And it would seemingly lift Manning from merely one of the great quarterbacks based on his overall body of work to arguably neck and surgically repaired neck with Montana.

"You don't have to win a Super Bowl to be a great quarterback. But to be in the conversation for the great-EST, you got to have that jewelry," said Shannon Sharpe, the former Bronco and Hall of Fame tight end who is now an NFL analyst for CBS. "If you don't have the rings, you're not even in the conversation. So we're just skipping over you.

"Joe Montana has four rings. Terry Bradshaw has four. Tom Brady has three. Peyton Manning has one. I didn't set the criteria. But I'm not going to let you change it to make it fit what you think it should be."

If Manning and the Broncos are to beat the Seahawks, history must be defeated. Manning is the fourth quarterback to reach the Super Bowl after leading the NFL in both passing yards and touchdown passes during the regular season. The others were Tom Brady (2007), Kurt Warner (2001) and Dan Marino (1984).

All lost their Super Bowls, by a combined score of 75-47.

The Broncos' 606 points are the most scored by a team in a single season. Of the next eight teams on the all-time scoring list, not one went on to win the Super Bowl.

In the ultimate game, defense has ruled.

Then again, it's not all that uncommon in the modern era for trends to bust. The Green Bay Packers beat Pittsburgh in the Super Bowl four years ago largely because their quarterback, Aaron Rodgers, carved up the Steelers' No. 1-ranked scoring defense.

As great as Rodgers was in 2010 and 2011, Manning was better this season.

"I don't have a top five," said former NFL coach Dick Vermeil. "But I do say Peyton's the best to have ever played that position. I've studied the numbers. I've taken all the numbers for the so-called great ones when they were great. His numbers are better."

But former Broncos running back Terrell Davis says Manning is not even the all-time best quarterback on his own team, much less the best, period. Davis would take Elway.

Why? Because with quarterbacks, Davis believes it's about more than the numbers.

"We do this in the world of sports, but they're all opinions," Davis said. "There are no facts. They're all subjective answers. If you ask me who threw for the most yards and most touchdowns, that's easy. Peyton Manning. Peyton Manning is the best. But if there are intangibles involved, if it's who got the most out of their team, that's debatable."

Combining traits of the greats

When Jones started talking about his top five quarterbacks, he pointed out traits nearly identical to Manning's idea of perfection. Elway had the strongest arm, Montana was the coolest. Marino, though, didn't have exclusivity on the release.

"Peyton and Marino have the two quickest releases of anybody I've ever seen," Jones said. "Manning is like a coach on the field. As a defensive player, if I could avoid playing against a Manning, I would."

Billick, an NFL Network analyst, immediately started his top five with Manning and Brady.

"I'll tell you one guy who's in there and nobody talks about him: Otto Graham," Billick said. "I saw film of him for a piece on NFL Films. It's a fascinating question."

Vermeil is 77 and started coaching football in 1959, so he has a little more context than most regarding any "all time" discussion. But this is an old-timer who doesn't stand up for the likes of Johnny Unitas or Otto Graham of yesteryear.

"We have a different game for quarterbacks," said Vermeil, who upon more reflection made Steve Young his second-best quarterback of all time. "Quarterbacks were never asked then to do what quarterbacks are asked to do now. Bart Starr threw the ball 18, 19 times a game. That doesn't make him any less (great). It makes him great for that vintage. Just like the Model A was a great car for 1931. No one in 1931 liked a car any better than the Model A. But today it doesn't compare."

Before Manning-Brady, there were Sid Luckman and Sammy Baugh in the 1940s. There were similarities in the quarterback rivalries. Most notably that Manning, like Baugh, was considered the better quarterback, but Brady, like Luckman, prevailed more often head to head.

A legacy, as defined in the sports world, is how an athlete is to be remembered forever more. Manning's is at stake in this Super Bowl.

But whether he wins or loses the Super Bowl on Sunday, what will be accomplished if in 75 years no one will be around to call Manning the all-time greatest quarterback, anyhow?

"That's where "all time" gets tricky for me," Davis said. "I never saw Otto Graham play. We can only talk about the guys we've seen with our own eyes. When you say 'all time,' I can only talk about 'my time.' "

Top 10 NFL quarterbacks

Denver Post NFL reporter Mike Klis lists his all-time best QBs. (If Denver loses Sunday, Manning drops behind Boss Elway, Unitas and Brady.)

1. Joe Montana

So methodically brilliant in going 4-0 in Super Bowls. His effortless big-game performances gave birth to the cliché "cool as the other side of the pillow."

2. Peyton Manning

No one ever played the position more efficiently. But it's a tough list, and the pick-six by Tracy Porter in a Super Bowl loss to New Orleans leaves him below Montana.

3. John Elway

Even if Manning was better, Elway was more mesmerizing. He could beat you by arm, by legs and by helicopter.

4. Johnny Unitas

He threw a touchdown pass in 47 consecutive games, a record that held for — get this — 52 years! Drew Brees didn't break it until 2012. Neither Montana nor Manning dominated their era as Johnny U. dominated his.

5. Tom Brady

He's not near the passer of Manning. Not even close. But there is a winning intangible about Brady that is difficult to describe.

6. Otto Graham

He went 4-0 in championship games in his first four AAFC seasons. Then he went 3-3 in NFL title games in his first six NFL seasons. But he threw 88 TD passes against 94 picks in the NFL, so don't get any ideas about a higher ranking.

7. Steve Young

This guy was so good, the 49ers gave up on Montana so they could give Young a chance to play. Might have been the all-time best combination of runner/high-percentage passer.

8. Sammy Baugh

As Babe Ruth brought the home run excitement to baseball, Baugh really delivered the forward pass to the NFL. He retired as the career leader in passing yards, touchdown passes, punt average and interceptions.

9. Brett Favre

A body of work counts, and besides one Super Bowl win, he holds all significant career passing records — at least until Peyton starts breaking them in the next year or two.

10. Bart Starr, Terry Bradshaw (tie)

Starr is the only quarterback to win five NFL championships, including Super Bowls I and II. Bradshaw went 4-0 in Super Bowls. They generally get docked because they led deeply talented teams.

Wish there was a longer list

Dan Marino, Troy Aikman, Sid Luckman, Joe Namath, Drew Brees, Fran Tarkenton, Arnie Herber, Norm Van Brocklin, Roger Staubach.

Klis: Super Bowl celebration in New York area because of 9/11

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
February 1, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. — The Broncos are here because of 9/11.

Peyton Manning and his men would have earned their trip to the Super Bowl on their merits. But the Super Bowl is not in its usual host city of Miami or New Orleans. This Super Bowl celebration is in the New York area because of the tragedy on Sept. 11, 2001.

"Roger Goodell and I started talking about New York right after 9/11," said former NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue. "We had to cancel a week in the season and we had to move everything back and New Orleans had an automobile convention there. For a while, it looked like we couldn't play in New Orleans. So Roger and I started talking. 'If we can't do it in New Orleans, let's do it in New York as a tribute to the nation and a tribute to the resilience of the people of New York in the aftermath of the tragedy.' That was sort of the first public discussion of the Super Bowl in New York.

"Everyone in New York said great. New Orleans didn't like the idea, so they ended up moving the car dealers. But that was the beginning of the conversation."

Once the Giants and Jets decided to help build a $1.6 billion, open-air stadium, New York had both the emotional energy and the venue to host the Super Bowl.

There is something fitting about Denver playing in the first New York-area Super Bowl. The Broncos came through with this nation's last victorious moment before everything changed. They beat the New York Giants and a defensive coordinator named John Fox 31-20 on Sept. 10, 2001, in the first game played at Denver's Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

It was a subdued celebration because popular Broncos wide receiver Ed McCaffrey suffered a gruesome broken leg.

About eight hours later, terrorists coordinated the hijackings of four U.S. commercial jets, crashing two into the World Trade Center's twin towers that were across the Hudson River from where the Broncos' Super Bowl XLVIII hotel is located.

McCaffrey is at this Super Bowl in various media capacities, including doing the Broncos' game analysis on KOA radio.

Super swan songs. For many key Denver players whose contracts expire March 11, this Super Bowl will be their last game in an orange jersey.

The Broncos will try to re-sign wide receiver Eric Decker, but the leverage of free agency will allow him to seek a multiyear contract worth $7 million, maybe $8 million, maybe even $9 million per year.

The Broncos love Knowshon Moreno, Zane Beadles, Dominique Rodgers- Cromartie, Shaun Phillips, Robert Ayers, Wesley Woodyard and Mike Adams, among others. But do the Broncos love those players enough to pay them what they might command on the open market?

Also, there figures to be an adjustment on cornerback Champ Bailey's $9 million salary next season and possibly the $6 million coming to wideout Wes Welker.

"I'd love to stay in Denver," said Beadles, a starting guard. "I also want a fair deal and a deal I deserve. I love the organization, I love the city. So, we'll see.

"I'm not worried about it right now. All I can worry about is the play and product I put on the field. If I focus on that and do well, good things are going to happen in the end. I'm just focused on winning the Super Bowl and we'll see what happens after that."

Denver teammates soon to be free agents said basically the same thing this past week. Not worried about anything but the Seahawks. But come on, guys.

"I'd be lying if I said I've never thought about it," Ayers said. "But right now, we have a great challenge at hand: the Seattle Seahawks. That's where we're focused on, and I want to help us get a (title) ring. Lord willing, I'll be here. Whatever is God's plan, that's what's going to happen. We'll see after the season."

Spotlight on ...

Michael Bennett, DL, Seahawks

When: 4:30 p.m. Super Bowl Sunday vs. the Broncos at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J.

What's up: Bennett is the Seahawks' most versatile and impactful defensive lineman on a team loaded with them. At 6-foot-4 and 274 pounds, he can play tackle in nickel situations and outside end in the base. He led the Seahawks with

8½ sacks this season, and he added another 1½ sacks — along with two forced fumbles and two fumble recoveries — in the Seahawks' playoff wins against New Orleans and San Francisco.

Background: Another undrafted NFL player with a chip on his shoulder. Grew up in Houston with younger brother Martellus Bennett, who is a starting tight end for the Chicago Bears. Michael played at Texas A&M and was signed as a rookie free agent by the Seahawks. He won a season-opening roster spot until October 2009, when he was waived. Tampa Bay immediately put in a claim. He didn't produce much with the Bucs until he broke out in 2012, his fourth year, with nine sacks. A free agent after last season, he returned to Seattle with a one-year, $4.8 million contract.

Klis' take: This guy is hot. He's more pass rusher than run stopper, but he has quickness and power, so he can do both. The Seahawks have a four-man rotation at defensive end — Cliff Avril (eight sacks), Chris Clemons (4½ sacks) and Red Bryant (1½ sacks, 31 tackles) — that will give Denver offensive tackles Chris Clark and Orlando Franklin all they can handle. Bennett prefers left end, so he'll mostly be Franklin's responsibility. Getting a step on Franklin is one thing. Getting a step on Franklin before Peyton Manning releases the ball is another.

"Yeah, I feel like I can get to him," Bennett said at his final Super Bowl media interview Thursday. "I wouldn't be playing in the game (if I couldn't)."

Broncos' pick plays to meet Seahawks' aggressive, physical DBs

By Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
February 1, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. — There are times during a game when Broncos receivers Demaryius Thomas and Wes Welker run a crisscross pass route so close together that their shoulder pads touch.

"We try to be precise," Thomas said. "You are trying to make it hard so that the defender can't get through, they can't follow. They have to go underneath or go behind, and that gets our guys open."

Call it a rub route, call it a rubout or call it a pick play, but call it highly effective. It's a central component of Denver's high-octane offense, something the Seattle Seahawks say they'll be braced for Sunday.

"It's something we are certainly aware of," Seattle safety Kam Chancellor said. "You have to get around them, be athletic and get around."

Rub routes have multiplied in recent years because of the incredible accuracy of quarterbacks such as the Broncos' Peyton Manning, New England's Tom Brady, New Orleans' Drew Brees and Green Bay's Aaron Rodgers. Because those type of quarterbacks are so accurate and can dissect a zone defense with ease, defenses were forced to go to tight, physical, man-to-man coverage at the line of scrimmage.

In the face of that pressure, offenses countered with a variety of pick plays and sophisticated routes. The Broncos, for instance, align receivers in "bunch" or "stack" formations in order to free up space for them to operate. In essence, the Broncos designate one receiver to come off the line and get tangled up with a defender, thus freeing up another receiver. The goal is keep the defense from getting its hands on all the receivers, which disrupts the timing of the routes. Picks and rubs are most often used in crucial situations — on third downs and often in the red zone, where space is squeezed — when teams look to beat tight coverage.

Critics call it cheating, claiming that receivers are essentially committing offensive pass interference. But Broncos offensive coordinator Adam Gase said rub routes are just one more tool for an offense to exploit.

"Everybody runs different forms of the play, not just the Broncos," Gase said. "It's about getting a (defender) to change directions."

No team uses picks or rub routes more than the Broncos, except perhaps the Patriots. For example, in their Week 12 meeting, which New England won 34-31 at home in overtime, the teams combined to run 12 pick plays in the second quarter alone, six by each team.

That's ironic, especially given that Patriots coach Bill Belichick unleashed a tirade the day after Denver beat New England in the AFC championship game. In that game, Broncos receiver Wes Welker collided with New England cornerback Aqib Talib, knocking Talib out of the game on a pass play to the Broncos' Thomas, who was the "underneath" receiver on the rub route. Belichick called the incident "one of the worst plays I've seen."

Dean Blandino, the NFL's vice president of officiating, said "under current rules, this is a legal play."

Mike Pereira, a former vice president of NFL officiating and now an analyst for Fox Sports, defended Denver's use of pick plays.

"Everybody assumes that when they hear the word 'pick,' it's illegal," Pereira said. "But not all picks are illegal, and Denver has run them for years."

Pereira pointed out that receivers are allowed to make contact with defenders within 1 yard of the line of scrimmage, which is why a lot of teams set up so-called bubble screens for their receivers. One of Manning's favorite plays is throwing a bubble screen to wide receiver Demaryius Thomas, which allows him to use his strength and speed to break free as he cuts to an open gap.

Pereira also said it's legal for a receiver to get in a defender's way downfield, so long as the receiver doesn't intentionally initiate contact while the ball is in the air. If he does, it should be called pass interference.

Pereira, however, also acknowledged that officials face tough judgment calls when it comes to pick plays.

"If you look at the Welker play, technically it was offensive pass interference because his pick occurred when the ball was inches away from Demaryius Thomas' hands," Pereira said. "It was one frame on the tape, so fast I can hardly stop it on the frame. It was like 1/26th of a second. So it was a bang-bang play, and it was impossible for the official to discern it."

The Seahawks will try to combat pick plays by jamming Denver's receivers at the line. Seahawks opponents often complain that Seattle's defensive backs frequently

get too physical with receivers without getting penalized. Expect plenty of hand-to-hand fighting at the line of scrimmage.

The Seahawks are confident they can disrupt the Broncos' pick plays.

"You have to know when it's coming," safety Earl Thomas said. "They have little tells and keys. Everything is attack mode. When you know, you just go. You don't second-guess yourself. Play with the absence of fear."

While the Broncos will be looking to rub out defenders, the Seahawks vow to get physical.

"At the end of the day, watching film, I don't think anyone ever hits them. They just take the pick play," linebacker Bobby Wagner said. "We're looking, we're very aware of the pick plays and when they show up, we're going to hit them."

Dusty Saunders: Plethora of electronic media descend upon Super Bowl

By Dusty Saunders
The Denver Post
February 1, 2014

It would have been appropriate if the loquacious Chris Berman, covering his 32nd Super Bowl, would have ended ESPN's Sunday pre-Super Bowl coverage by booming: "Give my regards to Broadway. Remember me to Herald Square."

George M. Cohan's rousing lyrics sum up the broadcasting scenarios of Super Bowl week, which produced a record number of TV and radio types covering the 48th event.

Super Bowl XLVIII provides special enticement — the first outdoor big game in a cold-weather city — and is being held across the river from the nation's largest metropolis.

The mention of Herald Square is certainly appropriate since Berman and his associates have been broadcasting from the venue, at 34th Street and Broadway, while allowing fans to tour the makeshift studio. ESPN, which also is utilizing a Times Square studio, began coverage at 4 a.m. Monday, utilizing 140 staffers.

This full-week barrage has boosted Fox Sports 1, which premiered in August. Among the cable network's 90 staffers on hand is Joel Klatt, an Arvada native and a former local TV sports talent who has had a key role as studio anchor.

Obviously, the NFL Network is not ignoring the Super Bowl. The cable outlet has had more than 100 employees at the game this past week, featuring 140 hours of programming, eight locations (including Times Square and MetLife Stadium) and interviews with 40 ex-NFL stars, 17 who have Super Bowl rings.

Denver's four major broadcast outlets are part of the crowded scene.

KUSA-Channel 9, billed as "the Broncos station" because of local "exclusivity," has been featuring Drew Soicher, Susie Wargin and Rod Mackey, along with several regular news staffers. Sportscasters Vic Lombardi, Tom Helmer and Reggie Rivers lead the KCNC-Channel 4 team, along with three reporters. KMGH-Channel 7's sportscasters Lionel Bienvenu and Arran Andersen have been involved in Broncos interviews while providing color on the New York scene.

KDVR-31, which will air Sunday's game, has three sports personalities on the scene: Nick Griffith, Raul Martinez and Kami Carmann.

Radio lines. KOA Radio's broadcasting team (Dave Logan, in his third Broncos Super Bowl, and Ed McCaffrey) has been in the New York area for a week. Other KOA staffers include Andy Lindahl, David Treadwell and Alan Roach.

The game, simulcast on 103.5 FM/The Fox, also can be heard on 104.3 FM/The Fan, a national Westwood One broadcast with Boomer Esiason and Kevin Harlan.

Who's not there. Jim Nantz, who provided more Broncos play-by-play regular season coverage than any other national broadcaster.

Nantz, the network's headline golf talent, is covering the Phoenix Open, which is scheduled to end around the time Super Bowl XLVIII begins.

Broncos Q&A: Denver guard Louis Vasquez

Super switch "a no-brainer"

By Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
February 1, 2014

NEWARK, N.J. — Louis Vasquez made the right decision.

When the former San Diego Chargers guard became a free agent last year, he had plenty of suitors. But he wasn't looking only for more money. He wanted to play for a winner too.

The Broncos signed the 335-pound lineman early in free agency because they figured he would help protect quarterback Peyton Manning and open lanes for their running backs. Denver gave Vasquez a four-year contract worth $23.5 million.

He responded with an all-pro season and helped the Broncos (15-3) advance to their first Super Bowl in 15 years.

Vasquez, with his Mexican-American heritage, was a big hit with Spanish-speaking reporters who attended Super Bowl media day.

Q: Why did you choose the Broncos?

A: I just was looking for where the team was headed, what kind of chemistry we'd have throughout the team, and overall where the location was. It was a no-brainer for me. Going from San Diego to Colorado, it's a big difference, but (it's) two different beauties, I'd say. You have the mountains and the landscape in Colorado, and the beaches in San Diego. For me it's just a different beauty, and I've been loving it ever since.

Q: What's your relationship like with center Manny Ramirez? You seem tight.

A: We call each other brothers. We played with each other two years at Texas Tech. Once I got here, he was one of the first teammates I called. I was like, "Hey, we're teammates again." We kind of picked back up where we left off in college, and he made my transition that much easier from San Diego to Denver.

Q: You're in the Super Bowl now. That must be kind of surreal.

A: It is. Just waking up every morning and telling myself, "Hey, we're here." We haven't accomplished what we want to accomplish just yet, but just to know that

this is Super Bowl week, and we're actually playing in it, has been one of the most surreal things that I've had to deal with.

Q: Your Mexican-American heritage seems very important to you. Is that accurate?

A: It's everything for me and Manny as well. To have everybody like you watching this Sunday, it's an amazing feeling.

Q: What does it mean to be representing the Latino community in the Super Bowl?

A: I actually spoke with Manny about it. It can be overwhelming, but we're taking it for what it is, and it's awesome to know that we have such a large group, especially the youth out there watching us. Hopefully it opens their eyes to say anything is possible, no matter what it is.

Q: How are you dealing with this week? Keeping your focus on the big game?

A: Just trying to keep my emotions in check. There's a lot going on, this being Super Bowl week and all. Being in the biggest city in America already, and the Super Bowl being here, there's so much going on. Just to mentally keep yourself focused on the goal you have at hand. That's probably my biggest challenge right now, just keeping everything in order, everything small-focused, and preparing for the ultimate game.

About Vasquez

2001-04: Considered one of the best offensive linemen in Texas while attending Corsicana High School.

2005-2008: Vasquez was a four-year letterman at Texas Tech, where he started 34-of-39 career games and received all-Big 12 Conference recognition after his final three seasons.

2009: Selected by the Chargers in the third round (78th overall) of the NFL draft. Vasquez started in 14 games for San Diego while helping the Chargers win their fourth consecutive AFC West Division title.

2010: Started only 10 games for San Diego, missing time because of knee and neck injuries.

2011: Vasquez started in 14 games, helping a San Diego team that ranked sixth in the NFL in total offense.

2012: Was the only offensive lineman in the NFL to start every game, commit no penalties and allow three or fewer sacks (2½).

2013: Signed by the Broncos as an unrestricted free agent. Vasquez started all 16 regular-season games, allowed no sacks and was named to his first Pro Bowl. He was the only player to participate in 100 percent of the Broncos' offensive or defensive snaps.

Broncos' five starting offensive linemen form a formidable wall

By Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
February 1, 2014

The Broncos' engine was breaking down.

The most important cog, all-pro offensive tackle Ryan Clady, who signed a five-year, $52 million contract during the offseason, was lost in Week 2 to a season-ending foot injury. In June, center J.D. Walton had surgery on the ankle he injured last season. By December, he had been released. Dan Koppen, expected to replace Walton, suffered a knee injury in July.

And yet the Broncos are in Super Bowl XLVIII, and did so with the most prolific offense in NFL history, anchored by a retooled group of linemen. Denver's pocket protection enabled Peyton Manning to throw for the most touchdowns (55) and yards (5,477) of anyone in league history. Manning, who gets rid of the ball extraordinarily fast, was sacked only 18 times while attempting 659 passes. Denver allowed a sack percentage of only .258, by far the lowest in the NFL. In two playoff games, he threw 79 passes and wasn't sacked once.

The Broncos (15-3) also can run the ball well. They finished 15th in the 32-team league in yards rushing and ran for more than 100 yards in 14 of their 18 games. Starting tailback Knowshon Moreno, a former first-round draft pick, had his best season with 1,038 yards rushing.

Mark Schlereth, an NFL analyst for ESPN and a former guard who played on three Super Bowl title teams, two with Denver, is most impressed with the ability of the Broncos' offensive linemen to adjust to Manning's play calling.

"To line up at the line of scrimmage with the potential to run or pass, and be equally good at both, takes a lot of talent," Schlereth said. "It takes exceptional execution from the guys up front. And it also takes a special mentality. Those guys have to be athletic and smart, and they have been both."

Here's a look at the five men who form Manning's great wall of protection:

C Manny Ramirez

When the injuries began to mount, Ramirez slid over from right guard to center, where he had never made an NFL start, and had a terrific season. This was his first season as a full-time center since 2000, when he was in high school.

"Manny is so physically strong," said left tackle Chris Clark. "He's in charge. He's a great guy, talks loud, makes the call loud at the line of scrimmage. He'll make a call just to make sure we're on the same page. He's our anchor."

Ramirez's journey has been arduous. He has gone from being a seldom-used backup guard on the 0-16 Detroit Lions in 2008 to the starting center for a historic offense.

He's most proud of his line mates' ability to adapt. He said the line has jelled to play its best football at the right time.

"It's been about being able to execute our game plan," Ramirez said. "We take a lot of pride in being able to protect No. 18, and we do understand that that's not an easy job. It's not every game that you're able to say that he didn't get touched, but we've been able to do that so far (in the playoffs). Hopefully we're able to go maintain that."

LG Zane Beadles

"He's a very smart guy. He's more of the Peyton Manning of the offensive line," Clark said.

"He's so darn smart," Magazu said. "If I say anything wrong, he's there to get me squared away."

Beadles, who was born in Casper and raised in Sandy, Utah, majored in mechanical engineering at the University of Utah.

Denver drafted him in the second round in 2010, and he has started 62-of-64 regular-season games. He will become a free agent after the Super Bowl and would prefer to stay with the Broncos but said he will seek "a fair deal."

Right now, Beadles is pinching himself, thinking about how far he, and the Broncos, has come.

"It's been an awesome experience," he said. "My rookie year, obviously going 4-12, with coach (Josh McDaniels) getting fired in the middle of the season was tough. Everything that went with that season, it was hard.

"I didn't really know any better at the time. Being a rookie, I just thought this was what the NFL was. But coming from a season like that to where we're at now, it's very rewarding and it's awesome to be able to say you've been a part of it."

RG Louis Vasquez

How much did the Broncos want Vasquez? They signed the 335-pound guard just hours after free agency opened last spring, giving him a four-year contract worth $23.5 million.

He responded with an all-pro season, dominating defensive linemen on running plays and becoming a premier pocket protector. He has not allowed a sack all season.

"He's probably the biggest human I've ever seen in my life and eats the most I've ever seen of anybody in my life," said Zane Beadles, laughing. "He's a phenomenal player."

"I thank God every day that we have him," said Dave Magazu, the Broncos' offensive line coach.

Vasquez, a former Charger, was thrilled to join Peyton Manning in Denver but acknowledged he didn't realize how demanding it would be.

"It's a lot of work during the week, a lot of memorizing," he said. "Just meeting time with (Manning) in general to make sure we're on top of it, because a lot of his words and signals can change meaning from week to week. It's a whirlwind."

RT Orlando Franklin

Amid all of the changes on the Denver line, Franklin has been rock solid. The Broncos have played 53 games from 2011 to the present, counting playoffs, and Franklin has started all 53.

Franklin's rough-to-riches tale is well told by now. At age 15, he was arrested for breaking and entering, possession of a stolen vehicle and robbery and was placed in a Toronto detention center. By then, he had been suspended from school nearly two dozen times.

His mother, Sylvia Allen, refused to bail him out, letting him sit in jail for a few weeks. Finally, they agreed to a personal, written contract.

It read: "I, Orlando Franklin, promise my mother, Sylvia Allen, that I will never get in trouble with the police again. I promise to dedicate myself to football ..."

Said Franklin: "I told her I would agree to these rules if she put me in the best situation to succeed. She kept her end of the bargain, and as of right now, I've kept my end."

Franklin starred at the University of Miami and was drafted by the Broncos, who moved him into their starting lineup as a rookie in 2011.

LT Chris Clark

When Clady went down, all eyes were on Clark, the man responsible for protecting Manning's blind side. After all, Clark had started only six games in his previous three seasons with the Broncos. And when Clark allowed a sack of Manning in his first game as a starter against Oakland in Week 3, critics were ready to pounce. The howls got louder after an Oct. 20 game at Lucas Oil Stadium when the Colts' Robert Mathis, working against Clark much of the time, sacked Manning four times in an Indianapolis victory.

But Clark responded and got better each week. He accepted his challenge.

"I don't really feel pressure. I do my best to apply the pressure," Clark said. "It's about the job. It's not about 'Can he do it?' or 'Will I do it?' Being a backup, I felt that my back was against the wall, and I still feel the same way — guys look at me and they lick their chops. It's what drives me to be successful."

Clark's growth was essential to the machine's success.

"We run what's in the game plan and Chris, like the rest of the guys, has protected Peyton. They know that is job No. 1," offensive coordinator Adam Gase said.

John Lynch, former Bronco, doesn't make Pro Football Hall of Fame

By Patrick Saunders
The Denver Post
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK — The safety who brought thunder to the Rockies will have to wait to gain entrance into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

John Lynch, the hard-hitting safety for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and later the Broncos was not elected Saturday night. Lynch, one of 15 finalists, did not make the cut to the round of 10 players.

The players who make up the class of 2014 are: Seattle Seahawks tackle Walter Jones; Tampa Bay linebacker Derrick Brooks; Buffalo Bills wide receiver Andre Reed; Rams and Cardinals defensive back Aeneas Williams; and Giants defensive end Michael Strahan.

Also making it as a senior candidates were Raiders punter Ray Guy and Claude Humphrey, a defensive end for the Atlanta Falcons and Philadelphia Eagles.

The Class of 2014 was announced at the NFL Honors show at Radio City Music Hall.

Lynch was a longshot to make it. But it's a positive sign that he was a finalist in just his second year of eligibility.

"I'm trying not to have a whole lot of expectations," Lynch said Friday. "I'm trying to find some way to enjoy the process. How you do that is appreciate that people think highly enough of you to be in this conversation."

Bolstering Lynch's future candidacy as a Hall of Famer is his nine Pro Bowl selections. Only Hall of Famer Ken Houston, with 10, has more among safeties. Lynch also helped anchor the famed Super Bowl-winning Tampa Bay Buccaneers defense of 2002, along with defensive tackle Warren Sapp and Brooks, who made the Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility.

Broncos cornerback Champ Bailey ready to be a champion

By Benjamin Hochman
The Denver Post
February 2, 2014

NEW YORK — Nicknames are like steroids for egos.

In sports, superstars' handles are superfluous. LeBron James, for one, already is the best at playing basketball, yet his "King James" moniker anoints him as sports royalty. The whole thing, really, seems over the top, until you look at Roland Bailey.

They call him Champ. The Broncos cornerback exudes all of the virtues of what fans desire in a champion. He's cool by not acting cool. He has this aura around him, but not because he's a self-proclaimed stud. It's because he's revered in football circles. It's because he speaks softly, yet with resonance. It's because he's actually so humble, it's hard to believe that someone with his talent isn't shouting about it.

Really, the only problem with the nickname Champ is that he's not a champ.

But, after 15 seasons in the NFL, this sure Pro Football Hall of Famer finally will play in the Super Bowl. The 35-year-old cornerback faces the Seattle Seahawks on Sunday. Winners get title rings.

"That's the only reason I still lace them up," Bailey said, "because I want to play in games like this."

Father Time must be an Oakland Raiders fan. How else could you explain how he treated this legendary Bronco? In what seemed destined to be a Super Bowl run, Bailey missed 11 games this season because of a foot injury. And when he did play, he seemed slow-footed at times, looking more Roland than Champ.

"He's been hurt. Everyone thinks he's old and over the hill. But great players, when it matters most, play great," said former Broncos safety John Lynch. "And he really did that against New England."

In the AFC championship game against the Patriots on Jan. 19, Bailey didn't just cover slot receivers, he smothered slot receivers. It was an eye- watering performance, the aging warrior mustering up one more fight.

And now, his lifelong goal is attainable. Sports are cruel because, well, even a transcendent cornerback has no control over the success of his team's offense, just

like an ace pitcher needs his offense to score. As such, some men like Champ never become champs. Bailey is a 12-time Pro Bowl selection, an NFL record for a cornerback, but only now will he play in the only bowl that matters.

"You think of all the great players who never made it to a Super Bowl and how hard it is to get there," said Boss Bailey, Champ's brother and a former NFL linebacker. "I played six years in the league, and I never even had a winning season. He's been a great pro all of his career. It's been 15 years and he still plays at a high level, so the timing couldn't be more perfect for him."

Front yards do something to boys. It's where they escape. It's where playing make-believe and playing football become the same thing.

"We always pretended we were great athletes. Deion Sanders — oh, my God — Darrell Green, these are the guys we'd emulate," said the Broncos' Bailey, who was raised in tiny Folkston, Ga.

A rookie with the Washington Redskins in 1999, Bailey sure enough played with Green, an iconic cornerback who was a two-time Super Bowl champion. The next season, Sanders and his two title rings joined the Washington secondary.

"You were them in the front yard and then you were their teammates," Bailey was told.

"How unbelievable is that?" he replied during a quiet moment amid Super Bowl preparation.

"A dream come true?"

"I never dreamed that," he said, "because I never thought it could happen."

Bailey has joined Sanders and Green on the shortlist of all-time great cornerbacks. At his best, Bailey not only is track-star stealth but freakishly strong, a rare combination at cornerback. He cherishes open-field tackling, which some diva cornerbacks look as dirty work that is saved for safeties. For years, quarterbacks chose to throw to a lesser receiver than throw to their best guy if he was being covered by Denver's best guy. In perhaps Bailey's greatest season, 2006, quarterbacks threw at him only 35 times. He intercepted 10 of those passes, allowing only four receptions. That's right, four.

"He should have been the defensive MVP in 2005 and 2006, especially 2006," said Andrew Mason, a longtime statistics analyst of the NFL. "The best play from a cornerback in my lifetime. Insane stuff."

But first it was Folkston that made Bailey, well, Bailey. His mother, Elaine, said she started calling him Champ when he was a baby, a preordained nickname for a boy

who would become a pro's pro. Elaine, who still lives in Folkston, flies to numerous Broncos games, wearing a jersey with MOM BAILEY above the No. 24. She, Boss and 35 family members came to Denver for the AFC championship game, a heck of a locale for a family reunion.

"We had a pretty close family. We lived right next door to my grandmother. That's one thing we had — each other," Boss Bailey said. "We weren't rich by any means, and we definitely didn't have it all, but at the same time, we had so much family support that we were able to play sports, and (received rides) to games. They put in a lot of hours on the road, getting us to different games in different cities.

"And, shoot, we'd play out there in the front yard or whatever yard we could find. Family reunions with the cousins, just around the neighborhood. We used to go around town and play pickup games."

And now, Champ will play a game in the front yard of front yards.

He is beloved from Folkston to Fort Collins. Dads in Colorado dress in No. 24 jerseys, while their boys pretend they're Bailey in front yards. Broncos cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie even wore a Bailey jersey on campus while he was a college student. Bailey's aura touched a generation.

"It was just a pleasure for me to finally get a chance to play with him and see how he handles himself," said former Broncos safety Brian Dawkins. "See, he was a professional. A lot of guys that have success aren't professionals."

Sunday's matchup is fitting — the Broncos have the quiet, cool cornerback, while the Seahawks have the brashest dude in the NFL. For years, everyone just knew Bailey was the best cornerback in the league. He didn't have to scream that line on national TV, as all-pro Richard Sherman of the Seahawks did after the NFC championship game.

"Champ's humble, and you don't see Champ being flashy or demanding respect or using his seniority to get things," said Broncos safety Mike Adams. "His presence alone — when Champ walks in the room, it's like, 'that's Champ.' His presence alone says enough."

But Bailey is famous for flipping the switch, nice to nasty in the snap of a football. And with Seahawks wide receiver Percy Harvin now healthy for Super Bowl XLVIII, Bailey's performance Sunday will be crucial for Denver to stop this suddenly bolstered Seattle offense. When Harvin lines up in the slot, it's likely Bailey who will be opposite him.

Neither Champ nor Boss has ever attended a Super Bowl. The brothers never wanted to go unless they were playing. So, when Denver defeated New England, Champ Bailey suddenly was whipped into the whirlwind that is Super Bowl week.

Sitting at a podium during Super Bowl media day last week, dozens of reporters peppered him with questions — until he was interrupted by an old friend. Deion Sanders now works for NFL Network, and he wedged his way next to the podium for a fun-loving interview with his protégé.

Asked why he doesn't boast loudly like Sherman, Bailey told Sanders: "My game speaks for itself. I'm still here, ain't I?"

"You ready to go," Sanders asked, "after *all* these years?"

"You know I am. Come on, man — I'm always ready," Bailey said. "I feel good. It's been a long year, but I'm ready to go."

After Sanders left, Bailey was asked about his early days with the Redskins, when he played alongside the man he emulated in the front yard.

"Man, he's one of a kind with his personality, the way he played the game," Bailey said in his slow, soft, Southern cadence. "One thing about him, though — people don't understand how hard he worked. You don't just strap them up and think it's going to happen. He made it seem like that, but that man put the time in. And that definitely rubbed off on me. That's why I'm still sitting here."

Hochman: This one's for Broncos Country

By Benjamin Hochman
The Denver Post
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK — The Broncos will win the Super Bowl, and John Elway, with a toothy smile as wide as Terrance Knighton, will proclaim from the postgame podium: "This one's for Pat!"

The phrase "This one's for" has become a Denver staple ever since team owner Pat Bowlen declared "This one's for John!" after the Broncos' first Super Bowl title. This one, yes, will be for Mr. B — the patriarch — and this one also will be for Peyton Manning and Champ Bailey and even Elway once again, the quarterback-turned-executive, the icon who somehow found a way to become even more iconic.

But win or lose, this one's for Denver. It's bonkers to think that there are high school freshmen who haven't been alive to see a Broncos Super Bowl championship. The last time the Broncos won the Super Bowl, Bailey was preparing for the NFL draft at the University of Georgia.

This one's for the families who pass down their love for the Broncos like an heirloom. For the fathers and sons and mothers and daughters who are connected by blood and genetics, sure, but really their bond is laced together like a football, a relationship strengthened by memories of Crushes and Drives and Helicopters.

This one's for the fans who scraped together money to fly to America's most expensive city and attend America's most expensive sporting event because financial sacrifices are worth being in the building to see the Broncos win their third Super Bowl title. Yes, they might be seated closer to the clouds than to Chris Clark, but attending the Super Bowl isn't as much about seeing it as feeling it, and there are few feelings better than sharing electric ecstasy when your team wins a championship.

That being said, this one's for the fans at home, who will share this moment with family and friends, the people with whom they wanted to make memories. This is important stuff. This isn't going to the bar on a lazy October afternoon to watch Broncos-Jaguars. There are few moments in a fan's life that literally are unforgettable. Someday you'll be old and gray, riding in your grandson's hovercraft, regaling stories about being sardined on a couch, nervously guzzling cans of Coors while watching the Broncos win the Super Bowl on this antiquated HD television screen.

This one's for the freaky fanatics, the guys with the Broncos logo shaved into their heads, the girls with Broncos tattoos inked into their souls — people who alter their body to pronounce their love for the Broncos.

This one's also for the quiet fans, the nondescript natives who don't need to paint their bodies orange to prove that the Broncos are part of their DNA. They feel the bond, and that's good enough for them.

This one's for the online community of Orange Nation, the tweeters and bloggers and commenters who fuel fandom at their fingertips. They lose themselves in social media, bonding with passionate people just like them who, after a few back-and-forths, mean more to them than many of their Facebook "friends" whom they haven't talked to since high school. Strangers united by handles and hashtags.

This one's for the Denverites who don't understand a read option or a bubble screen, but are beaming because, beyond the X's and O's, the Broncos represent their city, their people, their community. That's Denver out there on the field. And we have skiing and snowboarding and microbrews and marijuana, but it's the Broncos, darn it, who unite Denver.

Are Broncos ready for Seahawks' No. 1-rated defense?

By Troy E. Renck
The Denver Post
February 1, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. — Peyton Manning's story is ripped straight from an after-school special. The legend confronts doubt, his longtime employer fires him, he undergoes multiple neck surgeries, and he leads his new team to a Super Bowl.

The only things missing are a few puppies and an all-expenses-paid trip to Disney World before the credits roll and the screen fades to black.

And then there are the Seattle Seahawks. Their movie is little more edgy, and if Marshawn Lynch's iTunes account provides the soundtrack, it's X-rated. They are a collection of undrafted, overlooked reclamation projects.

They play angry. They play with a foot on the pedal. All red line, all the time. "The Fast and the Physical."

This game pits the league's top-ranked offense — and most prolific ever — vs. the best defense. For the past week the Seahawks have been asked how they are going to deal with Manning. Their response? He has to deal with us.

"Everything in football works both ways, you know?" Seahawks safety Earl Thomas said. "I don't think he has faced a defense like ours this season. With our personnel, we have so many guys who can impact the game in their own way. Peyton knows the type of players we have."

For Manning, much is at stake. Namely his legacy, talk he understandably dismisses as something reserved "for when you are 70 years old." Win a second Super Bowl with his regular-season numbers, and he's in the conversation as the greatest ever. The Seahawks, too, are staring down the barrel of history. All defenses of their ilk — the Pittsburgh Steelers' "Steel Curtain," Buddy Ryan's 1985 Chicago Bears, the 2000 Baltimore Ravens — won the big game, forever protecting their reputations as firewalls.

The Seahawks' "Legion of Boom" wants to join that group.

"We know we are good," defensive lineman Michael Bennett said. "We have to do what we've done. Now is not the time to change things."

While the Seahawks have a superior pass rush, and a deep defensive line that allows them to rotate players, their strength is at the back end, where they blanket opposing receivers.

In talking to multiple Seahawks over the past two weeks, peeks at their game plan emerge. They are prepared to stay with their basic sets against the Broncos, pressing and playing man-to-man on the outside, while loading the "box" with seven defenders to not only shut down the running game but pressure Manning up the middle. This strategy leaves the middle of the field as the soft underbelly. Manning has torched teams with vertical routes to tight end Julius Thomas or on short rub/pick crossing plays this season.

It'll be up to Seattle's linebackers to disrupt those plays.

"We are going to hit them. Who? His receivers. Anyone who comes through the middle," said linebacker Bobby Wagner, who calls the Seahawks' defensive audibles and leads the team in tackles. "There are certain formations they will line up in when we know what's coming. We have to talk, especially if we are in man coverage. But watching them on film, I don't think teams hit them on the picks. When they show up, we are going to hit them."

While Manning hasn't attacked a defense as good as Seattle's this season, the Seahawks have not encountered anyone like Manning. The Drew Brees argument gets advanced, but he was awful on the road this season and doesn't get the ball out as quickly as Manning. Many of Manning's throws are released in less than two seconds, which is not enough time to pressure him.

Manning will use "trips" formations with three receivers on one side of the field, forcing the Seahawks to make uncomfortable choices. If all-pro cornerback Richard Sherman takes away Demaryius Thomas, then a nickel back such as Walter Thurmond will be left to deal with Julius Thomas or wide receiver Eric Decker. Plus, the Seattle corners will tip their hands if they line up directly over the receivers, giving Manning an easy presnap read. The Seahawks will camouflage a bit, switching in and out of zone, or playing zone on one side of the field and man on the other.

But they don't change much. They are more about punching than bobbing and weaving.

This means it is paramount that Bennett, who stays fresh from Seattle's liberal defensive line rotation, and Red Bryant get Manning off his spot with pressure up the middle.

"He has to feel us, to feel the heat," Bennett said.

When Manning has struggled, which isn't often, he's been forced to move his feet and hold on to the ball longer he wants. An extra second swings the advantage back to the Seahawks' Legion of Boom secondary to make a game-changing play.

Fast vs. fast and physical.

"This is the ultimate challenge, playing a future Hall of Famer. A first-ballot guy," Bryant said. "He has weapons everywhere. What better defense to take this on than us?"

Broncos have won twice in six previous trips to Super Bowl

By Bick Lucas
The Denver Post
February 1, 2014

SUPER BOWL XXXIII

Broncos 34, Falcons 19

MIAMI — Welcome to 7's heaven, with all of Colorado feeling as high as the Broncos quarterback. Welcome to Denver's dynasty, with the Broncos becoming only the sixth team in NFL history to do a double take.

Back for seconds, back for glory, the Broncos devoured Atlanta's Dirty Birds and all the trimmings that came along with it. So start clearing space at the happiest place on earth — Denver's training facility on Broncos Parkway in Englewood — for another Vince Lombardi Trophy to go along with the one that shined there last season.

The Broncos are ahead of the Falcons 34-19 forever.

Two-ché. Do we hear three? Will John Elway put his retirement plans on hold and come back for a third?

"I don't know. This definitely throws a kink into it," Elway said. "This is what I came back for, to enjoy the Super Bowl. I'm going to savor this."

Adam Schefter, The Denver Post

SUPER BOWL XXXII

Broncos 31, Packers 24

SAN DIEGO — They tore apart history and wrote their own. For the first time in 38 years, for the first time ever, the Denver Broncos are masters of the football universe.

World champions. It has a ring to it.

In a Super Bowl XXXII classic, the Broncos played a classic game, mastering football, conquering the sport, humbling the defending world champions. The Broncos beat the odds and the Packers 31-24. They halted the AFC's ignominious 13-game Super Bowl losing streak, became the second wild-card team ever to win

the Super Bowl, notched the second-biggest upset in Super Bowl history and, in the process, made an entire city's heart somersault.

And as Broncos owner Pat Bowlen stood on a postgame platform that made him feel a Mile High, accepting the Vince Lombardi Trophy from NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue, he delivered a message loud enough for the 69,812 in San Diego's Qualcomm Stadium and everyone partying across Colorado to hear.

"There's one thing I want to say here tonight, and it's only four words," Bowlen said. "This one's for John."

Adam Schefter, The Denver Post

SUPER BOWL XXIV

49ers 55, Broncos 10

NEW ORLEANS — In his third trip to the championship plate of professional football, John Elway struck out again Sunday, dragging his bat back to the dugout like a weighted albatross he may never unload.

Did he get rattled in the Denver Broncos' 55-10 Super Bowl loss to the San Francisco 49ers?

Does he choke in the big game?

Were the remarks of Terry Bradshaw still burning in his ears?

How could somebody who played so well in the AFC championship game play so poorly in the Super Bowl?

Is it a lack of maturity, or mental toughness, as Bradshaw suggested?

Are there enough years left in Elway's career to remove the stigma of three lousy performances in three lopsided Super Bowl losses?

Already, the questions are piling up.

"I feel bad for him," said a sympathetic Matt Millen of the 49ers. "He's going to take a lot of abuse he really doesn't deserve.

"It's not fair. He's going to be labeled a loser."

Joe Sanchez, The Denver Post

SUPER BOWL XXII

Redskins 42, Broncos 10

SAN DIEGO — Washington shredded Denver in Super Bowl XXII.

Like worthless documents, the Denver Broncos were cut up, torn apart and scattered about San Diego's Jack Murphy Stadium by Ollie North's favorite team.

The Washington Redskins' Sunday massacre was 42-10.

Orange Madness turns into Orange Sadness once more.

Broncomaniac Depression has set in again.

Maybe the fourth time will be a charm. If there is a fourth time.

Denver's first three appearances in the Super Bowl certainly were not lovely and charming. The Broncos have been humiliated over the past 10 years by Dallas (27-10), the New York Giants (39-20) and Washington.

"Will we ever win?" asked a bawling Janet Johnson of Denver at the end. How long, oh, Lord?

There was no way for Elway. There was a total team collapse. All the joy, excitement and emotion that had enveloped Denver and Colorado for the second straight year evaporated in the second quarter when the Redskins scored a Super Bowl-record 35 points.

Woody Paige, The Denver Post

SUPER BOWL XXI

Giants 39, Broncos 20

PASADENA, Calif. — In the third quarter of the Super Bowl, the mountains surrounding the Rose Bowl disappeared behind a curtain of smog and darkness.

Below, under the fuzzy glare of the lights and the eyes of the nation, the Denver Broncos' season followed right behind. After a first half of hope and promise, the Broncos segued into disappointment and despair as the New York Giants fulfilled their own Super Bowl dream 39-20 on the summerlike Sunday afternoon.

The Denver defense posed its usual tough questions, but Giants quarterback Phil Simms, a unanimous choice as the game's most valuable player, found easy answers: a pass short, a pass long, a pass tipped by one receiver into the outstretched arms of another.

Denver's John Elway came out just as sure and confident and never was completely stifled, but to produce a miracle he needed the opportunity. Under the mounting pressure of the Giants' unstoppable offense, he never had one."I just figured the

more they scored, the more we had to score," Elway said as he faced the multitude of reporters.

Kevin Simpson, The Denver Post

SUPER BOWL XII

Cowboys 27, Broncos 10

NEW ORLEANS — The Dallas Cowboys tried a double reverse on the first play from scrimmage in Super Bowl XII on Sunday. It didn't work. Wide receiver Butch Johnson fumbled and lost 9 yards.

But it set the tone for the Cowboys' offense in their 27-10 victory over the Denver Broncos.

"I didn't feel we could play conservatively," Dallas coach Tom Landry said. "They (the Broncos) have such good pursuit, you can't drive 60, 70 yards on them."

The Cowboys went ahead 20-3 on a 45-yard pass from Roger Staubach to Johnson in the third quarter and finished the scoring with a 29-yard pass from running back Robert Newhouse to wide receiver Golden Richards in the fourth period after Denver had pulled within 10 points again.

Johnson had to stretch for his reception behind Bernard Jackson and barely made it into the end zone before fumbling the ball. The officials ruled he had possession when he broke the plane of the goal line.

"Staubach told me to run a strong post pattern," Johnson said. "I told him if he could get it in front of me, I could catch it."

Michael Irvin wants Wes Welker to win a Super Bowl because of bravery wideouts have

By Matt Walks
The Denver Post
February 1, 2014

While the media continues to debate what a second Super Bowl ring will contribute to Peyton Manning's legacy, Hall of Fame wide receiver Michael Irvin wants another Broncos player to earn a Super Bowl ring even more — Wes Welker.

The former Cowboys star was one of the first wide receivers to excel in the NFL primarily because of his bigger frame and physical dominance. His success contributed to NFL teams beginning to favor size and strength in wide receivers more than pure speed. The gradual change made smaller wideouts like Welker more rare to find in the NFL. That takes a kind of bravery because of the hits that get dished out to wideouts, Irvin said.

"You used to have to display what we call courage, going across the middle," Irvin said. "People say, 'Michael was fearless.' I'm not psychotic. Fear roams in my body. Courage is not saying that I did not have fear, courage is saying that you had an ability to overcome fear."

Welker's similar refusal to let that kind of fear dictate his play makes him one of Irvin's favorite wideouts.

"That's why I want Wes Welker, more than anybody, to win a Super Bowl," Irvin said. "His story inspires every little kid that feels dejected and rejected."

On Richard Sherman
Irvin also had a characteristically strong opinion on Seattle cornerback Richard Sherman, and the general firestorm regarding Sherman's candid interview after the NFC title game.

"This game is so massive," Irvin said. "Anytime someone makes a comment we're ready to jump right on them. But we've begged and asked to get closer to the game. When you beg and ask to get closer to the game, to see more, to get inside more, to see what it takes to become the greatest at the level, you can't be appalled."

After sealing the game with a deflected pass, Sherman blasted 49ers wideout Michael Crabtree, calling him a “sorry receiver” in a post-game interview. His polarizing comments ignited a discussion about, among other things, race, dignity and sportsmanship. In his playing days, Irvin spoke as much off the season as on. He famously wore a full-length mink coat to a 1996 court hearing, and he was a premier trash talker in his day. But Irvin said that’s just how some NFL alpha dogs are wired.

“It takes that kind of mentality,” Irvin said. “‘How dare you try me?’ (It’s) that who-do-you-think-you-are mentality. We’re catching it right at the height of emotion and then turning it against him. But we asked for this. This man is doing nothing but his job.”

Field goal science: Could Broncos' Matt Prater kick a record-breaker at the Super Bowl?

By Ryan Parker
The Denver Post
February 1, 2014

Denver Broncos kicker Matt Prater holds the record for the longest field goal made in league history at 64 yards, which is not news. But, there were certain conditions in place to help ensure Prater made the kick. So, just for fun, a trio of scientists from the Denver Museum of Nature and Science created a model of what conditions may have to be like Super Bowl Sunday if Prater is needed make another astounding kick.

Museum scientists Dimitri Klebe, James Hagadorn and Dan Winester presented their findings to The Denver Post as follows:

If the ball is kicked in windless conditions, in East Rutherford [New Jersey, site of Super Bowl XLVIII] the ball would travel 59.5 yards, or 4.5 yards less than it would travel in Denver at the same moment in time. The ball would travel even less in Seattle, 59.1 yards if kicked at the same moment in time. The short version is that in Denver the ball would travel farther mostly because of its lower air density. Air density is mostly impacted by atmospheric pressure and temperature; in New Jersey and in Seattle the atmospheric pressures are higher and the temperatures warmer. Thus, New Jersey's higher pressure and warmer weather makes it harder to kick a long field goal than in Denver, and a scootch harder than in Seattle.

In New Jersey, if a 10 mph wind is coming from directly behind the kicker when the ball is kicked, the ball will travel 70.3 yards, or 10.8 yards farther than with no wind at all. If a 10 mph wind is blowing directly against the direction the ball is being kicked, then the ball will travel 49.4 yards, or 10.1 yards less than with no wind at all. The short version is that tailwinds help and headwinds hinder. A lot.

And… Although air density and other environmental factors have a major impact on a kicker's ability to make a long field-goal, wind blows these factors away.

They even showed their work, lest you have any doubts:

Environmental data used:

East Rutherford, New Jersey:
5:30 pm New Jersey-time
Weather Station: Carlstadt, NJ 07073
Estimated Temp: 44 F
Estimated Humidity: 81%
Estimated Atmospheric Pressure: 1013 mbar Estimated Gravity: 9.80239 m/s^2
Estimated Wind Velocity and Direction: varies from 3-12 mph, and up to 270 degrees in orientation

Denver, Colorado:
3:30 pm Denver-time
Weather Station: Denver, CO 80202
Estimated Temp: 26 F
Estimated Humidity: 55%
Estimated Atmospheric Pressure: 844 mbar Estimated Gravity: 9.79451 m/s^2

Seattle, Washington
2:30 pm Seattle-time
Weather Station: Seattle, WA 98101
Estimated Temp: 41 F
Estimated Humidity: 75%
Estimated Atmospheric Pressure: 1019 mbar Estimated Gravity: 9.80728 m/s^2

Broncos' last practice before Super Bowl light, fun

By Ben Volin
Pro Football Writers of America
February 1, 2014

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — The Broncos' walkthrough practice Saturday afternoon at MetLife Stadium had a bit of a Senior Day feel to it.

The team practiced in sweats for about 30 minutes, going over a few offensive and defensive sets one last time before Sunday night's Super Bowl XLVIII against the Seattle Seahawks. But really the day was about enjoying the moment one last time and enjoying one of the final moments that this roster will be intact before the offseason hits.

Players trickled out onto the field with cameras and camcorders to capture the atmosphere — guard Louis Vasquez taking a panoramic photo of the stadium, backup offensive tackle Vinston Painter posing for photos and safety Mike Adams recording the scene with a video mounted on his head.

The walkthrough was light and fun, although security workers kept having to shoo away stadium employees trying to catch a glimpse of practice. Coach John Fox didn't keep his team on the field for long. The only player not expected to participate Sunday night is defensive tackle Sione Fua, doubtful with a calf injury.

"It was very similar to what we've done all season — typical Saturday practice," he said. "Just a review, pretty much. Play the game, walk the field — maybe not everything we're going to do, because you don't know what security is like here. But it was beneficial."

The weather was beautiful on Saturday — mid-40s and clear blue skies — but Fox said he didn't feel like his team caught a break with the conditions.

"We're pretty much weather-proof," he said. "We live in Denver, so we practice in just about every element there is."

Fox said he encouraged his players to soak up the moment. Peyton Manning took several photos inside the locker room with various teammates — the offensive linemen, wide receivers, etc. — and later posed with John Elway on the field. After practice, the players' families were invited onto the field to take pictures and enjoy the day, as well.

"They worked really hard to have this opportunity," Fox said of his players. "Might as well enjoy it."

Despite the enormity of Sunday's game, Fox is doing his best to keep the routine the same this weekend .The Broncos will be switching hotels tonight to sequester themselves from friends and family, but that's typical for a Saturday night, Fox said.

He said he's not too worried about nerves getting the best of him or his players, or having too much free time before kickoff at 4:30 p.m. Sunday.

"We've played a lot of prime-time games, this is just another one," he said. "It gets bigger on the outside, that's true all through the playoffs, and this is probably the ultimate of that, but they've listened and managed it pretty good."

Seahawks looking loose, energetic at final practice before Super Bowl

By Ralph Vacchiano
Pro Football Writers of America
February 1, 2014

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — On the final day before Super Bowl XLVIII, the NFC champion Seattle Seahawks got their first look inside MetLife Stadium where they'll face the Denver Broncos on Sunday night and then held their final walk-through across the Meadowlands parking lot at the Giants' practice facility. They looked loose and energetic as they went through their normal Saturday morning routine.

And when it was over, Seahawks coach Pete Carroll had no doubt his team is ready to start the game.

"We're ready to go," Carroll said. "That's kind of how we are. I don't know if it's loose, but we're where we're supposed to be. This is how we always prepare. This is the exact routine we always do. And the guys did it perfectly today.

"It's been great. We have no hesitation saying it's been exactly what we hoped to get done. We're physically right and mentally right and we're ready to go."

The day for the NFC champs began inside the Super Bowl stadium at around 10:30 a.m. when the players and coaches got a quick look at what normally is the New York Giants' locker room — though it now has a Seahawks logo above the door. From there they took to the field which was ringed by blue and yellow Super Bowl XLVIII banners. For about 15 minutes, players walked around on the turf and many took pictures and video of the empty stadium. Several position groups got together for group photos, too.

After huddling briefly at the 35-yard line, they exited the stadium and boarded their buses for the short ride across the parking lot to the Quest Diagnostics Center where they've been practicing all week. They held some more meetings, then went to the field house for their official team picture, which included Seahawks owner Paul Allen. Then, at 1:10 p.m. they were back out there again for a 35-minute walk-through.

For the rest of Saturday and Saturday night, Carroll said he will keep the Seahawks' routine "exactly the same." They even plan to remain at the same Jersey City hotel that they've been using all week long.

How loose were they during their final practice of the season? Early in the session, Carroll came over to the sidelines to greet former Seahawks running back Shaun Alexander and a friend. The coach made sure to talk to them while standing right behind his punter as they lined up for a kick. And when the ball was snapped, the punter, Carroll and Alexander all got out of the way so the ball landed right in the gut of the unsuspecting friend.

That prank got a good laugh out of everyone before the Seahawks went back to work.

Alexander was joined on the sidelines by former Seahawks linebacker Isaiah Kacyvenski. Both were members of the 2005 Seahawks team that played in Super Bowl XL — the franchise's only other Super Bowl team.

"It's always great to see Shaun and those guys," Carroll said. "It's good to have them around. It just kind of reminds us what we represent."

Welker doesn't dwell on costly drop

By Arnie Stapleton
The Associated Press
February 1, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. (AP) — Wes Welker swears he doesn't dwell on his costly drop in the Super Bowl two years ago that could have sealed New England's win over the New York Giants and made up for losing to them four years earlier.

"You know what? I don't even think about it," Welker said as he prepared for his third Super Bowl, his first with the Denver Broncos. "The past is the past, what happened, happened, and I'm just looking forward to this one and going out there and playing my best game and doing what I can to help my team win."

Welker said getting to the big game and coming up short two times is what drives him.

"I think it's the reason I get up in the morning in the offseason and even now," he said after helping the Broncos beat his old team for the AFC title, securing a showdown with the Seattle Seahawks on Sunday night at MetLife Stadium.

Welker tied a Super Bowl record with 11 receptions for 103 yards six years ago but the Patriots' perfect season ended when Eli Manning threw a 13-yard touchdown pass to Plaxico Burress with 35 seconds left to give the Giants a 17-14 win.

The teams met again four years later in Indianapolis and Welker caught seven passes for 60 yards and ran twice for 21 more, but it was the catch he didn't make that haunts Patriots fans to this day.

The Patriots led 17-15 with four minutes left and were on the Giants' 44 when Tom Brady found Welker wide open 23 yards downfield. The pass, however, was high and slightly behind Welker, who got both hands on the ball but couldn't make the catch.

The Giants got the ball back and drove for the winning touchdown.

"Sure, I mean it motivates you during the offseason. It motivates you when you're working out, it motivates you through the year," Welker said. "Just that feeling of losing that game, I mean it's heartbreaking. It takes a few weeks just to get over it. It definitely sticks with you and motivates you for the future and definitely blessed to have this opportunity again."

Welker joined Peyton Manning in Denver in the offseason after six seasons with Brady and was Denver's leading receiver until missing the final 3½ games after

sustaining his second concussion in a three-week span. He still ended up with 778 yards on 73 catches and a career-high 10 touchdowns. Wearing a bigger helmet to protect against further head injury, he's caught 10 passes for 76 yards and a TD in the playoffs.

He had four catches for 38 yards against New England in the AFC Championship and his hard hit took out Patriots top cornerback Aqib Talib on a pick play at the line of scrimmage. The next day, Patriots coach Bill Belichick suggested Welker deliberately tried to hurt Talib and complained to the league about it.

The NFL said no infraction had occurred.

Welker's teammates said Belichick was just using Welker as a smoke screen and a scapegoat to hide deficiencies in his team's defense and the fact that Welker's replacement in New England, Danny Amendola, dropped the only pass thrown to him in the title game.

Welker stayed above the fray, saying he was just happy to be back in the Super Bowl.

"I'm very blessed to have this opportunity again and that's all you really ask for," he said. "It's all you work for during the offseason is to get to this point and now you just want to finish it."

Manning wins 5th MVP award and AP offensive player

By Barry Wilner
The Associated Press
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK (AP) — Peyton Manning made his fifth MVP award a family affair.

Manning's record-setting season earned him The Associated Press NFL MVP award Saturday night in a landslide. No other player has won more than three.

Denver's record-setting quarterback, who threw for 55 touchdowns and 5,477 yards in leading the Broncos to the AFC's best record, earned 49 votes from a nationwide panel of 50 media members who regularly cover the league. New England quarterback Tom Brady got the other vote.

Manning won his other MVPs with Indianapolis in 2003, '04, '08 and '09. He also was the runner-up last season to Adrian Peterson.

"I am humbled by this recognition and grateful to my family, (Broncos owner) Pat Bowlen, John Elway, John Fox and the entire Denver Broncos organization, and of course, my coaches and my teammates," Manning said in a prepared video acceptance speech. He was not on hand as he gets ready for Sunday's Super Bowl against Seattle.

"Now, I sent a couple of guys over there tonight to pick up the trophy on my behalf: my father Archie and my son Marshall. Thank you very much and God bless you."

Archie Manning, holding his grandson Marshall in his arms, accepted the award from two more MVPs, Joe Montana and Aaron Rodgers.

Manning still trails several Hall of Famers for total MVPs in their sport. Wayne Gretzky won nine NHL MVPs, Barry Bonds owns seven in baseball, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar won six in the NBA.

Manning also took the AP's Offensive Player of the Year award for the second time. Elway accepted the Offensive Player award on Manning's behalf.

"I can say I have never seen a better year played by a quarterback than Peyton Manning," said Elway, a Broncos executive who won the MVP award in 1987. "To see what he did this year, it was truly amazing."

Manning received 33 votes for the offensive player honor. He also was runner-up last year to Peterson for the award.

This time, running back LeSean McCoy of Philadelphia was second with 10 votes, followed by Kansas City running back Jamaal Charles with four.

Carolina grabbed two major awards, with Ron Rivera winning AP NFL Coach of the Year and linebacker Luke Kuechly voted top defensive player.

Rivera engineered the Panthers' turnaround from a 7-9 record to 12-4, the NFC South title and a first-round playoff bye. Kuechly keyed a defense that allowed 241 points, less than every team except NFC champion Seattle.

"I had no idea," he said of adding the award to the top defensive rookie honors he got last season. "You look at the list of guys: Robert Mathis, a sack master, a guy that forced a lot of fumbles. And obviously, everybody knows about Richard Sherman and Earl Thomas. Those guys are both studs."

Green Bay running back Eddie Lacy and Jets defensive tackle Sheldon Richardson were the top rookies for 2013.

San Diego quarterback Philip Rivers took the Comeback Player of the Year award at the NFL Honors show.

Rivera's fine work in his third season in charge in Carolina brought him 21½ votes. That outdistanced Kansas City's Andy Reid, who got 13½ votes. In his first year with the Chiefs, Reid took them from 2-14 to 11-5 and an AFC wild-card berth.

"I do feel a lot of pride because it has been a long journey, but it also was a part of the process," Rivera said. "Just like us getting to where we are winning 12 games was part of the process. We started, the team was 2-14 before I got there and we went to 6-10 and then 7-9, and this year we broke through at 12-4. It was part of the process of growing and developing."

Rivera is the second Panthers coach to win the award. Dom Capers was AP Coach of the Year in 1996, Carolina's second season in the NFL.

All-Pro Kuechly received 19 votes, ahead of Indianapolis All-Pro linebacker Mathis, who earned 11½.

Kuechly was credited with 96 tackles, four interceptions, two sacks, eight passes defensed, and was a presence from sideline to sideline on the NFL's No. 2 unit.

A second-round pick (61st overall) from Alabama, Lacy was a key performer in the Packers' offense, particularly when star quarterback Aaron Rodgers was sidelined

for seven games. He rushed for 1,178 yards on 284 carries (4.1 average), with 11 touchdowns. He also had 35 receptions.

That was good enough for 35 votes.

"I'm comfortable where I am, and my teammates believe in me, and they make me feel comfortable, so I'm able to play the way I'm capable of playing," said Lacy, who beat out San Diego wide receiver Keenan Allen, who received 12 votes.

Richardson, the 13th overall pick in April's draft on a selection acquired when New York traded star cornerback Darrelle Revis to Tampa Bay, won a close race over Buffalo linebacker Kiko Alonso. Richardson received 23 votes; Alonso, a second-round choice (46th overall), got 19.

Often double-teamed as the season wore on, Richardson made 42 tackles and had 3½ sacks. He clogged the running lanes so effectively that the Jets ranked third against the run this season.

"I'm surprised," Richardson said of beating Alonso and Arizona safety Tyrann Mathieu, who got two votes. "Kiko and Tyrann most definitely had outstanding rookie years and it was a toss-up to me. Kiko made a lot of tackles and Tyrann made a lot of plays down the field. Unfortunately he got hurt, but it was a tight race."

Richardson joked about the possibility of winning both awards — he scored two touchdowns as a fullback in goal-line situations.

"Eddie Lacy beat me out there," Richardson said. "He had a few more touchdowns than I did."

Rivers led the Chargers to a wild-card playoff spot with four straight victories to close out the schedule, giving them a 9-7 record. He led the league with a 69.5 completion rate and threw for 32 TDs against 11 interceptions.

He received 13 votes in balloting so widespread that 12 players got votes. He was not at the awards show at Radio City Music Hall.

Chicago cornerback Charles Tillman won the Walter Payton Man of the Year award, and accepted the honor with tears in his eyes.

"As a Chicago Bear, this award has a special meaning to me," Tillman said.

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AP Sports Writer Dennis Waszak Jr. and Pro Football Writer Howard Fendrich contributed to this story.

Record-setting Manning top offensive player

By Barry Wilner
The Associated Press
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK (AP) — Peyton Manning has won his second Associated Press NFL Offensive Player of the Year award.

The Denver quarterback shattered the league record by throwing for 55 touchdowns. He also set a mark with 5,477 yards passing in leading the Broncos to a 13-3 record, best in the AFC. They play Seattle on Sunday in the Super Bowl.

Broncos executive John Elway accepted the award on Manning's behalf.

Manning received 33 votes from a nationwide panel of 50 media members who regularly cover the league in balloting announced Saturday night. He also won the award in 2004 and was runner-up last year to Adrian Peterson.

This time, running back LeSean McCoy of Philadelphia was second with 10 votes, followed by Kansas City running back Jamaal Charles with four.

Guy, Brooks, Jones among 7 elected to Hall of Fame

By Tom Canavan
The Associated Press
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK (AP) — The hang time is over for Ray Guy. The longtime punter for the Oakland Raiders is all by himself once again.

After waiting 23 years, Guy is the first punter elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

"Good things are worth waiting for," Guy said Saturday night after being elected along with six other players. "It's just a matter of time when it will show up. And I knew it would, sooner or later. It had to, whether it was me or somebody down the road. But sooner or later, it had to show up, because that is a part of a football game."

Defensive end Michael Strahan, receiver Andre Reed, defensive back Aeneas Williams and defensive end Claude Humphrey also were part of the class of 2014. Two first-time eligible players, linebacker Derrick Brooks and offensive tackle Walter Jones, were selected.

The announcement was made at the NFL Honors award show, less than 24 hours before the Denver Broncos take on the Seattle Seahawks in the first Super Bowl.

Among the finalists who didn't get in were two with ties to the Indianapolis Colts and current Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning — coach Tony Dungy and receiver Marvin Harrison.

Each incoming Hall of Famer walked to the stage and was announced individually. Strahan, who helped the Giants make two Super Bowls, got a huge cheer from the home crowd.

Induction will be on Aug. 1 in Canton, Ohio.

Guy turned the punting job into a defensive weapon after he became the first player at his position to be selected in the first round of the draft in 1973. He made "hang time" part of the football vernacular while playing all of his 207 games in 14 seasons with the Raiders.

The Southern Mississippi product averaged 42.4 yards for his career. Only three of his 1,049 punts were blocked, and he had 209 punts downed inside the 20-yard line.

"It's gratifying to now see a punter go into the Hall of Fame," Guy said, who joins Jan Stenerud as the only kickers enshrined . "Whether it was me or somebody else, they needed representation in that position."

Brooks was the cornerstone of a Bucs defense that led the league in 2002 and '05, and the NFC five times. He was The Associated Press Defensive Player of the Year when Tampa Bay won its only Super Bowl after the 2002 season.

The linebacker never missed a game in his 14 seasons and averaged a remarkable 146 tackles. Six of his 25 interceptions were returned for touchdowns, including a league-record three in '02.

Seattle certainly got a winner when it moved up to the No. 6 spot in the 1997 draft to take Jones. He immediately provided blindside protection for Warren Moon and quickly became the first Seahawks lineman to earn a Pro Bowl spot. He was one of the chief road graders who helped Shaun Alexander rush for 266 yards in a 2001 game — the fourth-highest total in NFL history — and then rush for a team-record 1,880 yards and 28 TDs in his MVP season in 2005.

"Coming into the league all I wanted to do was get here, and ... say I could play this game," Jones said. "For me to be here now, and for my team that I started with and finished with, to be here in the Super Bowl is just like the icing on the cake."

Strahan set the NFL record for sacks in a single season, getting 22½ in 2001. The one most people remember is the record-setter in the final game of the regular season, when Green Bay's Brett Favre seemed to lay down on a play late in the game.

While there is controversy about that play, the gap-toothed Strahan was one of the top two-way defensive ends. Younger teammates said he taught them how to work to become NFL players, and he walked away from the NFL after winning the Super Bowl in February 2008.

"It's hard to find guys with everything, but this guy had everything . size, speed, power, toughness, endurance, motor, smarts, leadership, heart, love for the game, but what I admired most about Michael was his pride," Giants general Jerry Reese said. "No matter what the circumstances were, when he walked out on that field on Sunday, he was going to give it ALL to you. There aren't many guys who can say that."

Reed came out of little Kutztown (Pa.) University and played his first 15 seasons with Buffalo, getting to four Super Bowls, but never winning one. His final season was with Washington. His 951 career receptions are third in league history, highlighted by nine consecutive seasons of 50-plus catches.

Long before people spoke about yards after the catch, Reed was doing it. He finished with 13,198 yards and 87 touchdowns.

"Having to wait this long for him is a sin, but the bottom line is he's in and that's what counts," former Bills quarterback Jim Kelly said of Reed's nine-year wait to get into the Hall.

A walk-on at Southern University, Williams was a shutdown cornerback in his 14 NFL seasons, the first 10 with the Cardinals and the last four with the Rams. He had 55 career interceptions, getting at least one in every season except his last. He had five or more in picks in six seasons, with nine being his best in 1994.

Williams spent his last four seasons with St. Louis. He started at cornerback for the Rams in the 2001 Super Bowl and played safety in his final two seasons.

The Hall of Fame doors finally opened for Humphrey on his 28th year of eligibility and his fifth as a finalist. The durable six-time Pro Bowl pick had 122 career sacks in 14 seasons with the Falcons and Eagles, who acquired him after a brief retirement in the 1978 season.

"I never really gave up hope," said Humphrey, whose only regret was his wife died in July and didn't get to see his election. "I always figured there was a place for me here."

Ground Zero: A quiet spot amid Super Bowl revelry

By Paul Newberry
The Associated Press
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK (AP) — Amid the revelry of Super Bowl week, there is at least one spot in New York that remains quiet and reflective.

Ground Zero.

Thousands of football fans trekked to lower Manhattan to visit a memorial to the worst terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, which includes two cascading fountains in the footprint of the former World Trade Center towers.

On Saturday, with sunny skies and the warmest temperatures of the week, a long line of mostly Denver and Seattle fans toured the National September 11 Memorial & Museum. The same folks who had been partying in Times Square heeded the requests to pay proper respect to nearly 3,000 victims, whose names are engraved along the outer edge of the fountains.

People decked out in Peyton Manning and Richard Sherman jerseys posed for pictures in front of the fountains. Others rubbed their fingers softly across all those names, some shaking their heads as they tried to comprehend the magnitude of the human loss. A few visitors peered through windows of the museum, which is still under construction and scheduled to open this spring.

The hushed voices and muffled sounds of the surrounding city were only broken when a man suddenly broke into a rousing rendition of the national anthem right in the middle of the plaza. A crowd gathered around, and cheered loudly after he ripped off the closing lines.

Then, just like that, it turned peaceful again.

Nearly everyone seemed moved by what they had seen.

"That was really powerful," a Seahawks fans said on her way to the exit.

Once in the gift shop, people returned to the prevailing mood for the week.

"Omaha! Omaha!" a Broncos fan screamed out, mimicking Manning's now-famous audible call at the line of scrimmage.

Just like that, it was back to football.

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PARTY REPORT: Of course, it wouldn't be a Super Bowl without some super parties.

The Big Apple certainly delivered in that department.

Beats by Dre, the headphone company, held two events with completely different vibes. The weekend began at the intimate Graff Diamonds jewelry store, where Serena Williams, Anthony Mackie, Jerry Stackhouse, Jermaine Dupri and others grooved to a performance by British singer Estelle. They also admired custom-made white headphones encrusted with 1,400 diamonds worth an estimated $1 million — kept safely behind glass, of course.

There was a more raucous crowd when the party moved to the club Marquee, where LeBron James, Colin Kaepernick and Victor Cruz were among the revelers. Rick Ross performed his hits before Kendrick Lamar got on the mic for a bonus performance.

Lamar was all over the place, it seemed, also performing at ESPN's bash on Pier 36 along with Robin Thicke. Lamar worked from one side of the stage to the other, rapping hits such as "Don't Kill My Vibe" and "Poetic Justice." Thicke's wide-ranging show included everything from his blockbuster "Blurred Lines" to a cover of Michael Jackson's "Rock With You."

There were plenty of celebrities in the crowd, including Spike Lee, Tim Tebow, Ice-T and Lindsey Vonn — complete with crutches as she recovers from a knee injury that will prevent her from competing at the Sochi Olympics.

Mary J. Blige, John Legend and Marc Anthony entertained a crowd that paid $2,500 a person to get into Cipriani's 42nd Street for an event sponsored by Shape and Men's Fitness magazines.

Legend said he never thought he'd see the day a Super Bowl came to New York City. Then he corrected himself: "More accurately, New Jersey."

With that, Legend launched into a song by one of New Jersey's favorite sons, Bruce Springsteen.

"Dancing in the Dark."

A perfect song for this night.

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BOOBIRDS FOR CHRISTIE: New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie must've felt like a Super Bowl kicker who missed a big kick.

Or, more accurately, a politician mired in scandal.

Christie was greeted with a scattering of boos during a ceremony in Times Square handing off the big game to next year's hosts in Glendale, Ariz. Leaders of the New York-New Jersey organizing committee gave a platter to their Arizona counterparts.

Christie has been under fire after his top aides orchestrated a traffic mess on the George Washington Bridge connecting New York and New Jersey, apparently in retribution against a political opponent. He has denied any knowledge and didn't seem affected by the crowd's response, which also included some cheers.

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AND NOW, FOR THE WEATHER: Remember all those worries about playing the NFL's biggest game outdoors in a cold-weather city?

Turns out, this likely won't even be the coldest Super Bowl.

Forecasters were calling for a high of 49 degrees on Sunday, with the evening low only expected to dip to 32 degrees (and that will surely be after the game is over).

At the 1972 Super Bowl in New Orleans, the temperature was a reported 34 degrees with a wind chill of 24. It now seems highly unlikely to get that cold at MetLife Stadium, though the chance of evening precipitation was picking up.

There was a 50 percent shot of rain or snow flurries.

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Associated Press writers Nekesa Mumbi Moody, Mesfin Fekadu and Jocelyn Noveck contributed to this report.

Numbers aren't the full Book of Manning

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK -- Manny Ramirez is a quiet, thoughtful guy, a get-it-done player who like many of the Denver Broncos offensive linemen would prefer to be seen rather than heard much of the time.

But the center who snaps the ball to Peyton Manning play after play, day after day, week after week, was asked this week what Manning does to reward his offensive linemen.

Ramirez didn't hesitate before he simply said:

"He throws touchdowns.''

Oh, yes, he has thrown some touchdowns this season, a season that has one more game when Manning and the Broncos take the field Sunday in Super Bowl XLVIII. But Manning has rewarded his offensive line, the Broncos receivers, defense, coaches, front-office staff and legions of ardent followers plenty over the past five months with a staggering total of touchdowns this season.

His all-out invasion of the single-season pages of the league's record book made Manning an easy selection as the both the league's Offensive Player of the Year and Most Valuable Player at the NFL Honors Awards show Saturday night at Radio City Music Hall.

Both awards were chosen by a nationwide panel for the Associated Press. It was Manning's fifth league MVP award -- he already held the record with four -- and his second Offensive Player of the Year award. Broncos executive vice president of football operations John Elway, a Hall of Famer and the NFL's MVP in 1987, accepted the Offensive Player of the Year award for Manning while Manning's father, Archie, and son, Marshall, accepted the MVP award.

That's because Manning was otherwise indisposed Saturday night as the Broncos were putting the final touches on their game plan for Sunday's title game against the Seattle Seahawks. A Super Bowl win Sunday would take Manning from having the greatest regular season in league history to what would be the greatest season overall.

Manning set single-season league records with 5,477 yards passing and 55 touchdowns over the course of the Broncos' 16 regular-season games. Manning tied a single-game record with seven touchdown passes in the season opener against the Baltimore Ravens and had nine games with at least four touchdown passes to go with 12 300-yard passing games.

Tight end Julius Thomas called it "Madden football,'' and cornerback Champ Bailey has described it all, "ridiculous sometimes, just taking the game to a place nobody knows.''

This is most of what Elway had hoped for when he lured Manning to Denver as a stunned free agent recuperating from spinal fusion surgery. Elway looked Manning in the eyes and promised to do "everything in my power'' for Manning to close out his career the way Elway did, with Super Bowl wins in each of Elway's final two seasons in the league.

For his part Elway wanted a player to shake the sensibilities of the entire organization, a player so good, so accomplished, the player's arrival would create "that mindset that you could win a world championship.'' To get the proverbial guy who raises all the boats.

"Absolutely. I mean, that's the reason you get a guy like that on your team -- to give you chances to win games like this,'' Bailey said. "He's the best to ever do it. I haven't played against a better quarterback, so I'm just glad he's part of our organization now because he definitely has a big part of why we're here, and I love him to death.''

Manning was a Hall of Famer in waiting before he arrived in Denver. His place in Canton was largely assured had he never thrown another pass after he missed the 2011 season. It's why so many questions about his "legacy'' being based on Sunday's result actually resided on the border between silly and insane. His legacy is that he was a Hall of Famer before Sunday's game and, without question or hesitation, will be one after.

But what he has really done is add a chapter of remarkable grit to his story.

Quarterbacks with as many throws for touchdowns as Manning has over his career are largely considered to be finesse players, Alpha dogs who are the center of a team's universe.

But Manning rolled up his sleeves, dug in and rebuilt himself from the ground up. Rebuilt himself from a place where he couldn't even prop himself up with his right

arm following his fourth neck surgery, let alone throw a pass that would be worthy of an NFL game.

He has done it with toughness, drive and some old-school heavy lifting.

Manning has shown himself to be driven and willing to put the dirt under his fingernails to get back to where he is now. To believe in himself, to believe in the tiny day-to-day gains that marked his recovery. And where it led him to was to the here and now, where he is a player with a second lease on football life, already looking to play beyond Sunday's Super Bowl.

So, while the numbers say his 2013 season was unprecedented, unheard of and more than a little unbelievable, the numbers don't tell the most amazing part of the story.

"Beyond everything he's done this season what he's done just to get back on the field and play is amazing,'' Broncos coach John Fox said. "It's amazing, unprecedented and remarkable. Just remarkable. I thought what he did last year was amazing, but then he had this season, he just keeps showing us more. He's shown us what he has inside him, who he is.''

Super Bowl XLVIII matchups to watch

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK -- Denver Broncos coach John Fox is fond of saying the NFL is a "bigger, faster, stronger" league, where the matchups decide the issue.

A league where those who hide, or exploit, their weaknesses the best usually will find a way to win.

In that light, here are a few matchups, beyond the Broncos' no-duh need to keep quarterback Peyton Manning upright with room to throw, to watch in Sunday's Super Bowl XLVIII:

WRs vs. DBs:

It is the marquee positional matchup. The Seattle Seahawks' defensive backs are the foundation of the league's No. 1 defense and play with a physical edge that often overwhelms receivers. The Broncos' receivers are the league's highest-scoring group with four players with at least 10 receiving touchdowns. Demaryius Thomas leads the way with 92 catches, 1,430 yards and 14 touchdowns.

And, given that flags routinely stay in the officials' pockets in the title game -- see last year's Super Bowl if you have any doubt -- the Broncos' wideouts have to find a way to keep the Seahawks' physical defensive backs from altering their routes or disrupting the timing of the Denver offense.

If Denver's receivers don't get their expected releases off the line of scrimmage, that often forces Manning to hold the ball a bit longer and the dominoes start to fall because the Seahawks' defensive front, especially the players on the edge, will have the time to get to Manning that rushers don't usually have.

A look at the video shows the Seahawks prefer to play man-to-man on the underneath routes and play zone coverages down the field for the most part, often with three deep defenders. That type of alignment makes the inside receivers -- for the Broncos, that's players such as tight end Julius Thomas and wide receiver Wes Welker -- important pieces of the puzzle.

Those are the pressure points for those coverage looks, so Manning will be looking there for the seam routes. Julius Thomas and Welker will have to perform well in

those high-traffic, high-contact areas.

And, when it comes to the matchup people want to see -- Seattle cornerback Richard Sherman against Broncos wide receiver Demaryius Thomas -- the Broncos figure to move Thomas all over the field, but Sherman usually remains in the left cornerback spot.

So, unless the Seahawks are willing to break from their usual plan, Demaryius Thomas will line up across from Sherman only when Thomas is on the offensive right, on the outside. Look for the Broncos to bunch the receivers, as well, to back the Seahawks' defensive backs away from the line of scrimmage a bit. Defenses routinely attack the point of the bunch, or the receiver who is closest to the line of scrimmage, so the Broncos could tuck Thomas behind a bit to give him slightly more room to work.

Broncos DT Terrance Knighton vs. Seattle C Max Unger:

Knighton, who will shade over toward the guard at times, has been the key in the Broncos' improved run defense down the stretch. And, although the Broncos simply can't afford to miss a tackle against Seahawks running back Marshawn Lynch, Knighton has to consistently win at the point of attack for the Broncos' plan to work.

For all of their defensive troubles this season, the Broncos have played better against the offenses that chose to attack them with heavier formations. It allowed the Broncos to play bigger, something they've done with more consistency and production than they have in some of their other personnel groupings.

The Broncos surrendered a league-low 2.84 yards on rushing attempts over the opposing center this season, surrendered a league-low 1.88 yards per attempt over the right guard and 2.74 yards per carry over the left guard. The Seahawks gained 4.8 yards per carry on runs behind Unger.

The Broncos do expect the Seahawks to go to a three-wide look more often with Percy Harvin in the lineup, so, as a result, Denver will be forced to defend the run a little more out of its nickel (five defensive backs) and dime (six defensive backs) packages.

Broncos special teams vs. Seahawks special teams:

There is a school of thought in the league that, in the end, the league-leading Denver offense and the league-leading Seattle defense will cancel each other out in

some fashion.

Those same folks also will say they believe the Seahawks' special teams are more consistent than the Broncos' special teams, especially down the stretch of the regular season and especially with Seattle set to have Harvin returning kickoffs. Harvin, who has played just 38 snaps on offense this season because of a hip injury as well as a concussion, returned one kickoff this year -- for 58 yards.

For the Broncos, Trindon Holliday has to be more consistent handling the ball, as few things turn a playoff game -- especially a title game -- as drastically as a special-teams bobble. Overall, the Seahawks have not surrendered a yard on punt returns in two postseason games and opponents averaged just 3.9 yards per punt return in the regular season.

Jack Del Rio vs. Darrell Bevell:

These two coach the "other" units, the ones folks aren't really zeroed in on, and the one who has come up with the best plan and gets his guys to carry it out the most efficiently certainly could decide this game.

Del Rio's Denver defense certainly has had moments of struggle this season, but it has been better down the stretch. The Broncos figure to show more of a 3-4 look against the Seahawks' power formations. Overall, Denver has to keep Seattle quarterback Russell Wilson tucked in the pocket; the Broncos can't let him break their containment and can't get washed out of the play in the Seahawks' zone-run attack.

Harvin's appearance in the Seahawks' offense is a wrinkle the Broncos will have to adjust to quickly in the game. And Del Rio will need an answer when the Broncos go to some of the specialty packages on defense if Wilson decides to pick on cornerback Tony Carter.

Peyton Manning wins 2013 NFL Most Valuable Player award

By Lorenzo Reyes
USA TODAY
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK — They may have been ducks, but they certainly were effective.

Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning, who admitted earlier this week that he was "proud" to throw wobbly passes, capped one of the greatest statistical seasons in the history of the NFL with two of the league's top honors from the Associated Press: Most Valuable Player and Offensive Player of the Year.

Manning received 49 votes from a national panel of 50 media members for the MVP award, beating out Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, who received one vote. The award was announced Saturday at the 3rd Annual National Football League Honors, held in Radio City Music Hall.

Manning broke the NFL's single-season passing records this year with 5,477 yards and 55 touchdowns, previously held by Saints quarterback Drew Brees and Brady, respectively.

"This is a very special award," Manning said through a recorded video message. "I am extremely honored to have it presented by Joe Montana and Aaron Rodgers. I am humbled by this recognition and grateful to my family, Pat Bowlen, John Elway, John Fox and the entire Denver Bronco organization, and of course, my coaches and my teammates."

Manning's 2013 MVP award is his NFL-record fifth, which is also two more than any other player in the history of the game. Jim Brown, Johnny Unitas and Brett Favre each won three MVP awards during their careers.

He also becomes the first player to win MVP awards for two different teams, after his tenure with the Indianapolis Colts.

Manning can add to his trophy collection Sunday, when his Broncos face the Seattle Seahawks in Super Bowl XLVIII at MetLife Stadium.

Manning's father, Archie, and son, Marshall, were sent to accept the award.

Defensive Player of the Year

He was as consistent as any player in the NFL and helped lead the Carolina Panthers to the NFL's second-best total defense, which allowed an average of 301.2 yards per game.

Because of that, linebacker Luke Kuechly won the Defensive Player of the Year award after registering 156 tackles, four interceptions and two sacks.

Kuechly edged Seahawks defensive backs Richard Sherman and Earl Thomas and Colts defensive end Robert Mathis.

"It's a great group of guys," Kuechly said. "Really, anybody could've gotten it, so it's an honor to be up here now."

Coach of the Year

When a coach develops a mythical persona like "Riverboat" Ron Rivera did for the Panthers, it's easier to give him the league's highest honor.

Rivera earned the Coach of the Year award, edging Andy Reid of the Chiefs, Bill Belichick of the Patriots, Chip Kelly of the Eagles and Pete Carroll of the Seahawks.

"This is most certainly a nice award," Rivera said. "There are a lot of deserving coaches in this league and to be singled out is certainly an honor. I'm fortunate that there's a group of men that worked for me that are coaches and did a tremendous job. … We've got a great group of players that are coachable and listen."

Rivera led the Panthers to a 12-4 regular-season record and the NFC South title. Carolina earned a first-round bye in the playoffs, but fell to the San Francisco 49ers 23-10 in the divisional round.

Offensive Rookie of the Year

Green Bay Packers running back Eddie Lacy's rookie season wasn't without difficulties, but according to the voting media, he was good enough to earn the Offensive Rookie of the Year award.

"I just want to say I'm extremely excited right now," Lacy said. "This is definitely one of the best moments of my life. I don't know what to say, I'm speechless."

Lacy beat out San Diego Chargers wide receiver and Cincinnati Bengals running back Giovanni Bernard.

Although he battled concussion issues and other injuries, Lacy rushed for 1,178 yards and 11 touchdowns on 284 carries.

Defensive Rookie of the Year

New York Jets defensive tackle Sheldon Richardson said at the end of the season that he was the NFL's top defensive rookie. The voting media agreed and tabbed Richardson as the Defensive Rookie of the Year, beating out Buffalo Bills linebacker Kiko Alonso and Arizona Cardinals cornerback Tyrann Mathieu.

Although Richardson believed he was the best rookie defender at the end of the season, the award caught him off guard.

"I was surprised," Richardson said. "Kiko and Tyrann most definitely had great, outstanding rookie years. It was a toss up to me, Kiko had a lot of tackles, Tyrann made a lot of plays down the field during the stretch, but unfortunately he got hurt, but most definitely, it was a tight race."

Richardson was a force in the middle of the defensive line, racking up 78 tackles, 3.5 sacks and one forced fumble last season.

KLEE: Sorry, Seattle - the Broncos will win this Super Bowl

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK — Sorry, Seattle.

Sorry for the rain. Sorry about Soundgarden's breakup. Sorry A-Rod left. (Though it looks like you dodged one there). Sorry we drink your Starbucks.

Sorry about the Sonics. No, really. And sorry for what the Nuggets did to George Karl's Sonics.

Mostly, and we mean this, sorry for your sports history. You deserve better. Your beauty is matched only by your taste in music.

One more, Seattle: Sorry, but Peyton Manning and the Broncos are going to beat the Seahawks on Sunday. Consider these our condolences.

The Broncos weren't simply the best team of this NFL season; they were the best team last season, too. The Ravens ruined it.

The Seahawks won't.

On a stroll through Times Square on Friday, Seattle's fans outnumbered Denver's fans on Broadway. The Super Bowl parade will be held on Broadway — in Denver, on Tuesday.

The Seahawks defense is good, the best in the game. The Broncos offense is historic, the best ever. There's a difference.

Sorry, Seattle.

Truth is, Seattle, we in Colorado are a lot like you. We both put the ill in chill pill. We're both super healthy. If there's a disagreement, we both roll a ... snowball.

We don't trash talk; we recycle talk.

So this isn't that. These are simply the facts:

— There will be a week of sunshine in King County before Russell Wilson beats Peyton Manning in a Super Bowl. He's a sweetheart, that kid, but he isn't Peyton.

— The media was wrong to pick on Marshawn Lynch for his silence. The media is more wrong to think he will damage the Broncos. Denver handled Jamaal Charles, twice. Lynch averaged fewer yards per carry than Charles. The Mute is not The Mop.

— Conventional thought on how to beat the Broncos is wrong, too. The blueprint is a capable offense, not a super defense. Three teams beat the Broncos: the Colts, Patriots, Chargers. Each ranks among the top 15 in total offense. Each ranks in the 20s in total defense.

— God is a Broncos fan. Didn't you hear? Sunsets are orange and blue. In Exodus, he parted the Red Sea. In New York, he parted the cold. Sunday will be the warmest day this week.

"Our weather has been pretty darn good in Denver. I think it's actually a pretty well-kept secret, Denver's weather," coach John Fox said. "But this year we've gotten a little more calloused."

Sorry, Seattle. Crummy weather was your only hope.

Hosting a Super Bowl in New York/New Jersey ranks next to the forward pass as a great idea. In a Broadway theater review, this Super Bowl week gets two thumbs-up. The NFL has been smart enough to involve New Jersey just enough to keep it happy, while keeping Manhattan as the hub. The NFL is so powerful it turned up the thermostat, just in time.

Too bad The Commish didn't sound too cheery when asked if Denver would be a candidate to host a Super Bowl. It should be.

"There's such a demand for Super Bowls right now," Roger Goodell said Friday.

"(They are) clearly the best of the best and this has the makings of a classic," Goodell said.

The Commish also said this: "I think the game itself is going to carry the day."

Pat Bowlen, Joe Ellis, John Elway, John Fox, Champ Bailey, Manning and Coloradans Mitch Unrein, Joel Dreessen and Ben Garland, the proud Air Force grad, will carry the Lombardi Trophy.

"Typical Champ," safety Mike Adams said. "He just wanted to come back for the playoffs."

You have super fans, Seattle. Broncos wide receiver Eric Decker told me yours is the "loudest building I've ever played in" — and that was in the locker room after a preseason game.

"Overall, Seattle is a better team," said one of the TV guys, Ray Lewis.

Is that true? I asked the most important player on Seattle's most important asset, its defense.

"I don't want to get into who's the better team," Michael Bennett said. "That will be decided on Sunday."

Seattle deserves this Super Bowl. According to wide receiver Doug Baldwin, the Seahawks realized they were a Super Bowl team after a 34-7 rout of the Saints on Dec. 2.

The NFL's best team doesn't always win. In fact, it rarely wins. Of the 26 previous No. 1 seeds, two won the Super Bowl.

This time, it will.

Broncos 31, Seahawks 17.

Sorry, Seattle.

Klee: Expectations of Super Bowl or Bust still shadows Broncos

By Paul Klee
Colorado Sprigs Gazette
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK - When, exactly, did the mantra of "Super Bowl or Bust" truly kick in for these Broncos?

"Right after we lost to the Ravens last season," veteran safety Mike Adams said.

This is a hard way to play in the NFL. Peyton Manning and the Broncos have played 18 games with the heaviest burden a football team can carry.

With expectations that are almost impossible to meet.

"This team has always been about one thing," defensive tackle Terrance Knighton said here during Super Bowl week. "That's getting to the Super Bowl."

Without so much as a pause, Pot Roast added: "And winning the Super Bowl."

Super Bowl XLVIII is Sunday.

Are the Broncos ready?

Better question: how could they not be?

If the Broncos aren't fired up like a New York subway, after 13 months of setting records, roster shuffling, doubting, player suspensions, bizarre injuries and absurd expectations, well, they would never be ready.

This Broncos season was reality TV in real time. The only thing missing from this Super Bowl equation was their head coach being hospitalized, thinking his days on this earth were over. Oh, wait.

"How many teams can say their coach had to leave the team in the middle of a season?" John Fox said.

How many teams can claim it is one of the greatest in NFL history?

This Broncos team can. This is a league where offense rules. In 47 previous Super Bowls, there's never been a better offense than this one.

The Broncos set NFL records for points in a season (606) and having five players score at least 10 touchdowns. Peyton Manning set the single-season passing records for yardage (5,477) and touchdown passes (55).

Perhaps the most endearing spect of their record-setting campaign was how the Broncos handled the success. Manning's Broncos are more like "awww, shucks" than "awww, look at me!" Mile High salutes? That's so 1998.

"We're not really a team that likes to talk a lot," wide receiver Eric Decker said.

There was always a different feel to this Broncos season. The break from the norm started right about the Monday morning after the Broncos sustained a painful loss to the Ravens 13 months ago at Sports Authority Field.

"I think when you experience something like that, it fuels you until the next time you have an opportunity in the playoffs," vice president of football operations John Elway said.

The Seahawks are the second-youngest team to play in a Super Bowl. Seattle's playing with little to lose.

The Broncos are playing with a quarterback who will be the second-oldest to start in a Super Bowl. Denver's playing with the heavy burden of expectations.

"This has been the second chapter of my career," Manning said.

The first meeting between the Broncos and Seahawks, in a meaningless preseason game back in August, should have been a hint.

This season might be Super Bowl or Bust. But it would be a test until the end.

Derek Wolfe, the defensive lineman, was taken from the field in an ambulance. Champ Bailey, the Hall of Fame-to be cornerback, left the locker room on a set of crutches. Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie nursed a bum ankle.

It only got tougher from there.

No excuses were allowed.

"When you think about everything we've been through ." Fox said.

Here, let me finish: . it's remarkable the Broncos are playing in Super Bowl XLVIII.

Right or wrong, that's not what the football history books will remember. Not when a season is Super Bowl or Bust.

"Just getting here," Knighton said. "That's not what our goal was."

RAMSEY: Five reasons why the Broncos will prevail

By David Ramsey
Colorado Springs Gazette
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK - Here's why the Broncos will defeat the Seahawks, 31-21.

One: The quarterback

This game is about much more than the Peyton Manning-Russell Wilson matchup. I know this.

I also know this game pits Manning, one of football history's greatest passers, against Wilson, who has struggled so far in the playoffs. The Seahawks-Broncos matchup is, in many ways, extremely close.

But this quarterback matchup offers a vast canyon of superiority for the Broncos.

Two: The first three quarters

The Broncos outscored the Chargers and the Patriots 37-3 in the first three quarters. Both games should have been routs, but Denver allowed both opponents to remain within distant striking distance.

During those first three quarters, though, the Broncos were utterly dominating. For much of the season, the Broncos struggled in the first half before overwhelming teams in the final two quarters.

The Broncos have grown, and now find ways to jump on teams early. I see the Broncos jumping on the Seahawks early and learning from their recent fourth-quarter struggles.

Three: The defense

I bought into the common view of the Broncos. This was a lopsided team, powerful on offense and borderline weak on offense. The Broncos followed this script for much of the season, surrendering 48 to the Cowboys, 39 to the Colts and 34 to the Patriots.

But the defenders are gaining momentum, even after a season-ending injury to Von Miller. In the Broncos' past four games, the defense has allowed a total of 70 points

and has been as impressive as the offense except for a porous fourth quarter against the Chargers.

Four: The health of Champ Bailey

When cornerback Chris Harris crumpled to the ground against the Chargers, a fresh question began to dominate the sports conversation in Colorado:

Who would replace Harris?

Turns out, the answer was easy.

Bailey, one of the NFL's all-time cornerback greats, is healthy after a season plagued with foot problems. He's no longer the dominating defensive back who inspired quarterbacks to throw everywhere but his direction, but he was effective and looked free of foot problems against the Patriots.

He's an inspirational presence on the field for the Broncos. On Friday, a reporter asked Broncos coach John Fox about how much the team wants to win an NFL title for Manning.

Fox was quick to mention that the Broncos have two venerable players on the roster.

Peyton and Champ.

Five: The tight end

The Seahawks are seeking to slow the Broncos' deep array of receivers, and they may enjoy some success. Maybe the Legion of Boom will stifle a few of Denver's receivers, but even a legion can't silence everyone.

I expect tight end Julius Thomas to emerge as Sunday's surprise hero. He's too fast for linebackers. He's too brawny for defensive backs. And he's developed a special bond with Manning.

RAMSEY: Most Venerable Player has won our hearts; now on to the game

By David Ramsey
Colorado Springs Gazette
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK - Peyton Manning has seized America's attention in a way only a few athletes have ever seized America's attention.

Yes, I realize the Broncos will tangle with the Seahawks in the overinflated circus known as the Super Bowl. This is a team game with dozens of actors working on football's grandest stage.

But the star of this show is Peyton. There never has been a Super Bowl so focused on one player.

On Friday, I stepped into the elevator at my hotel and descended to breakfast with a salesman from Cincinnati. Once he discovered my home state, he talked nonstop about Colorado's most famed resident.

Yes, Peyton.

The salesman is rooting for the Broncos. He wants to see the best American sports story of the 21st century arrive at a happy ending just like those old Hollywood movies. The salesman looked forward to returning to his home to watch the Super Bowl with his children.

Everyone in his family, the salesman announced, would cheer for Peyton to conquer those pesky Seahawks.

On Sunday, the Broncos will be America's Team. Forget the Dallas Cowboys. The vast majority of our nation will cheer for Peyton, America's Quarterback, with only a lonely green belt pulling for the Seahawks in the Pacific Northwest.

Michael Jordan once dazzled us this way. So did Babe Ruth, who had a big house built in the Bronx where fans could watch his soaring home runs. Manning now walks alongside Jordan and Ruth. He towers over all other current athletes.

Don't get me wrong. Manning is not the greatest football player of all time. That honor belongs to Jim Brown. He's not the greatest quarterback of all time. That honor belongs to John Elway, with apologies to runner-up Joe Montana. He's not the most dominating athlete working in America today. That honor belongs to LeBron James.

But Manning has a knack. He connects with people. He grew up a rich kid in New Orleans, the son of a football mega-star and a homecoming queen, but he's blessed with this aw-shucks approach and this probing honesty and this disarming sense of humor. He's not one of us, but he's delivered a matchless performance of acting as if he is.

Cornerback Richard Sherman, the face of the Seahawks, commented about the "ducks" Manning throws. Sherman was observing, correctly, that many of the passes Manning throws flutter along in wobbly, unsightly flight.

Manning just smiled.

"I do throw ducks," he said.

Those ducks are why he's so beloved. When Manning destructed defenses during his prime with the Colts, his passes resembled guided missiles. Flawless, as if launched by a machine.

Then came the neck injury and the four surgeries, leaving Mr. Certain engulfed in uncertainty. He was made fully human right before our eyes.

Expectations have stalked Manning for his entire career. He was the son of Archie, a Southern folk hero. He had the football genes. But there always was more than mere talent. Peyton was blessed with a relentless work ethic that allowed him to glimpse at a defense and see the immediate future. No quarterback has ever read defenses with the comprehension level of Manning.

He was dominating, so magnificent in regular seasons with the Colts that he confused and enraged fans when he was sometimes mediocre in the playoffs. Manning, the ultimate victor, often stumbled when it mattered most.

"I know how hard it is to get to the Super Bowl," Manning said. "People think you should go every single year. It's just not possible."

No, it's not. Manning in twilight understands this trip is precious.

He will trot on the field in New Jersey with a surgically repaired neck and those ever-hovering expectations. He is the undisputed star of this ultimate show.

The vast majority of Americans are rooting for him, and his Broncos.

Will Peyton be remembered as best ever? Not if he loses on Sunday

By Gregg Doyel
CBSSports.com
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK -- Peyton Manning may well be the greatest quarterback of all time, but life isn't fair. So understand this: If the Broncos lose Sunday in Super Bowl XLVIII, an enormous game and yet one measly game, Manning won't be remembered as the greatest QB ever. Not with a 1-2 record in the Super Bowl.

Don't confuse the way it ought to be with the way it is.

CBSSports.com awards Manning Offensive MVP

And the way it is, for a quarterback, is clear cut: Super Bowls are an enormous weight on your legacy, in either direction. Win them and your legacy jumps up. Terry Bradshaw, for example, is in the Hall of Fame. Was Bradshaw a truly great quarterback? Nah, probably not. He made the Pro Bowl three times, which is good but not great. He threw almost as many interceptions (210) as touchdowns (212), which isn't all that good. But Terry Bradshaw was great on Super Bowl Sunday, and his team was great on those days -- 4-0 -- so he was hurried into the Hall of Fame as a first-ballot candidate in 1989.

The Super Bowl, man. It can make you, and it can break you.

It broke Ken Anderson. Hey, it did. Anderson is the most deserving, Canton-eligible quarterback in NFL history to not be in the Hall of Fame. Know why that is? Because his team lost Super Bowl XVI to the 49ers. By five points. After Anderson drove the Bengals 74 yards for a touchdown late in the fourth quarter but watched as the 49ers recovered the onside kick and ran out the clock.

Here's some neat facts for you:

Playing in the exact same era as Bradshaw, Ken Anderson had as many MVP trophies (one) and All-Pro picks (one). He had more Pro Bowl appearances (four to three) and a significantly higher passer rating (81.9 to 70.9) and completion percentage (59.3 percent to 51.9 percent). His ratio of TD to INT also is significantly better (197-160, compared to 212-210 for Bradshaw). By almost every measure, Ken Anderson was Terry Bradshaw's equal -- if not superior.

But Bradshaw had those Super Bowl titles. Anderson did not, not even one, and without a ring his legacy isn't what it should be. Bradshaw made the Hall on the

first ballot. Anderson has been a finalist just twice, and not since 1998. His ship has sailed. Because of that loss in Super Bowl XVI.

Cold-weather dreams Manning's chill factor

So back to Peyton Manning. The guy is at a different level from Bradshaw and Anderson, clearly. The stakes are higher, so the competition is greater, all of which means the grading curve is more severe.

Manning isn't trying to get into the Hall of Fame. He's in. He's not trying to be remembered as one of the greatest ever, because he's on the short list whether he wins this game or not. But Manning has within his grasp the honor of greatest quarterback ever, and to be given that seat among the NFL immortals, he can't have a losing record in the Super Bowl.

Look, he just can't.

Not when Joe Montana, another candidate for the greatest QB ever, is 4-0 in the Super Bowl and carrying around some of the best individual statistics of his era. Not when Brett Favre owns most of the biggest career passing records -- he's first, and Manning is second, in touchdowns, yards and completions -- and has a 1-1 record in the Super Bowl. And when Tom Brady has sterling individual numbers and a 3-2 record in the Super Bowl. And when Aaron Rodgers, still in his prime, is 1-0 in the big game and first all-time (Manning is second among QBs with at least five years experience) in career passer rating.

How big a deal is the Super Bowl for a quarterback? It's like this: Brady set single-season NFL records in 2007 for touchdowns (50) and passer rating (117.2), but lost in the Super Bowl. Because of that, because of the position he plays, we consider that season a disappointment for Tom Brady.

Six years later Manning set records for passing yards (5,477) and touchdowns (55). He has had arguably the greatest season ever for a quarterback, nudging aside Tom Brady from 2007, and here he is in the Super Bowl. If the Broncos don't beat the Seahawks? We'll consider this season a disappointment for him.

Maybe that's not how it should be, but the NFL isn't so different from the NBA, where LeBron James is pretty clearly (to me) the greatest basketball player ever -- but Michael Jordan, no slouch himself, went 6-for-6 in the NBA Finals and for that reason will always be rated ahead of LeBron by lots of folks.

As for me, I'll remember Peyton Manning the way I'll remember LeBron James: Rings be damned, win or lose on Sunday, he's the greatest I've ever seen. But that opinion won't be the popular one, because I'm talking about the way it ought to be.

And legacies are a more cynical business. That's just the way it is.

Peyton Manning wins 2013 NFL MVP

By Will Brinson
CBSSports.com
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK -- The hardware keeps piling up for Peyton Manning and after his record-breaking 2013 season, Manning is now the all-time record-holder for MVP trophies, winning his fifth on Saturday night at the NFL Honors.

Manning also won the 2013 NFL Offensive Player of the Year award after throwing for an NFL record 5,477 passing yards and an NFL record 55 touchdown passes.

The Broncos quarterback helped produce two receivers with more than 1,200 yards in Eric Decker and Demaryius Thomas. Wes Welker and Julius Thomas also topped 700 yards in the Broncos aerial assault on NFL defenses.

Manning was named the 2013 CBSSports.com's MVP on Friday evening and like I said at the time, it was a no brainer. He was the only viable choice for the voters.

He was actually the only candidate too. There was no build up to the announcement -- Aaron Rodgers and Joe Montana handed out the hardware -- with the NFL's montage featuring Manning as the only candidate.

It's a cool moment and Peyton said in a video aired (he didn't attend the NFL Honors for obvious reasons) that he's "humbled." But any amount of trophies from 2013 is probably irrelevant if Manning doesn't end up holding the Lombardi on Sunday evening.

Peyton Manning wins 2013 Offensive Player of the Year Award

By Will Brinson
CBSSports.com
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK -- Peyton Manning is the 2013 NFL Offensive Player of the Year, revealed at the NFL Honors ceremony at Radio City Music Hall on Saturday.

Talk about a no-brainer pick. The Broncos quarterback was an absolute monster in 2013, compiling the single-best regular season by a quarterback in NFL history.

Manning threw for 5,477 passing yards and tossed 55 touchdowns to go along with only 10 interceptions.

He broke the single-season record for passing yards and touchdowns by a quarterback and dominated from start to finish in 2013.

It's a wonderful honor for Manning, although you have to think that unless he's holding a different trophy in less than 24 hours that he'll consider the season something of a disappointment.

Greg Cosell's Super Bowl Preview: Seattle's top defense vs. Denver's top offense

By Greg Cosell
Yahoo Sports/Shutdown Corner
February 1, 2014

Many people say preseason doesn't matter, but before this Super Bowl it's worth taking a look back on the Seahawks-Broncos preseason matchup to see if there are any clues on how the much-anticipated matchup between Seattle's top defense and Denver's top defense will shake out.

And we can find that in that game, which was the second preseason game for both teams, Seattle played a lot differently on defense than we're used to seeing.

The Seahawks prefer to run zone coverage, in particular "Cover 3" zone with two cornerbacks and a free safety each responsible for a deep third of the field. They also don't blitz much. Seattle had the third fewest blitzes in the NFL, in terms of sending five or more rushers on pass plays.

So what did Seattle do against Denver in that preseason game? The Seahawks played a lot of man coverage and blitzed more than they usually do. Now you have to try to decipher, did the Seahawks do that because it was a preseason game and they were trying out things, or do they believe this is the best way to match up against the Broncos?

The problem with repeating that approach is, despite a final score that was 40-10 in favor of Seattle, the Broncos went up and down the field when Peyton Manning was in the game (he was 11-of-16 for 163 yards and a touchdown). Manning was very patient in that game, and that's important for this matchup on Sunday.

If you give Manning the 5-yard completion, he'll take it. Will the Seahawks essentially take the approach that they'll give you 12, 13, 14 plays on a drive and see if Denver can execute all the way down the field against their defense? It takes only one bad play like a penalty, being tackled for a loss or a turnover to ruin the drive. In my opinion, that could be Seattle's approach on Sunday.

If you're Seattle, the lower scoring the game is, the better it is for them. If Denver holds the ball it isn't necessarily a bad thing, because time is being taken off the clock and the game is shorter. The red zone will be important, and both Denver's offense and Seattle's defense play very well in the red zone. Let's say Denver gets

the ball first, has a seven-minute drive and scores just three points. I think Seattle would look at that as a win, not as a bad thing.

One reason the Seahawks might not be so aggressive on defense and let the Broncos take some short plays is that their pass rush, a strength of the defense, might not be a huge factor anyway. Denver up to this point has played three-receiver sets in about seven of every 10 snaps, so the Seahawks will play a lot of nickel. Seattle likes its nickel defense pass rush, when Michael Bennett goes inside and Cliff Avril is in, but Manning normally gets rid of the ball quickly. Seattle's pass rush could become a factor if Denver gets into too many long-yardage situation. But not so much if the Broncos stay on schedule. We've charted games in which Manning gets rid of the ball in an average of two seconds. If you get rid of it in two seconds, your offense line can take a vacation.

Another thing to keep in mind: To win this matchup, I think Denver has to have some success running the ball. They don't need "X" number of runs or yards to be successful, but Manning is going to hand it off when the defense doesn't stack the box. They have to have success with Knowshon Moreno running it. Success could mean just 4-yard runs, not necessarily 20-yard runs. If Denver plays their game, and Moreno has 17 carries for 72 yards or something like that, it will help Denver. That means Seattle will have to defend the whole field against their offense.

The fact is, when you give two good coaching staffs two weeks to prepare, we have no idea what wrinkles they will throw at each other. Because of that, this game is really hard to handicap. I don't feel strongly one way or another. When I've been asked on some radio shows this week I have picked Denver to win, but I'm not saying that with any conviction. There are so many different ways this game could go. That's part of why it's a great matchup.

Peyton Manning enters Super Bowl with new perspective on career

By Michael Rosenberg
SI.com
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK -- Peyton Manning is back in the Super Bowl, playing as well as he ever has. But he is not quite the same. Let Tony Dungy explain.

Dungy coached Manning in the meat of his career, the glory years in Indianapolis. On Saturdays, Dungy would let the players' spouses and children watch practice. Most players appreciated it, but most players are not competitive piranhas like Peyton Manning.

"Peyton would always come to me," Dungy said, "and say, 'We need to change this. We need to have the kids stay in the cafeteria. We need to concentrate on Saturdays. It's our last practice before we're playing.' I'd always say 'Yeah, I understand that. But this is a special routine."

Last year, before Manning's first game in Denver, Dungy talked to the Broncos' Brandon Stokley, his former receiver with the Colts. And Stokley told him Manning looked like the Peyton they knew in Indy, but something odd had happened. Manning had asked Broncos coach John Fox to open Saturday practices to the players' families.

* * *

On the eve of his third Super Bowl, at the end of his 16th season, what makes Peyton Manning a great football player? There are many ways to answer that. Here is one: He is a master at disguising what matters and what doesn't.

This is how he fools defenders, creates openings, and leads his team down the field. He does it in many ways. Before the Colts played the Steelers in 2005, Manning told Dungy, "I know I'm going to get these guys." Assistant coach Bruce Arians had left Indy for Pittsburgh, and Manning knew Arians would share his famous pre-snap hand signals with the Steelers. So on the first play of the game, Manning signaled for a run. Steelers cornerback Ike Taylor bit.

But of course, on this day, the signal did not mean what Taylor thought it meant. Manning hit Marvin Harrison for an 80-yard touchdown.

After Dungy retired, he watched Manning play the New England Patriots. In the first quarter, Manning called "Storm!" at the line: Running play. The Patriots stopped it. Dungy was confused. Why did he call for a run against that formation?

Dungy got his answer later in the game. Manning called "storm" again. The Patriots went to stop the run again. But of course, Manning had changed the meaning of "storm." He hit Dallas Clark for a long completion.

The smartest baseball hitters set up a pitcher; they will swing and miss at a pitch so they get the same pitch later in the game. You don't see that much in football, but Manning had done it. The first "storm" play was a setup. Stopping the Colts for a short gain did not mean what the Patriots thought it meant.

Sometimes Manning will change his signals or pre-snap cadence between drives. Other times, he will have words that mean players should disregard other words, essentially turning them into dummy calls.

Everybody knows Manning watches a lot of film. But did you know that he watches the network broadcasts (or asks the backup to do it), so he can find out which of his words were audible to viewers -- and to his next opponent? He climbs inside his opponents' heads and watches them try to get inside his.

"He just goes way beyond what the normal person would," Dungy said.

And this brings us to "Omaha," the word that has America buzzing in these playoffs. What does "Omaha" mean? Consider these two answers:

Manning: "Well, Omaha, it's a run play. But it could be a pass play, or a play-action pass, depending on a couple of things: the wind, which way we're going, the quarter, and the jerseys that we're wearing."

Dungy: "Omaha means a lot of things. Right now he seems to be using it for the snap count. Unless he tells them he is not using it for the snap count."

Manning was joking, and Dungy was serious. But the answers are awfully similar, aren't they?

* * *

In 2011, Manning received two lessons in what matters and what doesn't. Dungy said they both changed Manning profoundly. The first lesson was that Manning had to miss the football season because of a neck injury. The other event occurred in April 2011, when twins Marshall and Mosley were born.

The two events are unrelated, but their effects on Manning are intertwined. Manning had been at the center of the NFL orbit for so long, and he discovered the

league kept spinning without him. He had also been the center of his own life for so long, and as any decent parent will tell you, that changes when you have kids.

Dungy said Manning's attitude now is: "Yeah, we want to win, but if we don't win, I'm still going home to those two kids, and we're still going to have fun. I don't know if you play better, but you put it in perspective."

It is often said that people don't change. But of course we all do, day by day, over time. For all those years in Indianapolis, Manning had been a model employee. He was a perennial MVP candidate, an ideal leader, responsive to his coaches, active in charity work, great with the media. He had helped the Colts win a Super Bowl and build a new stadium. And in the end, what did it get him? Cut.

Colts owner Jim Irsay, meanwhile, was in a strange place: He could transition from one franchise quarterback to another (Andrew Luck), the dream of every owner. But he risked being seen as a jerk for it. After all, who the hell cuts Peyton Manning?

Irsay's father, Bob Irsay, had been painted as the worst kind of owner. He had famously pulled the Colts out of Baltimore in the middle of the night, then rewarded Indianapolis with years of bad football. Jim took over and showed everybody how much he cared. He insisted that Dungy's father travel with the team. He built relationships that went beyond business. He and Manning had become very close. And now, because Luck was available and Manning's future was uncertain, Irsay risked being portrayed as just another callous owner.

Ultimately, everybody did the right thing, and nobody enjoyed it.

"It was stressful," Dungy said. "I talked to (Jim) two or three times during the course of it, in trying to figure out what to do. He kept coming back to: 'As much as I love Peyton, as close as we are, I just have to do what's best for the franchise down the road.'

"Does that make you a commodity? Does that make you just part of the office furniture? That's hard to say. In Jim's mind, I know he is more than that."

When Manning chose a new team, he knew one thing: He could not possibly replicate what he had in Indianapolis -- or what he thought he had. The second act of his career would always be overshadowed by the first. He is the Broncos' quarterback, but he remains Indianapolis's icon.

The one thing he can replicate is the game itself. It is his challenge, his puzzle, the thing that drives and thrills him. He has used new pieces -- Demaryius Thomas instead of Marvin Harrison, Eric Decker instead of Reggie Wayne, Julius Thomas instead of Clark -- to put the puzzle together.

Dungy said Manning looks the same to him on the field. But it is easy to imagine that Manning sees the game more clearly because of his lessons in what matters and what doesn't.

* * *

Peyton Manning keeps changing, a little bit every day, like we all do. He went from wanting to ban kids from Saturday practices to wanting them there. Someday, he will decide he would rather be with the kids than practicing. Dungy believes that is when he will retire.

"When the twins get a little older and he wants to go to whatever it is, whether it's play practice or performance, or Pee Wee baseball, or whatever it ends up being, he'll say, 'I know I should be training, working doing something, watching film, but I have a desire to do this,'" Dungy said. "That's when he'll step away."

And when he steps away ... well, we have made it this deep into a Peyton Manning column without using the word "legacy." Hey, I'm trying to be like Peyton here. Everything is by design.

Manning said this week that he doesn't care about his legacy. He added: "I'm not 100 percent sure what the word even means." It is easy to dismiss this as a pat answer. But Dungy insists: "He never really cared about that."

If Manning is healthy next year, he will break Brett Favre's record for touchdown passes. The year after that, he should pass Favre for all-time passing yards. But Dungy points out that in 2004, Manning threw a then-record 49 touchdown passes but barely played in the final game, because the Colts had clinched their seed. A few more touchdown passes would have made his record harder to break, but Manning didn't care.

We see Manning's crazy stats and TV commercials and Tom Brady comparisons and even his postseason record, and we are just like those defensive players. We can't separate what matters from what doesn't.

But this matters: A yellow note pad. After every Colts season, Manning brought a yellow pad to a meeting with Dungy. On it, he listed the ways he and the Colts could be better. He asked Dungy to hold him to his list.

A few weeks after the Broncos lost to Baltimore in last year's playoffs, Manning told Dungy he was already excited for the 2013 season, because he knew he was healthy, could take a hit, and had the weapons he needed. He put up the best numbers of his career, an MVP season, and he may win another Super Bowl. All of those things matter to Manning. But they are not what matters most.

Dungy said Manning is driven by "Chasing, in his mind, perfection: This is what the quarterback should do. Can I play the perfect game? Can I have the perfect practice? Can I be the absolutely best I can be out here? And if I do it, can I do it tomorrow?"

That is his legacy.

Peyton Manning is MVP of NFL for record fifth time

By Chris Wesseling
NFL.com
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK -- Even if he emerges victorious in Super Bowl XLVIII on Sunday, Peyton Manning will not end the debate over the greatest quarterback in NFL history.

After winning the 2013 Associated Press NFL Most Valuable Player award at Saturday's "NFL Honors" awards show, however, Manning should be the consensus choice for greatest regular-season quarterback pro football has ever witnessed.

Manning now has won the award five times, the most of any player. Jim Brown, Johnny Unitas and Brett Favre were three-time MVPs.

Although Manning was head and shoulders above the MVP field this season, he failed to join Tom Brady (2010) as the only winner to be voted unanimously. One wrong-headed member of The Associated Press opted to make the process about himself rather than selecting the most deserving candidate.

By basic statistical measures, Manning generated the most productive season ever. He set records with 55 touchdown passes and 5,477 yards through the air while leading the Denver Broncos past the 2007 New England Patriots for most points in NFL history.

Manning has compensated beautifully for waning arm strength by translating opposing defenses before the snap, processing information in the pocket quicker than any quarterback and consistently squeezing accurate passes into small windows.

The difference between this year's campaign and last year's MVP loss to Adrian Peterson was the addition of slot receiver Wes Welker and the emergence of athletic tight end Julius Thomas.

Armed with a pick-your-poison attack capable of exploiting mismatches down the field and underneath, Manning became a nightmare for defensive coordinators. Even before the season started, it was evident that this offense would enter the NFL's pantheon.

What we will remember most about Manning's 2013 season was the onslaught of points he would throw at overwhelmed opponents to turn a tight game into a

laugher. Even when his offense was held in check for a significant portion of the game, he repeatedly showed the ability to pull away with a flurry of touchdowns.

This was the year that Manning widened the gap for most MVP awards while setting a slew of new single-season marks. Before long, he will own all of the major career records as well.

Will those accomplishments propel him to the "greatest ever" perch? That will be debated in bars, taprooms, taverns and podcast studios around the world.

Broncos' Peyton Manning earns Offensive Player of the Year

By NFL.com
February 1, 2014

Add yet another award to Peyton Manning's resume.

The Denver Broncos quarterback earned The Associated Press Offensive Player of the Year award for 2013 at "NFL Honors" on Saturday.

Manning produced perhaps his best season in his 16th year in the league. He passed for a league-high 5,477 yards along with 55 touchdowns and just 10 interceptions while leading the Broncos to an NFL record 606 points; his passer rating was 115.1.

The Broncos finished the regular season 13-3 en route to a first-round bye and home-field advantage throughout the AFC playoffs. On Sunday, Manning will look to top his stellar 2013 campaign with a Lombardi Trophy on Sunday.

Manning's only other Offensive Player of the Year award came in 2004 with the Indianapolis Colts when he passed for 4,557 yards with 49 TDs through the air and 10 INTs.

'NFL Honors' complete list of winners

By Gregg Rosenthal
NFL.com
February 1, 2014

NEW YORK -- The Carolina Panthers wanted to be playing in New Jersey on Sunday. Instead, they were the big winners at the "NFL Honors" ceremony in New York on Saturday night.

Ron Rivera was the surprise winner of the Coach of the Year Award, while Luke Kuechly won the Defensive Player of the Year award. (Even if he wouldn't have received our vote.)

Both of the above awards had a number of great candidates. Still, it was eye-opening that Pete Carroll, Bruce Arians and Chip Kelly received just eight combined votes. Andy Reid and Bill Belichick came in second and third, respectively, in the voting behind Rivera.

Kuechly won a crowded defensive-player field, where Robert Mathis came in second. Earl Thomas and Richard Sherman split the Seahawk vote. NaVorro Bowman, our pick, was ignored. Robert Quinn came in fourth.

There weren't a ton of other major surprises, although we were pleasantly surprised to see Jets defensive lineman Sheldon Richardson win Defensive Rookie of the Year. Peyton Manning won the MVP award, as expected.

The coolest moment of the night came when the 2014 Pro Football Hall of Fame class was announced. It was the first time this was done at "NFL Honors," and it won't be the last. The ovation for the seven men was like a scene out of a movie.

Michael Strahan and Walter Jones are headed to Canton, but the biggest news was one name that was left off this list. We're stunned that Marvin Harrison was not inducted.

The complete list of award winners are below. First, a few observations from our intrepid reporter Marc Sessler:

» Andre Reed and Ray Guy stood out as the most thrilled to make the Hall of Fame. Both men waited a long time for this moment, and they were relieved. There was an audible gasp when Guy, a Veterans Committee candidate, was announced.

"There's been a lot of frustration (over the wait)," Guy said, before calling it a "moment so precious."

Guy says the news gives a younger generation of punters hope. It will be a cool Raiders moment when John Madden presents Guy in Canton.

» Reed repeatedly praised Buffalo as a sports town.

"That was one of the greatest cities to play for," Reed said.

Here is a list of the winners:

» AP Offensive Rookie of the Year: Eddie Lacy, RB, Green Bay Packers

» AP Defensive Rookie of the Year: Sheldon Richardson, DE, New York Jets

» Salute to Service Award, presented by USAA: John Harbaugh, head coach, Baltimore Ravens

» Fantasy Player of the Year: Jamaal Charles, RB, Kansas City Chiefs

» Greatness on the Road: Nick Foles, QB, Philadelphia Eagles

» AP Comeback Player of the Year: Philip Rivers, QB, San Diego Chargers

» AP Coach of the Year: Ron Rivera, Carolina Panthers

» Don Shula High School Coach of the Year: Mike Grant, Eden Prairie (Minn.) H.S.

» Defensive Player of the Year: Luke Kuechly, LB, Carolina Panthers

» AP Offensive Player of the Year: Peyton Manning, QB, Denver Broncos

» Pepsi Next Rookie of the Year: Keenan Allen, WR, San Diego Chargers

» GMC Never Say Never Moment of the Year: Aaron Rodgers, QB, Green Bay Packers

» Deacon Jones Player of the Year: Robert Mathis, DE, Indianapolis Colts

» Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year: Charles Tillman, CB, Chicago Bears

» Bridgestone Performance Play of the Year: Calvin Johnson, WR, Detroit Lions

» FedEx Air Player of the Year: Peyton Manning, QB, Denver Broncos

» FedEx Ground Player of the Year: LeSean McCoy, RB, Philadelphia Eagles

» AP Most Valuable Player: Peyton Manning, QB, Denver Broncos

Super Bowl XLVIII's impact on Peyton Manning's legacy

By Judy Battista
NFL.com
February 1, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- The jerseys that have piled up in his locker this week -- all with those polite but pointed notes from teammates "sign this for me" -- are just another reminder to Peyton Manning that the light he says he sees at the end of the tunnel of his career is blinding to everybody else, and that even those who know his continued viability best are rushing to commemorate him nonetheless.

"All these hints about retirement," Manning said this week. "I feel like everybody's trying to get rid of me."

Only the opponents. Still, there has been an unmistakable valedictory quality to the Broncos' playoff run, and to this week in particular. Even if the end of Manning's career does not come now -- he says it will not, win or lose Sunday -- it looms so close on the horizon that the accounting of his place in history has already begun. Manning has all but cringed each time his legacy has been discussed this week, but there is little point in ignoring it, and there is little question he has long been aware of it. He said this week he has been asked about his legacy since he was 25 years old.

Even at 25, though, Manning was not playing like this. Manning did not merely construct this year the best season any quarterback has had. He methodically chipped away at each of the perceived demerits on his record, the ones that began forming back when he was 25 and had time on his side. Each time he has seized victory this season -- in breaking the most significant of quarterbacking records, on very cold nights, over his eternal rivals Brady and Belichick, in the postseason games that have often bedeviled him -- Manning has checked off another box that had been a mark against him.

"The numbers are ungodly," John Elway said.

The last time Manning's stature was seriously discussed was four years ago, with a different team, at a different time in his life. He had the Colts then, but not his children or the faded scar on the back of his neck. It was simpler to measure Manning at that Super Bowl. He had one of his routinely extraordinary seasons despite the almost complete absence of a running game or experienced receivers. His preparation was legendary -- at the time, his quarterbacks coach Frank Reich said he and a few other confidants acted as Manning's research and development

team, with Manning texting ideas of plays he thought would be useful against the upcoming opponent and then a few others looking for video proof to confirm or refute his theories.

Manning said this week he is no longer as obsessive in his preparation; he is not a robot, he memorably declared, preferring to put his children to bed instead of watching another bit of preseason tape. But his command and control over the offense -- which Dan Marino has said he has never seen another quarterback have as much of -- has not waned. He still peppers his teammates with pop quizzes, after all. And he still forces coaches to make unorthodox decisions in an attempt to beat him. Then, it was the Saints' onside kick to steal a Super Bowl possession. This year, it was Belichick allowing the Broncos to have the ball first in overtime, but forcing Manning to throw into the wind.

Tony Dungy said Manning had dominated his era like nobody other than Otto Graham, and that because championships are fickle, Manning's place in the quarterbacking firmament should have been settled much earlier, when he won his first in the 2006 season.

"If two championships will solidify that in peoples' minds, great," Dungy told me before the Colts lost to the Saints in Super Bowl XLIV. "He's been as much of a factor on this offense as any quarterback in the history of football."

In hindsight, that Super Bowl was a devilish turning point for Manning. The Colts lost and Manning would never again win a postseason game with them. Then came the neck surgery and the wrenching release, and Manning began what looked to be a quiet receding from the loftiest echelon of the game. What he has done since has surprised even those who have tracked him most closely, who worried that he would never play again.

Manning admitted this week that he never felt entirely at home last year with the Broncos, the unfamiliarity after being a Colt for so long making him feel like he was just renting out the locker for a few months. But this season was a wonder. Whatever physical limitations still exist after his neck injury, he will not say.

He joins in the joking about how ugly some of his passes look -- in truth his passes have always wobbled -- noting that he has thrown for a lot of touchdowns and yards with the wobbles. And if he is no longer the most aggressive player Reich has ever seen -- Manning used to want to throw deep on every play, Reich said four years ago - his passer rating on passes of at least 21 yards in the air is higher than it was in 2009, even though he averages just four such throws per game. But he and coordinator Adam Gase have quickly fallen into step -- Gase is such an aggressive play-caller that Elway said he wished he could have played for him -- and the amalgam of an offense they have constructed off the foundation Manning

brought with him from Indianapolis has compensated for whatever was lost to the surgeon's knife.

"Somebody asked me to describe Peyton Manning," said Gil Brandt, who already calls him the greatest regular-season quarterback of all time. "He's the Greg Maddux of the NFL. He masks physical limitations with unmatched knowledge of his position."

When the Broncos signed Manning nearly two years ago, Elway declared his goal to make Manning the best quarterback to ever play the game. The subtext was clear: Manning had to win at least another championship, and probably more, to garner perhaps the only accolade that still eludes him.

The irony is how closely the Broncos team that Elway has constructed for Manning mirrors the one with which Manning won his only title. Both teams had two running backs combine for nearly 2,300 total yards. Both had offensive lines that allowed the fewest sacks in the NFL. The Colts had six receivers with at least 30 receptions; the Broncos are even more diverse, fielding seven receivers with at least 20. But, perhaps most critically, both teams had defenses that, while in the bottom half of the league during the regular season, improved dramatically in the postseason -- each allowing a little more than 16 points per playoff game. Manning was the most valuable player of that Super Bowl, but it was the five turnovers the defense forced against the Bears that really changed the game.

Manning has been noticeably relaxed and reflective this postseason -- more so than when he was younger and in this same spot -- offering unusual insight into his private thoughts during and after his injury, and alluding, frequently, to the coming end of his career. The only questions he has chosen to deflect have been about his legacy. If the Broncos win on Sunday, it won't be a question any longer.

"What else do you talk about when you talk about Peyton Manning?" Elway wondered.

We might finally find out.

John Elway led Peyton Manning's recruitment to Denver Broncos

By Jeff Darlington
NFL.com
February 1, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- Seated in a quiet lounge area upstairs at a high-end Denver steakhouse, the man with the name on the door finally had a few minutes alone with the man who's own name was on the mind of every sports fan in America.

John Elway and Peyton Manning, seated in comfortable leather chairs at one of Elway's restaurants, each with a couple of beers in the belly, were on the brink of a moment that would change the Broncos' organization for good.

"We pulled off to the side, sat down for about 45 minutes to an hour -- and we just talked," Elway said during a one-on-one conversation with NFL Media this week.

If somebody wanted to pinpoint the moment, if someone really sifted through all of the madness that went down during the NFL's league-wide courtship of Manning in the Spring of 2012, this might have been the one.

This was the conversation that bridged Manning between his past and his future; the time when the shock of yesterday began to be replaced by the hope of tomorrow. The Colt, you see, was getting closer to growing into a Bronco.

"I can tell you're in shock," Elway told Manning, nearly 48 hours after the Colts released him on March 7, 2012.

"I am," Manning said.

In perhaps the perfect combination of empathy, sympathy and salesmanship, Elway was putting together a recruitment of Manning that would ultimately bring the legendary quarterback to Denver for the final years of his career.

We have heard plenty of stories since. Stories about the intense nature of Manning's recovery from neck surgery. About the behind-the-scenes way in which Manning and Colts owner Jim Irsay eventually recognized their future wasn't together. About all of the other teams that pursued Manning's services.

But what is truly worth noting, on the eve of Manning's return to the Super Bowl, is the ideal way in which one championship quarterback convinced another that Denver was the place to be.

"What I did, I just put myself in his shoes," Elway said. "How would I want to be treated? What would I want from an organization? I didn't want to hard sell him. We didn't hard sell him. We showed him what we had, what Denver was about.

"I just felt we had the best thing to sell anyway -- the owner, the fan base, Fox being there, the wide receivers. To me, I really felt confident about what we were selling."

But as many members of the organization will tell you, it wasn't Demaryius Thomas or Fox or Denver or ownership that allowed the Broncos to close the deal on Manning. It was Elway -- all the way.

One Broncos source said most members of the organization didn't even know Elway had decided to chase Manning, with Tim Tebow still on the Broncos' roster, until word slowly began to trickle down. Elway, instead, had decided on his own that he was going to get Manning, that the QB was the answer to all of his questions.

The source described it as "pure excitement" when the news of Manning's arrival for a meeting in Denver began to spread. And once those same people heard that Manning and Elway had a sit-down conversation over a few drinks, they felt even better than ever about it.

"There's not a man in the world who will sit down for a few beers with Elway and not want to run through a wall for him by the time they are done," one source said.

Of course, it wasn't simply as easy as that. But it was a hell of a start.

Instead, the Broncos still had to deal with some competition in the hunt for Manning's services. Although his meeting with Denver was the first, Manning still had meetings planned with the 49ers and Titans. He'd also meet with the Dolphins' brass, and the Cardinals were also showing interest. The Redskins, too, were on their way to Denver to meet with Manning.

Little by little, things were unfolding in the Broncos' favor.

"We're sitting there at dinner with Peyton, and I saw Washington trade up to the No. 2 spot," Elway said. "It ran across the bottom line of the television in the restaurant."

Elway knew one of the potential suitors was out. Manning, though, would still meet with Redskins coach Mike Shanahan the next day because the coach was already on his way to Denver when the trade went down.

"I knew they traded the pick, so I texted Mike, 'Put in a good word for us,'" Elway said.

Elway was still nervous about the prospects of a few other teams, even while maintaining a patient approach with Manning, never trying to make a hard sell as Manning continued making plans to visit with other teams.

"He was good buddies with (former Arizona coach Ken) Whisenhunt, but I knew they had to decide on (quarterback Kevin) Kolb, so I wasn't worried as much about that one," Elway said. "Houston was the other one. I thought if they got in the mix, they had a good football team, but I called (coach Gary) Kubiak, and he said he wasn't in the mix."

What about Tennessee?

"The only thing Tennessee had was that he was from there," Elway said.

That ended up benefiting the Broncos because Manning ultimately wanted a very fresh start. And as other teams like the Dolphins pursued him, it always still came back to one major aspect of the Broncos' situation: They had Elway.

"I knew Peyton already," Elway said. "He came in the year I retired. I never played against him, but I'd known him. It was a friendship, but I wanted to show him what we had in Denver."

"So I thought, 'What does he want to hear? What does he need to hear?'"

When Manning left the restaurant that night, ending a one-day visit with the Broncos, nobody knew with certainty that Manning would choose the Broncos. Manning was doing as Elway advised him to do. He was taking his time.

Yes, Manning would still talk with other teams. He would still spend time contemplating everything he'd heard from everyone. There is, nonetheless, a sense within the organization that Elway's meeting with Manning forever changed the direction of the organization -- even if it was 11 days until Manning completed his deal and was introduced as the Broncos' quarterback.

It led them here, to this weekend, to this moment, with Manning on the brink of his second Super Bowl ring. He has the opportunity to help secure his legacy as one of the greatest quarterbacks to ever play the game.

And he has it because Elway closed the deal.

"To me, Peyton wanted to finish strong and have a chance to cement his legacy," Elway said. "I really felt like this was the best spot for him. I believe that. It ended up working out."

Safe to say, with a win Sunday, it will have worked out for Manning. For Elway. And for the entire Broncos organization.

Super Bowl XLVIII: Seattle Seahawks vs. Denver Broncos - Breaking down the matchups

No. 1 offense vs. No. 1 defense. Peyton Manning's up-tempo no-huddle against a defense that combines incomparable team speed with a violent approach. This Super Bowl could be a classic.

By Hank Gola
New York Daily News
February 1, 2014

When the Seahawks have the ball ...

QUARTERBACK vs. DEFENSIVE SCHEME

With just five TD passes and four interceptions in his last six games, Russell Wilson has hit a rough patch at the wrong time. And he's up against a defense that has been playing its best football lately (allowing just 15 ppg over the last four), even while losing one its best players in Von Miller in Week 16. In fact, only four current starters — DT Terrance Knighton, LB Danny Trevathan, CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie and SS Duke Ihenacho — started the season opener against the Ravens.

Nevertheless, Wilson's ability to extend the play, improvising with either his legs or arm, is exactly the thing that gives the Broncos problems. They've faced mostly pocket passers all year, Andrew Luck being the exception, but even the Chiefs' Alex Smith was able to make some plays against them out of the pocket.

Wilson, who had a not-too-shabby 61.3 completion percentage during the season, will be at his most dangerous if the Broncos become too wrapped up in stopping Marshawn Lynch. Their linebackers come hard and could be very susceptible to play-action. That's when the Seahawks will try to catch them with a play-action boot leg, Wilson rolling to his right with his eyes always down the field and a receiver slipping behind the secondary. Wilson is excellent throwing on the run and he has a very big arm. Seattle usually takes a few of these shots per game and, in an effort to get a jump on Peyton Manning, they could go for a big play early on.

It wouldn't be surprising to see the Broncos stay in their base defense, use a spy against him and have their ends play contain.

Finally, for all of the poise shown by Wilson so far, the Super Bowl stage can be daunting for young quarterbacks. He'll have to conquer it.

EDGE: EVEN

OFFENSIVE LINE vs. DEFENSIVE FRONT

With Lynch's running style, you would assume the Seahawks' O-line is all about power. It's not. They also use a lot of zone blocking to catch linebackers in the wash and isolate Lynch on a safety. That makes them very effective getting Lynch to the second level to spring those big runs but they are surprisingly ineffective on short yardage.

Indeed, the Broncos' defensive line is the more physical unit, led by the man who could be the key to the entire game, big defensive tackle Terrance Knighton, aka Pot Roast. The 6-3, 335-pound monster was actually an all-state receiver in high school before he started putting on the pounds, but he retains that quickness and athleticism.

In the AFC Championship Game, where the Patriots tried blocking him one-on-one, Knighton blew up a running game that had been so effective the week before. He either pushed blockers back into the flow of the play or penetrated with a patented swim move, in effect cutting the zone schemes in two. Pot Roast slants toward the left guard, where the bearded Max Unger gives away 25 pounds. Unger has also had two rough playoff outings against big nose tackles.

If the Broncos keep winning first and second down as they have in the playoffs, this one is over.

Since losing their best rush end in Von Miller, the Broncos have had to rely on ex-Charger Shaun Phillips, who has had his moments. In general, the pass rush has been inconsistent, although there is a possible weak spot in the LG rotation of Paul McQuistan and James Carpenter.

EDGE: BRONCOS

WIDE RECEIVERS and TIGHT ENDS vs. SECONDARY

Most people consider the Seahawks' receivers an afterthought. The top four targets had 19 TDs all season. Compare that to the Broncos' record-setting numbers. But the availability of Percy Harvin as a X-factor changes things, especially against a secondary that has proven vulnerable. Harvin's mere presence in the slot will force the Broncos to make adjustments and with only two game films to study, that won't be easy.

What the Broncos do know is that he's dangerous with his speed, and he'll be tough matchup for either Dominique Rogers-Cromartie or creaky vet Champ Bailey, who, after missing all but five regular-season games with a foot injury was thrown back

into his old left cornerback position after the Broncos lost Cliff Harris in the playoff opener.

Doubling Harvin will also mean one-on-one opportunities for Doug Baldwin, Golden Tate and Jermaine Kearse, who all say they have something to prove as a unit. They respond to their “pedestrian” label by noting they have walked into the Super Bowl. As previously mentioned, the Seahawks love to take their shots downfield out of nowhere and let’s not forget those opportunities Tom Brady missed in the AFC Championship Game. Denver’s two safeties, Mike Adams and Duke Ihenacho, are big hitters but not considered to be good coverage guys. Wilson could try to target Ihenacho, particularly with tight end Zach Miller. One thing about the Seahawks receivers is that they have excellent hands. You don’t see many drops.

EDGE: SEAHAWKS

RUNNING BACKS vs. LINEBACKERS

Maybe the Broncos should try holding up a bunch of tape recorders and note pads when Lynch lines up. That may be the only way to truly get him off his game. Beast Mode has been unstoppable with 249 yards in the Seahawks’ two playoff games because, sooner or later, he seems to be able to bust off the one big play that breaks a game open.

Lynch is really a one-cut back. He sticks his foot in the ground and goes. According to Pro Football Focus, Lynch led the NFL with 99 missed tackles. The challenge is in keeping him from getting to the second level, where he is so hard to bring down one-on-one. Once he squares his pads and starts running downhill, good luck to any smaller man trying to tackle him. He’ll lower his shoulders and start churning away with those powerful legs.

On top of that, he has relentless energy and a will to dispense the punishment. He never gives up on a play.

We talked about Knighton’s role in stopping Lynch through penetration (see above), making it difficult to run against the middle of the Denver “D.” That’s where the Broncos’ linebackers have to finish Lynch off by swarming to the ball. In fact, as the Broncos were practicing back in Denver during the off-week, observers could hear LB coach Richard Smith constantly yelling, “Tackle!”

MLBs Paris Lenon and Wesley Woodyard and WLB Danny Trevathan are very aggressive and have done a great job stuffing the run, with Travathan on the field more than any other Bronco backer. He’s very instinctive and has great quickness, which is why he’s an asset in pass coverage. But he’s also on the small side and may not match up physically with Lynch, or fullback Michael Robinson, his escort on the stretch play.

EDGE: SEAHAWKS

* * *

When the Broncos have the ball ...

QUARTERBACK vs. DEFENSIVE SCHEME

RELATED: SUPER BOWL CONFIDENTIAL: PEYTON HAS EYES ON DOUBLE TEAM

Peyton Manning is on the verge of capping off one of the greatest seasons by any quarterback in history. After 55 TD passes in the regular season, he's led the Broncos to a score on every postseason possession (other than kneel downs) save one. But Manning has yet to come up against a defense like this, one that seems perfectly built to stop his inexorable run to a second Super Bowl championship.

It's a delicious matchup. No. 1 offense vs. No. 1 defense. Manning's up-tempo no-huddle against a defense that combines incomparable team speed with a violent approach that has brought the intimidation factor back into the game.

You may not see that many gyrations out of Manning at the line of scrimmage — although he will change the cadence and go hard count — because the Seahawks defense doesn't try to fool you that much. It lines up in either "man" or "cover 3" with its corners in bump-and-run (a hybrid type of press zone). It has such versatility in personnel, and its philosophy never varies whether it is playing base or nickel, which Manning will no doubt see most of the night.

The key is whether Manning can get into a rhythm and start moving the chains on first and second downs. Seattle's one advantage is that it can pressure out of a four-man front or when it morphs into a 5-2 with its many options. The Seahawks aren't looking for sacks because the ball is out of Manning's hands so quickly. It just wants to affect him, get his antenna up like it was for Robert Mathis in Denver's loss to the Colts. Remember when he was a little off at the beginning of the AFC Championship Game? That's because he was feeling Chandler Jones.

Without pressure, it doesn't matter how good the Seahawks' secondary is. He's going to find one of his many weapons open. Scouts note that the Seahawks' defense has had its biggest problems when an offense spread the field and gets the corner outside the numbers.

EDGE: BRONCOS

RUNNING BACKS vs. LINEBACKERS

The Broncos have to get just enough out of Knowshon Moreno and Montee Ball to keep the Seahawks honest and they've gotten far more out of them so far. Their

postseason drives have eaten up the clock and the running backs have kept the chains moving, with Moreno carrying a workhorse-like 37 times for 141 yards.

Moreno, who suffered a rib injury in the AFC title game but should be ready to go, has become one of the most versatile backs in the game. He was the first Bronco in history to rush for at least 1,000 yards with over 500 receiving yards. The Broncos love to use screens to slow the pass rush. Manning completed just under 100 passes to running backs.

Defenses usually have their smaller people on the field in nickel to defend spread formations and that will probably be true Sunday. But here is where the Seahawks' versatility comes in. Their nickel defense has no peer. S Kam Chancellor can be moved around like a chess piece into run support and they can keep LBs Bobby Wagner and Malcolm Smith on the field because of their athleticism. It even manifests itself in defending that screen pass.Usually, linebackers will be in deep drops against the threat of Manning's arm but the Seahawks' linebackers are in hunt mode and excellent at busting up screens.

Wagner, in just his second season, has developed into one of the top middle linebackers in football with 119 tackles, five sacks, six pass break-ups and two interceptions. Having K.J. Wright back from injury only give the Seahawks more depth at the position.

EDGE: SEAHAWKS

WIDE RECEIVERS & TIGHT ENDS vs. SECONDARY

How much fun will this be? The Broncos, with as talented a receiving corps as Manning has ever had, will be trying to pick off the Seahawk DBs with rub routes while the Seahawks' Legion of Boom try to smear the Broncos' receivers with big hits.

Demaryius Thomas, Wes Welker and Eric Decker, three of five receivers with 60 or more catches, know they won't have free releases at the line. Cornerbacks Richard Sherman, with his great wingspan, and Byron Maxwell will be contesting them on every snap, trying to push into the formation so they can't get depth and run their picks. How much "man" the Seahawks will play is a question but even when they are in a three-deep zone — safety Eric Thomas alone in centerfield to clean things up — it's an aggressive zone. The Seahawks don't just drop into coverage and eye the quarterback and go to the ball. They clamp down with "man" concepts and jump you. With three Pro Bowl players, they match up against this group. TE Julius Thomas, for instance, has become an exceptional downfield target, particularly on third down where the Broncos have converted at a 62% rate during the playoffs.

But because of SS Kam Chancellor's skill set, the Seahawks have been able to contain similar tight ends like Jimmy Graham, Tony Gonzalez and Vernon Davis.

That doesn't mean the Broncos aren't going to win their share of routes. All Manning needs is the tiniest of windows or just one man getting open. They will also look to get their receivers away from jams with bunch formations and motion. And let's not forget the red zone, where both of these units excel. That alone could determine the outcome.

EDGE: SEAHAWKS

OFFENSIVE LINE vs. DEFENSIVE FRONT

Even after losing LT Ryan Clady, the Broncos' offensive line has quietly become one of the best in the league. Manning was the least-sacked QB in the regular season (18 sacks on 659 pass attempts) and it's continued in the playoffs with neither the Chargers nor Patriots able to get to him.

Pro Bowl RG Louis Vasquez has been a rock and LT Chris Clark, a former tight end with just six career starts, has been a revelation since being plugged in for Clady. Manny Ramirez made a seamless transition to center, not easy when you have to synchronize your calls with Manning's.

Enter the Seahawks' defensive line, which can rotate elite pass rushers on and off the field with impunity. Cliff Avril and Michael Bennett, their two key free agent acquisitions, aren't even on the first-team depth chart. But they are part of Seattle's NASCAR front, an appropriate nickname for their lightning-quick nickel pass rush. It all works in tandem. The Seahawks' secondary disrupts routes, the quarterback holds the ball, the pass rush gets to him. Whether that happens against Manning's quick release remains to be seen but it does make this matchup one of the biggest factors in the game.

The Broncos might figure they will have an advantage running the ball behind their O-line but the Seahawks have a couple of run stuffers in the disruptive Brandon Mebane, a DT in the Pot Roast mold, and DE Red Smith.

EDGE: BRONCOS

SPECIAL TEAMS

There are again, some interesting matchups here. The biggest thing that stands out is punter Jon Ryan and the Seattle coverage teams. They nearly set a record for fewest punt return yards allowed in a season with just 25 going into the last week. They ended up second-best at 82. Most punters are happy pinning teams inside the

20. Ryan shoots for inside the 10. The only problem with the Seattle punt unit is with blocks, although it seemed to have cleaned that up.

Late in the season, the Broncos took the punt-return duties away from explosive but fumble-prone Trindon Holliday and gave them to Eric Decker, who nearly took one to the house against the Chargers. Holliday is still a threat on kick returns but Percy Harvin gives the Seahawks a return man who can take it all the way, as well. The Broncos may even kick away from him.

One of the most telling stats of the postseason is that the Broncos' Britton Colquitt has punted just once in two playoff games, after the opening series of the AFC Championship Game. That's how little the Broncos have needed to control field position.

Broncos PK Matt Prater may have the strongest leg in the NFL. The Seahawks' Steve Hauschka doesn't have as much range but he has made 17 of 18 field goals from 40 yards or longer.

EDGE: SEAHAWKS

* * *

PREDICTION

Seahawks 24, Broncos 21: It sets up to be as good a Super Bowl as we have ever seen. The Seahawks narrowly win the battle of matchups. Does Manning hold the trump card? Not against this defense.

Broncos motivated by stunning playoff loss to Baltimore

By Joshua Mayers
The Seattle Times
February 1, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. — For the Denver Broncos, one of the defining moments on their impressive road to Super XLVIII came the season before. It was a game most fans around the league remember, particularly for a play impossible to forget.

The Broncos were seemingly counting down the final seconds of an AFC divisional round win against Baltimore, with a seven-point lead at home and less than a minute to go.

The Ravens had the ball on their own 30-yard line with no timeouts, and in desperation, quarterback Joe Flacco heaved essentially a last-chance, Hail Mary pass into the cold, thin Denver air. Broncos safety Rahim Moore badly misplayed the toss, however, which resulted in a 70-yard, tying touchdown with 31 seconds left.

Baltimore, after one of the most memorable plays in NFL playoff history, went on to win in double overtime and, eventually, win the Super Bowl as well.

The Broncos ended the season stunned, devastated.

“There is no doubt it has been a journey; it kind of started there,” coach John Fox said ahead of Sunday’s championship. “We had finished the season pretty strong a year ago (and we were) very disappointed in the loss at home. ... I would say that it was a fire in everybody’s belly.”

Don’t make the mistake of thinking there is only one team in the Super Bowl with a chip on its shoulder. The Seahawks might thrive with such an attitude, but the Broncos, too, have something to prove — that two seasons of greatness won’t come and go without a ring.

That motivation has carried throughout.

“I can’t speak for everybody else; I just know for myself, it bothered me,” said offensive coordinator Adam Gase of the loss. “It made me really want to get back.”

Veteran cornerback Champ Bailey said there was a different sense of urgency when organized team activities began. Receiver Eric Decker said the team embraced a mentality — “finish everything we do” — whether it was a practice or even just a workout.

Bailey added: “You could tell that everybody was a little more focused than the year before. That’s really what you want going in to workouts. You want everybody on the same page from Day 1. Here is our finished product: we’re in the Super Bowl, just because guys really honed in on what they had to do.”

As fate would have it, or perhaps just some crafty NFL scheduling, the Broncos opened the 2013 regular season at home against the Ravens in a stand-alone Thursday night game on national television.

The result? Denver dominance. Peyton Manning threw for 462 yards and a league record-tying seven touchdowns in a resounding 49-27 victory.

If the playoff defeat was a starting point, Week 1 was a launching point.

“It was a heck of an opening night,” Manning said. “Any time you get to play the defending Super Bowl champs, a team that put you out of the playoffs the year before, there was no question our team was motivated. It was kind of our night that night.

“It gave me confidence and I know it gave those guys confidence, as well — you can do it on a big stage.”

The Broncos’ offense did it on every stage, it seems, setting NFL marks with 606 points (37.9 per game) and 76 touchdowns this season. Manning’s season was also historic, setting league records with 5,477 passing yards and 55 touchdowns.

On the other side of the ball, Denver’s defense is peaking at just the right time, allowing an average of 15 points in the past four games, including playoff wins against San Diego and New England.

But it is no secret most of the attention Sunday will fall solely on Manning, as questions surrounding his legacy are sure to be raised, win or lose. The 37-year-old won his fifth MVP award but has won just one Super Bowl.

Another letdown would surely rest on Manning’s shoulders, even if he has deflected credit in getting this far.

“The offense, the defense and even the special teams have played well together at the same time these past two postseason games,” Manning said. “That is certainly what we’d like to occur on Sunday. The only way to win a world championship is if all three phases are playing at a high level.”

The fire has been burning for almost 13 months.

Demaryius Thomas' Super Sunday will include emotional call from mom, grandma

By Joshua Mayers
The Seattle Times
February 1, 2014

JERSEY CITY, N.J. — Demaryius Thomas will wait, as always, for his mother's call before Super Bowl XLVIII. That's the routine every game for the Denver Broncos wide receiver.

He can't call her. Inmates aren't allowed to take calls.

Thomas' mom, Katrina Smith, still has three years left on her sentence for a drug conviction. Grandmother Minnie Pearl Thomas is also incarcerated under the same charge.

"It's kind of tough right now," Thomas said in the buildup to the biggest game of his life. "I think about them all the time. I wish they were here with me. I get emotional."

Being in the Super Bowl spotlight makes it impossible to hide any of life's details — good or bad — and Thomas admitted it hasn't been easy having to deal with the attention, especially coming from Montrose, Ga., population of about 200. There are lessons to be learned, though, from having two family members in jail.

"One day you can be here and the next day you'll be gone," Thomas said. "So I take every day like it's my last. I play every football game like it's my last."

The last message from mom came earlier this week: "I told you you were going to make it."

That he has.

Thomas, 6 feet 3, 229 pounds, has been Peyton Manning's leading receiver the past two seasons in Denver, averaging 93 catches, 1,432 yards and 12 touchdowns. Looking at the production, one might never guess he came from a run-heavy, triple-option offense at Georgia Tech.

"Just watching him mature as a football player and as a person has been tremendous," said fellow receiver Eric Decker. "The guy has so much talent. I really think he is one of the best receivers talent-wise in the NFL. It is fun to see him keep progressing every year."

Praise doesn't stop there.

"He's made big play after big play for us this year and he'll continue to do so," said tight end Julius Thomas (no relation).

Receiver Wes Welker touted the guy they call "DT" as having the best hands on the team: "He wears like triple-X gloves, so he's got huge hands."

Coach John Fox has been most impressed with Thomas' commitment to developing his skills. But size, speed and all the other measurables help, too.

"He is very, very gifted, no doubt," Fox said. "He is one of the better athletes I've been blessed to be around."

Mexican-American pride

Offensive linemen don't often get a lot of love, but guard Louis Vasquez and center Manny Ramirez know they will be cheered on by more than just Broncos fans Sunday.

The former teammates at Texas Tech are of Mexican-American heritage and have felt support from that community this week.

"I actually spoke with Manny about it, and it can be overwhelming, but we're taking it for what it is," said Vasquez. "It's awesome to know that we have such a large group, especially the youth out there watching us. Hopefully it opens their eyes to say anything is possible, no matter what it is."

Note

• Former New York Giants' defensive end Michael Strahan was one of the inductees into the Pro Football Hall of Fame on Saturday. Broncos coach John Fox was told this week that former NFL legend Warren Sapp was advocating against Strahan's candidacy.

"First of all, I think it's a shame that's going on, but I believe Michael does deserve it," said Fox, who was Strahan's defensive coordinator in New York from 1997 to 2001. "I believe he deserved it a year ago. ... He was a great leader. He won a Super Bowl. I think he exemplified what our league is about in a very positive light, both on and off the field."

Super Bowl forecast: Slight chance of precipitation

By Mike Wilkening
Pro Football Talk
February 1, 2014

With less than 24 hours until kickoff for Super Bowl XLVIII, the weather forecast continues to look favorable, all things considered.

According to forecaster WeatherUnderground.com, dry conditions are currently expected for 6 p.m. Eastern on Sunday in East Rutherford, New Jersey, the home of MetLife Stadium. Overcast skies, winds of six mph and a temperature of 44 degrees are also in the forecast around gametime.

Kickoff between the Seahawks and Broncos is slated for 6:30 p.m. Eastern.

As the game goes on, the probability of precipitation increases. Weather.com forecasts a 20 percent chance of precipitation from 6 p.m. through 11 p.m. WeatherUnderground, for its part, predicts a zero percent chance of precipitation at 6 p.m, a 10 percent chance at 8 p.m. and a 20 percent chance at 11 p.m.

Temperatures above freezing are expected during the game. However, snow looks likely in East Rutherford by Monday — a little too late for those hoping for a snow-covered Super Bowl.

Peyton Manning voted NFL MVP

By Mike Wilkening
Pro Football Talk
February 1, 2014

As expected, there wasn't much drama when it came to the winner of the 2013 Associated Press NFL Most Valuable Player Award.

Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning has garnered MVP honors from the AP, the media organization and the NFL announced Saturday night.

For Manning, it's an NFL-record fifth time he has captured the AP MVP award.

According to the AP, Manning received 49-of-50 votes for MVP, with Patriots quarterback Tom Brady getting the lone non-Manning vote.

Manning broke league single-season yardage (5,477) and passing touchdown (55) records in the regular season, then led Denver to postseason wins against San Diego and New England to earn a berth in Super Bowl XLVIII, which kicks off Sunday at 6:30 p.m. Eastern at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

Manning also garnered 2013 Offensive Player of the Year honors from the AP.

Broncos, Seahawks hold walk-throughs on Saturday

By Mike Wilkening
Pro Football Talk
February 1, 2014

Both the Seahawks and Broncos went through walk-through practices on Saturday, one day before they meet at MetLife Stadium in Super Bowl XLVIII.

According to the Pro Football Writers of America's practice pool report, the Broncos held a light practice of around 30 minutes at MetLife Stadium on Saturday afternoon.

"It was very similar to what we've done all season — typical Saturday practice," Broncos coach John Fox told the *Boston Globe*'s Ben Volin, who filed the practice report. "Just a review, pretty much. Play the game, walk the field — maybe not everything we're going to do, because you don't know what security is like here. But it was beneficial."

The Seahawks traveled to MetLife Stadium in the morning to see the building, then held their walk-through at the Giants' practice facility.

"We're ready to go," Seahawks coach Pete Carroll told Ralph Vacchiano of the *New York Daily News*, who wrote the pool report for the PFWA. "That's kind of how we are. I don't know if it's loose, but we're where we're supposed to be. This is how we always prepare. This is the exact routine we always do. And the guys did it perfectly today.

"It's been great. We have no hesitation saying it's been exactly what we hoped to get done. We're physically right and mentally right and we're ready to go."

Denver mayor wants a Mile High Super Bowl

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
February 1, 2014

In Colorado, you can now legally smoke a super bowl. Eventually, you may be able to attend one, too.

Via Mike Klis of the Denver Post, Mayor Michael Hancock is making the rounds in Manhattan, cheering on the Broncos and stumping for the opportunity to host the game.

“I’m here to root for the Denver Broncos to win the Super Bowl,” Hancock said Friday. “We also want to bring the Super Bowl to Denver.”

It’s inevitable that more and more cold-weather cities with open-air stadiums will attempt to secure the game, now that the New York/New Jersey Super Bowl appears to be poised to unfold without weather being an issue.

“We have the infrastructure to host this event in the future,” Hancock said. “We have the hotel rooms, the transportation and the stadiums that would make it work. We’ve hosted events of this scale in the past and have been successful.”

Still, giving the game to Denver would constitute another game of Russian roulette with the premier American sporting event. It’s a game the NFL is willing to play, because having cold-weather cities at the table will increase the quality and value of each and every Super Bowl bid.

PFT’s postseason award winners

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
February 1, 2014

With the NFL finally unveiling its 2013 regular-season awards at Radio City Music Hall more than a month after the regular-season ended, it’s hard to generate much interest in stale topics on the eve of the Super Bowl.

But at least for an hour or two on Saturday night, the league will kick the dust off the regular season that was. So let’s kick the dust off the awards handed out in the wake of the regular season by PFT.

The PFT winners appear below. The official NFL winners are coming soon.

Offensive rookie of the year: Packers running back Eddie Lacy.

Defensive rookie of the year: Jets defensive lineman Sheldon Richardson.

Offensive player of the year: Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning.

Defensive player of the year: Colts linebacker Robert Mathis.

Comeback player of the year: Eagles tackle Jason Peters.

League MVP: Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning.

Coach of the year: Panthers coach Ron Rivera.

Executive of the year: Cardinals G.M. Steve Keim.

Super Bowl Postcards: Phantom of the Opera

By Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
February 1, 2014

Gray Caldwell's latest postcard from Super Bowl XLVIII takes a trip to Broadway.

NEW YORK -- There is so much to do in New York, it's impossible to fit it all in on one visit.

Magnify that exponentially when the Super Bowl is in town. In addition to the usual fare, there are countless parties, festivals and celebrations to commemorate the big game.

But we still tried to stick to old reliable on Friday night, making our way toward Times Square.

It wasn't to experience Super Bowl Boulevard, mind you, the crowded-but-cool aspect of Super Bowl lead-up. Rather it was to attend the longest-running show on Broadway -- The Phantom of the Opera.

What does that have to do with the Super Bowl, you ask? Nothing. But I'm trying to stick to Brian Dawkins' advice -- remember it's a business trip, but just as importantly, remember to enjoy the moment.

I would use my wife as an excuse, but I'll admit I enjoyed the show. Now excuse me while I listen to the Phantom soundtrack to get pumped up for tomorrow.

Super Bowl Postcards: Manning at Carnegie Deli

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
February 1, 2014

Andrew Mason's latest postcard from Super Bowl XLVIII investigates an autographed photo of Peyton Manning at Carnegie Deli.

NEW YORK -- It's debatable as to what is the most notable part of Peyton Manning's framed picture on the wall of the renowned Carnegie Deli in midtown Manhattan.

Is it that his autographed photo has a prominent place behind the cash register of the Carnegie Deli, not far from Tom Brady, where everyone can see it as they check out after attempting to eat a corned beef Reuben drowned in Russian dressing and big enough for a family of four to eat comfortably?

Is it the way he signs his message to the deli -- in quotation marks, writing "Great Food"? Why are the quotations needed? Is there a subtext to his message as a result? Did he think of writing, "Nothing's finer than being in your diner," and then realized that a "Seinfeld" homage wouldn't have been appropriate for a restaurant that was never mentioned during the nine-year run of the sitcom?

But then I realized that only I would obsess over such pathetic speculative minutiae, and settled on something else: that the man who just had the greatest statistical season for a quarterback in NFL history, who is on the short list of the finest quarterbacks to ever play the game, and is probably the most recognizable 21st-century NFL player is honored alongside hundreds of celebrities, politicians, actors and statesmen with his first name misspelled as "Payton," like the late Chicago Bears running back.

Seriously? The deli managed to spell Britney Spears' first name properly; you can see her spot just above Manning's.

A deli doesn't survive 76-plus years in Manhattan without doing something right. But one-pound cheesecakes in this corner of the greatest restaurant city in the world are the speciality, not proper spelling.

Breaking Down the Seahawks Defense

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
February 1, 2014

Independent analyst Andrew Mason takes a closer look at Seattle's defense and the challenges it will present to the Broncos on Sunday.

JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- When you have players who use their size, length and strength as well as Richard Sherman, Earl Thomas, Bobby Wagner, Michael Bennett, Cliff Avril and Brandon Mebane, you don't need to be weighed down by superfluous scheming.

Besides best defenses in NFL history usually weren't tactically complicated -- although there were exceptions, starting with the Cowboys' flex during the "Doomsday Defense" era of the 1970s. Most relied on a core of stellar players, supplemented by solid contributors and depth, with simple assignments.

“The way I see these guys is, they don’t play a whole bunch of stuff, but they play it about as good as you want to play a defense. Their execution is off the charts," said Offensive Coordinator Adam Gase. "They play their three-deep zone and man-to-man as good as you want it designed.

"We’ve played teams this year that have played similar schemes that did not play it as well as these guys do. These guys are on it with their execution, and then bring that size and physicality that they have."

And that's what has been called into question, although the physicality of Sherman, Byron Maxwell and Walter Thurmond is generally within the legal limits.

"As far as pushing the envelope, I wouldn’t say so much. I’d say they do as much as other teams do, even ourselves," said Broncos wide receiver Eric Decker.

They'll use the five-yard zone within the line of scrimmage to disrupt; as a result, their interception rate of one every 20.29 pass plays leads the league -- and is well above the league average of one interception every 38.71 pass plays. (The Broncos, by comparison, throw one interception every 69.5 pass plays, the second-best in the league behind Kansas City's one every 73.38 pass plays.)

"That’s what makes what they do so special is those corners, they can lock up one-on-one," said Gase. "They can take away the run with the rest of their guys, and, you know, Earl is going to cover the entire field. This group is a special group on defense, and it’s going to be a tough matchup for us.”

But the ability of their cornerbacks to handle their responsibilities in press man coverage explains why their safeties and linebackers can be so active in the pass rush.

Pressure could mean Peyton Manning will have to throw into coverage from time to time. But that's where his exceptional ability usually makes itself known; you've seen myriad throws over the last two seasons in which his targets had little separation, but he dropped it into a precise spot where it could not be defended.

"It's like catching tissue paper," said Broncos wide receiver Demaryius Thomas. "It's so easy to catch, it really doesn't matter if it's a spiral or wobbly."

But in Week 7, the Broncos' big-top aerial circus saw its tent punctured by the Colts and their press coverage. Indianapolis' aggressive cornerbacks disrupted the timing of the Broncos' passing game until a pass-interference penalty in the second half finally forced them to play back, at which point Denver's offense returned to its normal service and mounted a comeback that wasn't finally derailed until a goal-to-go fumble.

Press coverage never again affected the Broncos in the same way it did for the first two-thirds of that night, revealing the offense's ability to adjust and adapt. Still, the Broncos know they must be prepared for Seattle's physicality.

"You see a lot of defenses, especially with the passing game becoming more prevalent, cornerbacks getting to the receiver at the line of scrimmage and at the top of routes. I think they do it well," Decker said. "They challenge teams and are the best at it in the NFL."

And like the Colts that night, the Seahawks have an effective pass rush, which has synergy with press coverage.

"That pass rush gets to the quarterbacks so fast that the corners know they don’t have very long to cover regardless of what coverage they’re in," said wide receivers coach Tyke Tolbert. "They could be in cover two, three or one. The pass rush is coming and every little bit of time you spend on coverage the defensive end has two more steps up the field at the quarterback."

Seattle's quarterback hit rate of one every 7.89 pass plays is third-best in the league, and their rate of hurried throws forced, according to ProFootballFocus.com, is one every 2.63 pass plays, second-best in the league behind the Broncos (one every 2.42 pass plays).

"We put it in our receivers’ head that you can’t spend too much time at the line trying to beat press coverage because the defensive pass rush is coming," Tolbert

said. "They have to get in their route, use their technique, get open and be ready for the ball."

But no one makes that more difficult than the Seahawks, which is why they're here. In a league now predicated on prolific passing games, the Seahawks were the best at limiting their effectiveness.

Breaking Down the Seahawks Offense

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
February 1, 2014

Independent analyst Andrew Mason takes a closer look at Seattle's offense and the challenges it will present to the Broncos on Sunday.

JERSEY CITY, N.J. -- Percy Harvin is the unknown quantity of the Seahawks' offense, as much an X-factor as there has ever been in the Super Bowl, given his paucity of experience in a Seahawks uniform.

The Broncos can only consult limited Seahawks tape, and have to evaluate his Vikings work, as well as Seattle's own tendencies to figure out how to combat the presence of Harvin, who could see more touches to date than in his entire, injury-plagued 2013 season to date.

But the Harvin factor is not the only question about the way Seattle might choose to attack the Denver defense, which has become increasingly stout on the inside with the breakthrough play of Terrance Knighton and his ability to free linebackers Danny Trevathan and Paris Lenon to contain the run and fill the gaps.

That might lead the Seahawks to try to test the Broncos outside the tackles and in space, and could lead back to quarterback Russell Wilson exercising the run option of his potent dual threat.

Running has never been what Wilson would prefer to do; it's a choice he has, but it's one he'd prefer to eschew in favor of beating teams with his right arm, which has held his career carries-per-game average to 5.9 -- which has been just 3.75 per game in the Seahawks' last four contests. He has gained just 21 yards on nine non-kneeldown carries in Seattle's last three games -- all of which have seen Seattle run at least as often as it throws.

"I think he’s been smart about how he runs," said Broncos Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio. "He’s not taking unnecessary risks. He’s not exposing himself to unnecessary contact. He’s a threat to run but he’s not trying to run over people to prove a point.

"And really the thing he does very well is as he’s running his eyes are constantly down the field and he’s prepared to throw the ball down the field, so that’s been a big emphasis point for us."

And that's where the Broncos' defensive effort could turn into a feast-or-famine contrast. Wilson waits for late-opening receivers better than almost anyone in the game, using his adeptness in rollout situations to buy time for his receivers to get open. This puts a unique challenge on Denver's cornerbacks and safeties, who will have to maintain coverage integrity up to as many as eight to 10 seconds after the snap.

In Week 5, Dallas quarterback Tony Romo took advantage of this -- along with a Broncos secondary depleted by injuries -- by darting around the backfield to buy time for his targets, led by wide receivers Doug Baldwin and Golden Tate, whose statistics were comparable. Neither broke 1,000 receiving yards, but each had between 50 and 65 receptions and precisely five touchdown catches.

"They work well with their quarterback," said cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie. "They extend their routes. They have speed, they are very aggressive to the ball and they can make you miss. Golden Tate (Doug) Baldwin, Percy Harvin…those are capable guys even though a lot of people aren't talking about them. As defenders, we know. You can't take those guys lightly."

In part because Wilson holds the football to give his receivers extra time to freelance and get open, the second-year quarterback has been hit often when he decides to pass -- once every 4.99 pass plays, the most in the league. (Peyton Manning and the Broncos are at the opposite end of this statistic; he and Brock Osweiler have been hit one every 13.6 pass plays, the best rate in the league and well above the league average of one hit every 7.44 pass plays.) The sack rate of one every 10.5 pass plays is also the most extreme in the NFL.

"He keeps his eyes downfield," defensive end Shaun Phillips said. "With a guy like that, they are never completely out of the play just because of the fact that he is do dynamic in throwing the ball and running it. He has a big, strong arm as well."

The desire to use Wilson's legs as a threat could lead to some zone-read looks. Those would also change the formations out of which running back Marshawn Lynch runs, but unlike the rest of their offense, no such questions exist about No. 24 -- besides queries about his Media Day conduct.

Lynch is arguably the most effective running back in the NFL at forcing missed tackles; if he does that Sunday, he will effectively turn a recent Broncos strength into a weakness.

"He doesn't stop running hard," said defensive tackle Terrance Knighton. "You can hit him in the backfield, and he can turn a minus-two into a plus-seven.

"And usually a lot of times guys will have him wrapped up, and guys aren't running to the ball, aren't gang-tackling, and he'll break out of a tackle. So the challenge for us is, every play, to have 11 guys to the ball, and make sure we get the guy down."

Added Phillips: “I think the main thing about him is the fact that he doesn't want to go down and he doesn't go down. He's a very hard runner. He wants to deliver the blow instead of take the blow. You have to respect a guy like that."

When Lynch has at least 109 yards, which was his total against the 49ers in the NFC Championship Game, the Seahawks usually win; they are 15-3 when he hits that number, including 4-0 in the postseason.

"There has to be a whole swarm of our defensive players tackling him and taking him down," said linebacker Nate Irving.

Harvin, Wilson and Lynch. Each is capable of seizing the game for himself. Some learning on the fly and adapting may be necessary to contain all three Sunday night.

Manning Named Most Valuable Player

By Mike Morris
DenverBroncos.com
February 1, 2014

Quarterback Peyton Manning was named NFL MVP after completing a record-breaking campaign and leading the Broncos to Super Bowl XLVIII.

NEW YORK -- After posting a historic, record-breaking campaign in the regular season, helping the Broncos score more points than any other team in NFL history, and leading the Broncos to the Super Bowl, quarterback Peyton Manning has been named the Most Valuable Player for the 2013 season.

Manning was also honored as the Offensive Player of the Year for his efforts this season.

For the season, Manning set NFL records by throwing for 5,477 yards and 55 touchdowns – and helping the Broncos set their own league record by scoring 606 points in the regular season.

Manning also threw only 10 interceptions in the regular season and posted a quarterback rating of 115.1 – the second-best mark of his career. He finished with a quarterback rating of over 90.0 in all but one regular-season contest, and posted a rating exceeding 140.0 in three different games (in wins over Baltimore in Week 1, Philadelphia in Week 4, and Oakland in Week 17).

He also threw for four-or-more touchdowns in nine different games, including tying an NFL record with seven touchdown passes against the Ravens in the season opener on Sept. 5.

Manning was also honored as the FedEx Air Player of the Year. With that award comes a $25,000 donation in his name to the Junior Achievement chapters in Denver.

The quarterback was named FedEx Air Player of the Week four times this season.

Manning was certainly at his best on the biggest stage of the Broncos' season thus far, completing 32-of-43 passes for 400 yards and a pair of touchdowns in Denver's 26-16 win over New England in the AFC Championship Game on Jan. 19, helping the Broncos advance to Super Bowl XLVIII.

"He's been remarkable," Head Coach John Fox said after the AFC Championship Game. "It's been unprecedented for what he did, even a year ago, to come off from not playing, (a) very unusual injury that he was coming off of. To get to where he

finished a season ago and then to start where he left off, to have the kind of season, not just today, but all season long that he's had, to me is pretty remarkable."

"There's not much you can say, Peyton is Peyton," wide receiver Demaryius Thomas added after that game.

With this, his fifth MVP award, Manning reset his own record for the most in NFL history.

Hall of Fame Class of 2014 Announced

By Mike Morris
DenverBroncos.com
February 1, 2014

Former Broncos Safety John Lynch, a finalist for the Pro Football Hall of Fame, was not elected to the 2014 Class

NEW YORK – Despite an impressive resume, former Broncos safety John Lynch was not inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 2014.

The safety was one of 15 finalists for the Class of 2014, marking the first time that Lynch had been named a HOF finalist. He will be up for induction once again next season.

Lynch, who played with the Broncos from 2004-2007 before retiring prior to the 2008 campaign, was named to nine Pro Bowls in his 15-season NFL career with the Buccaneers and Broncos.

A four-time All-Pro during his career, Lynch snared 26 interceptions, notched 13 sacks, forced 16 fumbles and recovered nine more in his career. He won Super Bowl XXXVII with the Buccaneers and played a key role in helping the Broncos advance to the 2005 AFC Championship Game.

The 2014 Hall of Fame Class includes Derrick Brooks, Michael Strahan, Andre Reed, Aeneas Williams, Ray Guy, Claude Humphrey and Walter Jones.