

Kiszla: Case Keenum runs the Broncos offense. Michael Scott runs “The Office.” They’re the same guy. Well, kinda.

By Mark Kiszla
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The job pays Broncos quarterback Case Keenum a cool \$18 million salary. But the job will follow him home from the office if he’s not careful. Maybe the potential for 24/7 stress is the price a man pays for working the same turf where John Elway and Peyton Manning rode into the sunset as Super Bowl champs.

Where does Keenum go when he needs a break and wants to hang his No. 4 uniform in the closet, so he can just be a regular guy for a little while?

When asked how he recharges his batteries away from the football field, Keenum cited: 1) his faith and 2) “The Office.” He leans on God and Michael Scott.

Now there’s a combo you don’t hear every day.

His relationship with Christ is well-documented, and firmly committed to 224 pages in “Playing For More,” a new memoir Keenum wrote with Andrew Perloff.

What’s more, the words immediately below Keenum’s name in his Twitter profile are a reference to a Bible verse that’s a personal favorite. Isaiah 40:31 can refortify a quarterback constantly feeling the judgment of 150,000 eyes on him in the stadium: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”

OK, now we know what’s really important to Keenum is way bigger and more serious than a miracle touchdown pass in the playoffs or a career-long struggle to find an NFL city to call home .

But I’m here for the laughs. Why? A pro quarterback lives in a crazy fishbowl world. Find out what a guy thinks is funny and you begin to discover how he views that world.

Of all the sitcom dudes in television history, from Barney Fife to Peter Griffin, what the heck attracted Keenum to Michael Scott, who might be the last person on earth you’d want playing quarterback? During seven seasons of “The Office,” which ended production in 2013, the character played by Steve Carell turned I-before-team vanity, rampant insecurity and clueless leadership into an art form.

“If nothing’s going on, we’ll binge it,” Keenum recently told me. “Like last night, I got home from work and my wife asked, ‘What you wanna do?’ I said, ‘Let’s eat dinner, and watch an episode of ‘The Office’ or two.”

So I asked Keenum for an episode in which Scott broke down the fourth wall, reached through the TV monitor and touched his funny bone.

“That time Michael ran over Meredith in the car,” Keenum said. “It’s the way they open an episode, those ‘cold’ opens or whatever you call them, is always my favorite part of the show.”

A most excellent and inspired response, don’t you think? Keenum is a devout Christian with a devilish sense of humor and appreciation for the absurd. All useful survival tools for a pro quarterback.

During the opening minute of the mockumentary’s fourth season, as Scott rolls into the parking lot at “The Office,” he is a driver distracted in the reverie of his perfectly mundane life. Perfect, until the instant Scott accidentally plows into pedestrian Meredith Palmer, a co-worker who bounces with a thud on the hood on the car, fracturing her pelvis.

Hey, stuff happens. Sticks and stones. A little broken bone never really hurt anyone, right? Or, as Scott so deftly rationalized it with the camera rolling in his office: “Guess what? I have flaws, what are they? Oh, I don’t know. I sing in the shower, sometimes I spend too much volunteering, occasionally I’ll hit sometime with my car. So sue me. No, don’t ... sue me, that’s the opposite of the point I’m trying to make.”

Scott runs the Dunder Mifflin Paper Company in Scranton, Penn. Keenum runs the Denver offense. They have the same job, with the same burdens of leadership, with every triumph and mistake captured for posterity on video. In many ways, Scott and Keenum are the same guy.

Well, kinda.

“Do I need to be liked? Absolutely not,” Scott revealed to TV viewers in 2007. “I like to be liked. I enjoy being liked. I have to be liked, but it’s not like this compulsive need to be liked, like my need to be praised.”

While Keenum will generously take the time to autograph orange jerseys until his throwing hand begins to cramp, he has also deftly developed a deaf ear when angry Broncomaniacs will inevitably scream at him for throwing a pick-six. He works for teammates’ respect. He requires wins to keep his job. He doesn’t need your praise or mine.

“I don’t read a lot of what you guys write,” said Keenum, describing how he deals with media criticism. “I’m sorry.”

Hey, no apology necessary. Life’s too short for any of us to take ourselves too seriously ... unless your name is Michael Scott.

Who has the tougher existence in a fishbowl filled with sharks? Keenum or Scott? The regional manager of Dunder Mifflin? Or the NFL game manager under center for the Broncos?

“That’s a hard question,” Keenum said, “They way Michael Scott does it, it’s probably tough over there at his office. But I’ve got to go with leading a football team.”

Broncos Game Plan: A look at matchup vs. Seattle

By Ryan O'Halloran

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GAME PLAN

WHEN THE SEAHAWKS RUN

Seattle could use all four of its running backs, led by Chris Carson and first-round pick Rashaad Penny. The Seahawks have been searching for a running game since Marshawn Lynch departed to Oakland. Carson averaged 4.1 yards on 22 carries and third-down back C.J. Prosise had a team-best 10 catches. The Broncos' rush defense improved as the preseason progressed. A key is how ends Derek Wolfe and Adam Gotsis and nose tackle Domata Peko absorb blocks to free up the linebackers. The Broncos led the league last year in fewest yards allowed per carry (3.3).

Edge: Broncos.

WHEN THE SEAHAWKS PASS

If there's one quarterback this year who can use his athleticism to semi-negate the Broncos' pass rush, it's Russell Wilson. Wilson (65-30-1 as a regular season starter) will scramble laterally and in reverse to buy time to buy time and frustrate the Broncos. It also makes blitzing difficult since that would vacate the middle of the field for Wilson to scramble; his 30 rushes of at least 10 yards last year were seventh in the league and tops among quarterbacks. A tough test for the Broncos' cornerbacks, which includes Bradley Roby moved up to No. 2 and Adam Jones/Tramaine Brock as the No. 3.

Edge: Seahawks.

WHEN THE BRONCOS RUN

Rookie Royce Freeman won the running back competition over Devontae Booker. Freeman scored three touchdowns in the preseason, leaving Booker to play a backup role and rookie Phillip Lindsay to be a change-of-pace option. Seattle was 19th against the run last year and one of its few returning defensive starters is excellent middle linebacker Bobby Wagner. The Seahawks' 4-3 front includes former second-round pick Jarran Reed and third-round rookie Rasheem Green. But look for Freeman to show the stage isn't too big for him and for Lindsay to get more touches (rushes/receptions) than Booker.

Edge: Broncos.

WHEN THE BRONCOS PASS

Count all of the Broncos additions: Quarterback Case Keenum, tight end Jake Butt (hurt last year), rookie receivers Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton and the slippery Lindsay, who can motion out of the backfield. Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders remain the Nos. 1-2 receivers. Sanders in particular looked sharp in the preseason. Count on Sutton to get a few chances down the sideline. The

Seahawks' best pass rusher is Frank Clark (nine sacks last year), who will line up in a stand-up and three-point stance at defensive end. Rookie linebacker Shaquem Griffin starts for the injured K.J. Wright and it would behoove the Broncos to challenge him.

Edge: Broncos.

SPECIAL TEAMS

For many years, kicker Sebastian Janikowski and punter Marquette King were Oakland teammates. Now they play for the Seahawks and the Broncos, respectively. The Broncos' special teams, so poor last year, showed signs of progress in the preseason. Veteran Adam Jones, signed on Aug. 26, is expected to handle punt returns and Lindsay will handle kick returns. Kicker Brandon McManus made his first eight field goal attempts last month and placed his kickoffs in good position. Seattle rookie punter Michael Dickson debuts and Tyler Lockett returns from injury to handle returns.

Edge: Broncos.

THREE THINGS TO WATCH

1. First quarter pulse. The Broncos' offense was slow to wake up the entire year, but particularly at the start of games. Their offense had one first possession touchdown (Seattle had none). The Broncos were outscored 77-59 in the first quarter.
2. Red zone wins. An emphasis during the offseason/preseason for the Broncos' defense has been inside the 20-yard line. Last year, they ranked 23rd in touchdown percentage. Seattle's offense was 13th (55.6 percent).
3. Getting fancy. Philadelphia was doing little offensively on Thursday night until a pass to quarterback Nick Foles converted a third down and led to a touchdown. The Broncos tried a flea flicker in the preseason (incomplete pass). Both teams should be on guard for trickery.

INJURY REPORT

Seattle: x

Broncos: x

STAFF PREDICTIONS

Ryan O'Halloran, Beat writer

BRONCOS 27-20

Hopefully this won't be a repeat of Thursday night's Falcons-Eagles sleepwalk. The Broncos sack Russell Wilson four times and Royce Freeman debuts with 97 yards and two touchdowns.

Kyle Fredrickson, Beat writer

BRONCOS 28-24

Quarterback Case Keenum's turnover-free day keeps the Broncos from beating themselves. Turnovers forced by Denver are the difference in a close victory.

Mark Kiszla, Columnist

BRONCOS 24-20

The Broncos' dream is going from worst to first, flipping a 5-11 record to 11-5. For that to become a reality, this is a must win.

Broncos preview 2018: Secondary features new faces with same championship attitude

By Kyle Fredrickson
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To no-one's surprise, Aqib Talib fired the first shot, an accusation questioning a Broncos defense slowly dropping play-makers from their 2015 Super Bowl champions.

Edge rusher Demarcus Ware retired. Linebacker Danny Trevathan left in free agency. The Broncos' cut safety TJ Ward a year ago and traded Talib to the Rams in the offseason, where he could play for his former Broncos' defensive coordinator Wade Phillips.

Then Talib made this comment to Sports Illustrated.

"That (Broncos) team was full of dogs, and now they're all gone," Talib said. "So, stop firing all the dogs."

What's the NFL offseason without a little friendly smack talk between old friends? (By the way, Denver hosts the Rams on Oct. 14).

At its peak, Denver's "No Fly Zone" defense in 2015 was arguably a top-10 unit in league history. It spearheaded an unlikely championship run with a pass defense that allowed only one touchdown completion in the playoffs despite facing Pittsburgh's Ben Roethlisberger, New England's Tom Brady and Carolina's Cam Newton.

The unit's production two seasons later? A mixed bag, at best. Denver's defense ranked inside the NFL's top-five for average yards allowed (290) a season ago but fell below No. 20 in most every other statistical group and was torched for 18 touchdown passes in the red zone.

"Guys weren't on the same page," said three-time Pro Bowl cornerback Chris Harris. "We just panicked a lot."

But don't expect Denver's defense to sit back and accept Talib's criticism as truth.

Yes, the Broncos feature a new defensive backs coach (Greg Williams), a new base-package starter at cornerback (Bradley Roby), three free agents (S Su'a Cravens, CB Tramaine Brock and CB Adam Jones), plus third-round rookie cornerback Isaac Yiadom.

But, that hasn't changed expectations. Going worst-to-first requires the same "dog" attitude Talib brought to the locker room in championship contending seasons.

The Broncos don't believe they've lost a step.

"That's just Talib's point of view," Denver edge-rusher extraordinaire Von Miller said. "That's still my guy. (But) I feel like we have dogs."

Here's what Denver's secondary can feel confident about: Harris, in his eighth NFL season, is still considered among the league's top cover corners. And, despite Talib's comments, the Broncos were validated in their decision to cut Ward a year ago. Ward was released after one season in Tampa Bay, while Denver safety Justin Simmons showcased greater versatility and athleticism. Fellow safeties Will Parks and Darian Stewart have a combined 12 seasons of NFL experience.

However, other areas of the secondary are more uncertain, which is why Denver added Jones after its third preseason game.

Roby enters Year 5 with big expectations. He has amassed 15 career starts and six interceptions (two returned for touchdowns) as the team's No. 3 cornerback. Now, Roby gets his first chance to start full-time.

"It's a premiere position in the National Football League and I'm glad I'm playing it," Roby said. "I look at it as just taking another step in my game and in my leadership. That's how life works. Life is all about evolving at each level."

The Broncos' drafted cornerback Brendan Langley in the third round of the 2017 NFL draft, and after one season on mostly special teams, he's fallen on the depth chart. Rookie Isaac Yiadom has earned those reps through preseason with up-and-down results.

"The thing about Isaac is that he's a very technical player," defensive coordinator Joe Woods said. "When you watch him, he's always on the body. You don't see him where there's a guy that's beating him and he's five or six yards away. He just has to learn how to finish at the top of routes, and that will come with experience."

Denver picked up cornerback Tramaine Brock from Minnesota in the off-season, a ninth-year pro with 40 starts, to bolster its depth. Brock missed time during training camp with a hamstring injury, but that hasn't shaken confidence from Woods' perspective: "Things don't rattle (Brock). He plays with poise," Woods said. Cravens missed the Broncos' first three preseason games because of knee soreness.

The Broncos' decision to sign cornerback Adam Jones, though, might be the strongest indicator of their need for additional edge in the secondary. The player formerly known as "Pacman" can be electric as an emotional, hard-hitting force with 16 career interceptions. He's also rightfully earned an over-the-line reputation. Jones' rap-sheet includes multiple arrests, NFL suspensions, and most recently, a charge for verbally abusing a police officer, and in a separate incident, being attacked by an Atlanta airport employee.

Joseph served as Cincinnati's defensive backs coach in 2014-15 when Jones made the Pro Bowl. If he can get even a little close to that form, it could be a serious boost for the secondary — with a dose of Talib-like attitude.

"I enjoyed coaching (Jones) because he is competitive," Joseph said. "Every game we played, he was ready to go. Every day for work, he was ready to go. ... His football character is A-plus."

Release the dogs.

Game-by-game predictions for the 2018 Denver Broncos' season

By Ryan O'Halloran
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A game-by-game look at the Broncos' season:

Sept. 9: vs. Seattle (2:25 p.m., FOX)

If the Broncos can bottle up rookie tailback Rashaad Penny, their pass rush should be able to harass quarterback Russell Wilson.

The call: Broncos 27, Seahawks 20.

Sept. 16: vs. Oakland (2:25 p.m., CBS)

The Broncos get the Raiders off a short week (Oakland hosts the Rams in the late Monday game Sept. 10) and start 2-0 for the sixth consecutive season.

The call: Broncos 31, Raiders 19.

Sept. 23: at Baltimore (11 a.m., CBS)

The first of two East Coast trips in three weeks. A potential sub-plot: By this point, the Ravens will have a plan for rookie quarterback Lamar Jackson.

The call: Ravens 17, Broncos 16

Oct. 1: vs. Kansas City (6:15 p.m., ESPN)

A matchup of Texas football legends — the Broncos' Case Keenum (Abilene/University of Houston) vs. Patrick Mahomes (Whitehouse/Texas Tech).

The call: Broncos 24, Chiefs 23.

Oct. 7: at New York Jets (11 a.m., CBS)

Do the Broncos see rookie quarterback Sam Darnold by this point? A short week and a long trip is always a tough assignment.

The call: Broncos 20, Jets 7.

Oct. 14: Los Angeles Rams (2:05 p.m., FOX)

Old Home Week: Former Broncos coach/defensive coordinator Wade Phillips and cornerback Aqib Talib return to Denver. The Broncos face quarterback Jared Goff and tailback Todd Gurley for the first time.

The call: Rams 31, Broncos 27.

Oct. 18: at Arizona (6:20 p.m., FOX/NFL Network)

Get ready for three days of the players complaining about playing on Thursday. The Broncos make their second trip to Arizona in eight weeks, but this game actually counts.

The call: Broncos 22, Cardinals 16.

Oct. 28: at Kansas City (11 a.m., CBS)

A quirky division schedule continues. The Broncos play the Chiefs twice before facing the Chargers once. The Broncos are 19-38 all-time in Kansas City.

The call: Chiefs 24, Broncos 21.

Nov. 4: vs. Houston (2:05 p.m., CBS)

If the Broncos' season is going well, this is a classic look-ahead scenario. But quarterback Deshaun Watson, receiver DeAndre Hopkins and pass rusher J.J. Watt all have the ability to ruin a game.

The call: Broncos 34, Texans 17.

Nov. 18: at Los Angeles Chargers (2:05 p.m., CBS)

Big-time AFC West matchup and first place could be on the line. Chargers defensive end Joey Bosa is elite.

The call: Chargers 14, Broncos 13.

Nov. 25: vs. Pittsburgh (2:25 p.m., CBS)

Since 1970, the Broncos and Steelers have met 23 times in the regular season ... and eight times in the postseason. This meeting is their first since the January 2015 AFC title game (Broncos 23, Steelers 16).

The call: Steelers 33, Broncos 28.

Dec. 2: at Cincinnati (11 a.m., CBS)

We ranked the Bengals last in the preseason rankings. No excuses for the Broncos.

The call: Broncos 29, Bengals 14.

Dec. 9: at San Francisco (2:05 p.m., CBS)

The 49ers' Kyle Shanahan, son of Mike and the pride of Cherry Creek High School, faces his hometown team for the first time as a head coach.

The call: 49ers 20, Broncos 17.

Dec. 15: vs. Cleveland (2:30 or 6:20 p.m., NFL Network)

The NFL Network gets to decide if it's Browns-Broncos or Texans-Jets for the 6:20 p.m. game. The Browns will have won a game or three by this point.

The call: Broncos 24, Browns 14.

Dec. 24: at Oakland (6:15 p.m., ESPN)

Only two more trips to the Black Hole for the Broncos before the Raiders move to Las Vegas.

The call: Raiders 28, Broncos 24.

Dec. 30: vs. Los Angeles Chargers (2:25 p.m., CBS)

The Chargers have the AFC West locked up and the Broncos clinch the sixth seed with their ninth win of the year.

The call: Broncos 33, Chargers 28.

Final record: 9-7.

Inside the game: Broncos' Todd Davis on his path to defensive team captain

By Kyle Fredrickson

Denver Post

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The Broncos' 53-man roster gathered shortly after its creation inside a team meeting room at UCHealth Training Center. Denver's coaching staff handed out slips of paper with simple instructions. Write down the names of two team captains for offense, defense and special teams.

The votes were tallied, and for the first time during his five seasons with the Broncos, inside linebacker Todd Davis was named a defensive team captain.

"I called my mom, my dad, my wife — I talked to my wife first," Davis said. "It was a huge honor for me."

The right to wear a boldfaced "C" on the chest of your NFL uniform is distinction earned, not given. Davis embraced the philosophy at each step of his football journey. He wore the C at Paraclete High School in Lancaster, Calif., with 119 tackles as a senior. He wore it again at Sacramento State and responded with a first-team All-Big Sky performance.

The path to NFL team captain status would be even more difficult, though, as an undrafted small-school standout.

"I just tried to work my butt off day in and day out," Davis said.

A combination of consistent production and even-keeled leadership on and off the field has allowed for Davis's moment.

"It's huge for me," Davis said. "It's not something that the coaches choose. It's not something that the media picks. It's your peers, your friends and your teammates. They see you as a leader and somebody that is doing the right things.

"When your team votes you captain, that's somebody they would follow into battle. Somebody who comes day in and day out and brings it. Someone they can turn to on and off the field. Someone who is going to be there for them through anything."

The challenge now is showcasing on every snap exactly why Davis is among Denver's most appreciated players.

Davis wears the C with pride.

"They saw something in me and chose me to be captain," Davis said. "I can't sway from the mentality and the work ethic that I have — and keep having fun with it."

Worst-to-first: Denver Broncos believe they can return to top of AFC West

By Ryan O'Halloran

Denver Post

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It has come to this for a proud Broncos franchise that won the Super Bowl in February 2016, has finished last in the AFC West only three times since 1991 and has not had consecutive losing seasons in more than 40 years.

Their model this year should be last year's Jacksonville Jaguars.

Yes, the Jaguars.

The Broncos need their primary free-agent pickup (quarterback Case Keenum) to be dynamite, want their top-five draft pick (linebacker/defensive end Bradley Chubb) to make an instant impact and hope their defense (led by linebacker Von Miller) can pile up sacks and takeaways so they can climb from the bottom of their division to the top in one season... like the Jaguars did.

"It's a revolving door, this business," Broncos' defensive lineman Zach Kerr said during training camp. "You get a team that's not good and they make free agent moves and trades and draft the right players and the next thing you know, you've got the Jacksonville Jaguars. Anything can happen."

That's the NFL. Everything has happened.

Twenty-six teams since 2000 have gone from worst-to-first in their division, including last year's AFC runner-up (the Jaguars) and Super Bowl champion (Philadelphia), who improved by seven and six regular season wins, respectively.

Rebuilding, retooling or resetting is rarely pretty and almost never neat. In the NHL and MLB, rebuilding involves several years of selling off veteran players for draft picks, and developing prospects. In the NBA, it is particularly difficult to rebuild. The same two teams (Cleveland and Golden State) have met in the last four championship series and success while rebuilding is dependent on either tanking (losing on purpose), winning the draft lottery or swinging a blockbuster trade.

But in the NFL, at least one team in 14 of the past 15 years as gone worst-to-first in its division. The Broncos have done it twice in franchise history (1991 and 2011). Can they do it again after last year's 5-11 eye-sore?

"I think they can," said former NFL personnel executive and current Sirius XM analyst Gil Brandt. "The competitive balance in this league is unbelievable. Every team (that finished last) can say, 'Well, Philadelphia was last and won the Super Bowl — we can do it this year.'"

The Broncos certainly believe they can return to the top of the division they won from 2011-15.

“Absolutely,” safety Darian Stewart said. “But there are going to be some hard days. Like (former defensive coordinator) Wade (Phillips) used to say, ‘If it’s important to you, you’ll find a way to get it done.’ We all love football and are looking forward to this grind.”

The grind started in late July and continues Sunday against Seattle.

A (recent) history lesson

The NFL was designed to have worst-to-first turnarounds.

“Everything turns over every year in the NFL,” said Broncos tight ends coach Geep Chryst. “The league enjoys that.”

Bad teams have two distinct advantages: They draft high in every round and usually have salary cap space to sign players. Which is why it makes sense to focus on the Jaguars of a year ago and how their showing could pertain to this year’s Broncos.

Denver’s poor record meant it had the fifth overall draft selection, which was used to take Chubb. Denver had six of the top 113 picks: Chubb, receiver Courtland Sutton (40), tailback Royce Freeman (71), cornerback Isaac Yiadom (99), linebacker Josey Jewell (106) and receiver DaeSean Hamilton (113).

From 2014-17, the Jaguars had four top-five picks and 13 top-100 selections. Twelve of those top-100 picks are still on the roster, including cornerback Jalen Ramsey, defensive end Yannick Ngakoue, running back Leonard Fournette and quarterback Blake Bortles. Bortles is not a Pro Bowl player but neither is he a bust, so the Jaguars did not have to draft or sign his replacement, like the Broncos did with Paxton Lynch.

A salary cap was introduced in 1994 (\$34.6 million) and has risen \$177.2 million this year. Good teams must carefully choose which players to retain, resulting in a flood of talented players hitting the free agent market each year. The Jaguars made a habit of looking at the Broncos’ depth chart, signing guard Zane Beadles, tight end Julius Thomas and defensive tackle Malik Jackson. Only Jackson was a hit.

In March 2017, the Jaguars chose not to keep spending money on former draft picks, declining to re-sign any of their 2013 picks. That meant they could spend on the open market, adding talent to their highly regarded draft classes of 2014-16.

The Jaguars went 3-for-3 in free agency last year with defensive end Calais Campbell, cornerback A.J. Bouye and strong safety Barry Church. Those veterans brought playoff chops to the locker room, practice field and game field to change the culture along with first-year coach Doug Marrone. Campbell and Bouye made the Pro Bowl.

This offseason, the Broncos were in a different position than the Jaguars. Just two years removed from winning the Super Bowl, their roster already had high-priced players and they did not need many defensive alterations. But they needed a quarterback and prioritized signing Keenum, which they did with a two-year, \$36 million contract. It was a one-stop shopping trip for general manager John Elway.

The Broncos are looking to change the worst-to-first trend in one regard: Acquiring a veteran quarterback for the turnaround. An exception is New Orleans in 2006, which signed Drew Brees.

“The quarterback play was dreadful last year,” said Brian Baldinger, a NFL Network analyst. “If they just get better quarterback play from Case, it can affect a lot of things.”

Said Broncos coach Vance Joseph: “From top to bottom, every team has talent. But the one position that makes a huge difference is quarterback — and we have one in place. That’s exciting.”

What it’ll take

Do the Broncos have what it takes to go from worst to first? Elway said, “I think we have the ability to do that. We just have to do it.”

Canvassing the 26 worst-to-first teams since 2000, how they did it had three similarities:

Fast start: Only six of the teams had a losing record through four games. Turnarounds start with a solid September.

The Broncos are set up for a quick start. Only one of their first five games (Week 4 vs. Kansas City) is against a team that made the playoffs last year and that team, the Chiefs, has changed quarterbacks, handing the football to Patrick Mahomes.

Philadelphia started 3-1 last year on its way to the championship. New Orleans started 4-0 in 2009 and won its first 12 games on its way to a Super Bowl title. The 2011 Broncos were an anomaly. They started 1-3 and 2-5 before winning six consecutive games.

Sacks and turnovers: Last year, the Jaguars had 55 sacks and produced 33 takeaways, both ranking second in the NFL.

The Broncos have a potentially terrific pass rush, led by Miller and Chubb.

In 2000, New Orleans improved by seven wins and led the league with 66 sacks, 11 more than second-place Tampa Bay and Tennessee.

In 2004, Atlanta started 4-0 and led the league with 48 sacks.

In 2012, Washington had 32 sacks, but the Redskins were plus-17 in turnover ratio (third in the league).

“The key is first and second down,” Miller said. “First down, we’ve got to stop the run or force an incomplection. You have to do the same on second down. Third down, we’ve got to rush the passer and get off the field.”

First-round draft pick impact: Pick the right player and teams were able to take advantage of their premium draft position. The Broncos feel they have that kind of talent in Chubb.

Just in the last decade, Miami left tackle Jake Long (2008), Kansas City safety Eric Berry (2010), the Broncos’ Miller (2011), Washington quarterback Robert Griffin III (2012) and Dallas running back Ezekiel Elliott (2016) were named to the Pro Bowl as rookies. Philadelphia left tackle Lane Johnson (2013) and Washington right guard Brandon Scherff (2015) started every game and Fournette (2017) spear-headed the league’s top running game a season ago.

Chubb could join that elite company.

“Chubb can do anything,” Brandt said. “I thought for sure Cleveland would take him (at No. 4) but I understand Cleveland’s reason — the Browns needed a cornerback (Denzel Ward) more than they needed Chubb.

“But Bradley Chubbs don’t come along every day.”

Consecutive losing seasons have not come along in these parts since 1972. Despite last year’s struggles, this year’s Broncos are confident.

“No question,” said defensive backs coach Marcus Robertson, a two-time All Pro free safety during a 12-year playing career. “I can promise you this: Nobody in this facility has any type of doubt that we have a chance to make the playoffs. Our No. 1 objective is to win the (AFC) West. Concentrate on doing that and we’ll see where it takes us.”

Broncos Insider: Everything you need to know about the 2018 Denver Broncos

By Joe Nguyen
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Broncos Insider readers, rejoice: Football. Is. Back.

The Broncos kick off their 2018 campaign at 2:25 p.m. against the Seahawks (follow along to analysis from game in our live blog). But before the game starts, we have a comprehensive guide to everything you need to know about this year's team:

- After a 5-11 season, the Denver Broncos believe they can return to top of AFC West. They've gone from worst-to-first two other times in franchise history: 1991 and 2011.
- Broncos hope Case Keenum can provide quarterback stability and productivity.
- Bradley Chubb gives the Broncos one of the NFL's top pass rushing units.
- First-year experience should aid Denver head coach Vance Joseph in Year 2.
- Veteran play-caller Bill Musgrave is counted on to improve the offense.
- Denver Broncos' new additions will improve the woeful red zone offense.
- Broncos assistant coach Tom McMahon brings a new fire to the special teams in 2018.
- A priority on improving the turnover ratio could be rewarded.
- The Broncos' veteran O-Line presence bring stability and production up front in 2018.
- Rookie receiver Courtland Sutton is ready to make an instant impact.
- Mark Kiszla writes: Case Keenum runs the Broncos offense. Michael Scott runs "The Office." They're the same guy. Well, kinda.

What are the Broncos' biggest obstacles in the AFC West?

- AFC West preview: Los Angeles Chargers favored in a wide-open division.
- Los Angeles Chargers preview: LA appears to be the team to beat in AFC West.
- Oakland Raiders preview: Jon Gruden looks to recapture previous magic.
- Kansas City Chiefs 2018 preview: Can Patrick Mahomes continue KC's success?

Here's a breakdown of what you need to know about the rest of the NFL:

- NFC preview: Here are 10 storylines to watch this season.
- NFC West preview: Rams poised to make leap in Year 2 under coach Sean McVay.
- NFC South preview: NFL's toughest division is trouble for the Buccaneers.
- NFC East preview: With or without Carson Wentz, Eagles in good shape.
- NFC North preview: Will Kirk Cousins lead Vikings to division title?
- AFC preview: Here are 10 storylines to watch this season.
- AFC South preview: Blake Bortles and the Jaguars are more than a punchline.
- AFC East preview: No likely challengers to New England Patriots' dominance.
- AFC North preview: Pittsburgh Steelers are heavy favorites despite aging stars.

Broncos DE Derek Wolfe leaned on wife's support during recovery from neck surgery

By Ryan O'Halloran

Denver Post

Sept. 9, 2018

As Broncos defensive end Derek Wolfe prepared for neck surgery last December, his right arm numb because of a pinched nerve that made it difficult for him to get out of bed and prevented him from opening a door (let alone play football) he and his wife, Abigail, had a brief conversation.

"We thought for a second that if it didn't work, we should consider retirement," Abigail said. "But that was a whisper. He was just really hopeful the whole time this wasn't going to be the end."

Later that day, the surgery was a success. Weeks later, Derek began training. And nearly nine months later, he'll make his regular season return when the Broncos host Seattle on Sunday.

Wolfe hopes the whisper of retirement turns into a roar of a comeback, a return to the player who can defend the run and provide an interior pass-rush presence; back to the player who had 2 1/2 sacks during the Broncos' Super Bowl run in 2015.

"The ups and downs in my life in general have prepared me for this game," Wolfe said at his locker earlier in the week. "Football teaches you to be consistent and not get too high or too low."

That mindset has helped Wolfe deal with the ups (six sacks as a rookie in 2012 and signing a four-year contract in 2016) and downs (a bruised spinal cord injury in 2013, a four-game performance-enhancing drug suspension in 2015 and last year's neck surgery). He hopes this season is another successful up.

"He has a lot of game left to give," Abigail said of her 28-year old husband. "He's ready to show them he's still a young buck."

If Derek does return to being an elite player, he will get to enjoy the journey with Abigail, whom he credits for providing constant support since they met in early 2016.

One scary moment

A foraminotomy is a surgical procedure that enlarges the area (called the foramen) in the spinal column to relieve pressure on compressed nerves. A small drill is used to shave a larger opening in the spine, which is originally 3 to 4 millimeters wide.

The surgery became an option when the Wolfes visited an expert in such surgeries in California. Wolfe played 11 games last year before being shut down. The neck injury was a by-product of the spinal cord injury earlier in his career. Calcium had built up in the foramen, causing discomfort that would not go away. Surgery would allow him to play again and also avoid a constant diet of anti-inflammatory drugs.

"Every time you shrug your shoulders or your head gets compressed, it pinches the nerve," Wolfe said. "What happened, it was pinching and staying pinched."

The expert provided the second opinion and it was swift, almost immediately after Derek sat on the exam table.

“The doctor said, ‘If you don’t take care of this, you’re going to lose function of your right arm,’” Abigail said. “That’s when it really hit Derek — it was much more serious than he anticipated.”

Abigail asked most of the questions in meetings with trainers and doctors.

“I felt it was my job as his wife to make sure we weren’t skipping over the little things,” Abigail said. “Doctors might have thought I was a little annoying, but I didn’t care.”

The Wolfes returned to Denver and Derek’s surgery was performed by Broncos team neurosurgeon Chad Pursmack.

“The procedure is quite common” for the general public, said Neel Anand, M.D., professor of orthopedic surgery and director of spine trauma at Cedars-Sinai Spine Center in Los Angeles who performs foraminotomy on a regular basis. “Any surgery on the spine is risky. Can things go wrong? Yes. But given all of the procedures we do, this is one of the far-less risky ones.”

Wolfe said he was “really miserable” for two weeks post-surgery, which he was told to expect, but also regained the feeling in his right arm “immediately,” which Anand said is common for a successful surgery.

Wolfe began training less than a month after surgery. His first bench press lift was 225 pounds. It’s now in the 450-500 pound area.

“I was really impatient,” Wolfe said. “I wanted to train 2-3 times a day, but (strength-and-conditioning coach) Loren (Landow) and the doctors made sure I didn’t do anything stupid.”

Wolfe was a regular participant during the Broncos’ offseason program. He was building confidence, but Derek and Abigail knew putting on pads and battling offensive linemen in practice would be the true test.

“I told him, ‘We’re not going to know if this surgery works until the first day of training camp,’” Abigail said.

There was one scary moment during the first padded practice July 31, Wolfe sustained a stinger and walked to the locker room. Abigail was watching the workout.

“It freaked me out pretty bad because I was like, ‘It didn’t work, it didn’t work,’ ” she said.

Derek knew he was fine, though, because he never lost feeling in his right arm. It was his shoulder pads that produced the discomfort. He did the foam roller and returned to the field to watch practice. Wolfe practiced the next day and has trended upward the entire preseason.

“One of our first time in pads, I said, ‘Holy (bleep), Wolfe’s back,’” nose tackle Domata Peko said. “He was hitting guys, getting off blocks. I was like, ‘Hell yeah, he’s looking good.’”

A perfect match

Derek and his friends were celebrating the Broncos' Super Bowl 50 victory in Las Vegas at the Tao nightclub. Abigail, who grew up in Cheyenne, Wyo., was working in the restaurant. A mutual friend introduced her to Derek.

"I had no idea who he was," Abigail said. "I knew who the Broncos were, but the only player I could recognize was Peyton Manning. But when (Derek) walked in, I told our friend I needed to meet him. Everybody thought we would be a match made in heaven."

They married in Vail in February 2017. Abigail's first year as an NFL wife was as a caregiver. Derek sustained a right ankle injury in the preseason, which meant he couldn't drive. Abigail would drop him off at the Broncos' facility every morning at 5:30 a.m. And she led the neck surgery conversations, doing the research to ask informed questions.

"If it wasn't for her, I don't know what would have happened," Derek said. "I'm blessed to have her."

Back healthy, Wolfe is beginning the third season of a four-year, \$36.7 million contract he signed in January 2016. He is comfortable living here. His wife has family and friends here. He would like to remain involved with the sport post-retirement. That makes this season important. Play 16 games for the first time since 2014 and post at least six sacks for the first time since 2012 and his future is with the Broncos.

"This is a season I can try and get an extension and retire a Bronco because I want to stay here for the rest of my career," Wolfe said. "It's a really important (year) for me personally and it's important for us as a team because of last year and the way things went. It's really important to bounce back anytime you have adversity like (the injury) and you've been knocked down. Come back, surprise people and respond well."

Said Abigail: "We just can't imagine starting all over with another team."

NFL Picks: Game, Lock and Upset of Week 1

By Ryan O'Halloran
Denver Post
Sept. 9, 2018

GAME OF THE WEEK

San Francisco (plus 6 1/2) at Minnesota, 11 a.m.

A great quarterback matchup with the 49ers' Jimmy Garoppolo against the Vikings' Kirk Cousins, who were in New England and Washington, respectively, at this time last year. The Vikings believe Cousins is the final piece of their Super Bowl puzzle, but their top-ranked defense that will help them start 1-0.

Vikings 27, 49ers 20.

LOCK OF THE WEEK

Kansas City (plus 3) at L.A. Chargers, 2:05 p.m.

Despite Joey Bosa nursing a foot injury and no home-field advantage while playing at a soccer stadium, we like the Chargers to make an AFC West statement against new Chiefs starting quarterback Patrick Mahomes. Los Angeles started 0-4 last year but will start 5-1 this year.

Chargers 34, Chiefs 17.

UPSET OF THE WEEK

Tennessee (minus 1) at Miami, 11 a.m.

Why are the Titans — 0-4 in the preseason with a new coach (Mike Vrabel) and two new coordinators — giving a point to the Dolphins? We'll take it. Miami traded receiver Jarvis Landry and moved on from center Mike Pouncey and defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh. But the Titans will wilt in south Florida heat.

Dolphins 17, Titans 13.

AFC preview 2018: Here are 10 storylines to watch this season

By Ryan O'Halloran
Denver Post
Sept. 9, 2018

The AFC last year was a combination of the status quo and long-awaited breakthroughs.

Status quo: New England, Pittsburgh and Kansas City reached the playoffs for the ninth, fourth and third straight year, respectively.

Long-awaited breakthroughs: Ending long postseason droughts were Tennessee (first time since 2008), Jacksonville (2007) and Buffalo (1999).

The Patriots and Steelers remain formidable, but this is in the inferior conference in terms of depth.

Here are 10 questions about the AFC:

1. Does the conference still go through Foxborough?

Yes ... we think. In our league power rankings, we have the Jaguars ahead of the Patriots, but until quarterback Tom Brady begins to show signs of age, New England should still be considered the favorite even if it doesn't have home-field advantage. But expect some rocky moments for the Patriots — they have myriad new faces to implement and don't have receiver Julian Edelman for the first four games (suspension).

2. The Patriots are the best team. Who is the worst team?

Cincinnati. Since losing in the wild card round for five straight years (five!), the Bengals have gone 6-9-1 and 7-9. But picking Cleveland or Indianapolis to be the worst team is too easy.

3. Are the Jaguars a Super Bowl contender?

Yes. They should have played in the Super Bowl last year but couldn't hold on to a 10-point lead in the fourth quarter at New England. Many of their players are receiving attention for the first time so it will be interesting to see how they handle those expectations. But they have a great defense and tailback Leonard Fournette to carry them.

4. Can Tennessee (with a new coach) and Buffalo (with a new quarterback) return to the playoffs?

No and heck no. The Titans reached last year's divisional round and mutually moved on from coach Mike Mularkey. They hired Mike Vrabel, whose only year as a defensive coordinator resulted in a 4-12 record for Houston. Buffalo overachieved last year, but saw two of its starting offensive linemen (Eric Wood and Richie Incognito) retire and will have A.J. McCarron or Josh Allen at quarterback.

5. Who starts more games: Allen, the Jets' Sam Darnold, Baltimore's Lamar Jackson or Cleveland's Baker Mayfield?

Allen. But Jackson could have the biggest impact if the Ravens devise ways to get him on the field. How teams are handling these first-round picks is flawed. Play ... them ... right ... away. That is the only way to get better at that position.

6. Which team is positioned to start fast and which team will have a tough start?

The Broncos play only one playoff team in the first five games. Buffalo could have a tough September. The Bills are at Baltimore, vs. the Chargers, at Minnesota and at Green Bay.

7. The Chargers are the popular AFC West pick. Buying or selling the Bolts?

Buying, but keeping the receipt. The Chargers dug themselves holes of 0-4 and 3-6 but were probably the division's best team at season's end. They lost tight end Hunter Henry (knee) in the offseason program and cornerback Jason Verrett (Achilles) in a training camp conditioning drill. They have several elite players — quarterback Philip Rivers, receiver Keenan Allen, pass rusher Joey Bosa, cornerback Casey Hayward — to make them the tepid pick.

8. Which AFC non-quarterback first-round rookie could generate buzz?

A bunch of good choices: Broncos linebacker Bradley Chubb, Miami cornerback Minkah Fitzpatrick and Chargers safety Derwin James. But we'll go with New England tailback Sony Michel. The Patriots have traditionally used a by-committee running back setup, but Michel wasn't drafted No. 31 overall to be a rotation player.

9. Who are some returning players who will break out this year?

Texans receiver Will Fuller had only 28 catches but seven resulted in touchdowns; Indianapolis safety Malik Hooker is coming back from an ACL, but had three interceptions as a rookie; Pittsburgh receiver Juju Smith-Schuster will cruise past 1,000 yards; and Tennessee tailback Derrick Henry will emerge from DeMarco Murray's shadow.

10. Who are the AFC playoff teams?

The division winners are Jacksonville, New England, Pittsburgh and the Chargers. The wild cards are Miami and the Broncos.

Broncos hope RB Royce Freeman says plenty with his legs in NFL starting debut

By Mike Klis

9 News

Sept. 9, 2018

Royce Freeman will politely answer your questions, but he's not going to use a couple hundred words when only a couple will do.

"I'm just chillin'," Freeman said during a sit-down interview with 9News this week. "But, yeah, I'm always like this."

The Broncos' rookie starting running back had to speak in front of a crowd once. At least once, as a senior at Imperial High School when he broke the California Interscholastic Federation San Diego section career yardage record (he finished with 7,606 yards). They gave him the public-address microphone and Freeman gave the crowd a gracious speech.

"Yeah, that was to pay tribute to the people I care about, who supported me all throughout my high school career, who came out and watched us, me and my teammates play in those games," he said. "Just a humbling experience and the blessings I've been given playing this game. I'm always so appreciative for it."

The next week he broke Rashaan Salaam's CIF-San Diego touchdown record. (Freeman finished with 111). The San Diego-area must be a hotbed for raising running backs as Broncos' Hall of Famer Terrell Davis hailed from there, too.

"I talked to T.D. a couple times and it's a humbling experience to have somebody like that with that legacy and career and especially here, give you some words," Freeman said.

When Freeman lines up behind quarterback Case Keenum on the Broncos' first offensive play today against the Seattle Seahawks, he will become the Broncos' first rookie running back to start a season opener since Davis in 1995. Freeman and Davis haven't spoken since received the nod, but they have before.

"Just wanted to pick his brain a little bit, see what his experiences what he went through playing this game, especially from the running back position and the knowledge he was willing to give me," Freeman said.

Since Broncos' running backs' coach Curtis Modkins gave him the news that he had been promoted from No. 2 running back behind Devontae Booker to starter, Freeman has heard from a lot of people, none more so than Fantasy League players.

"Oh man," he said. "Everybody wants to tell you they're playing you in Fantasy. I mean it's pretty funny."

Freeman played varsity football as a freshman in high school. He started as a freshman at Oregon, where he set all their career rushing records. No wonder he was low key about becoming a rookie starter in the NFL.

"I feel so honored to be in this role and this position to be the starter for week 1 but I mean you can't really think too much outside the box," he said. "I just have to stay focused and stay the course."

OK, let's say Royce is rolling through the hole. He reaches the second level and there's nothing but a lone safety between him and the end zone. Does Freeman run him over or give him a juke and try to get around him?

"That's a common question," Freeman said. "I feel like it's more of an instinctive thing. Sometimes you want to set something up or sometimes you want to go for the move. It also depends on the defender or who you're going against. You can't say I'm going to do this or the other. It varies."

Now that he's a Day 1 starter as a rookie, any other goals like gain 1,000 yards in year one?

"People always ask me that," he said. "I tend to try to take it game by game. You don't want to get too ahead of yourself and try to do too much outside the box."

Bronco Bits

With Von Miller, Chris Harris Jr. and Derek Wolfe all out with injuries in Super Bowl XLVIII, the Broncos have just two players remaining from Seattle's 43-8 Meadowlands Massacre: Demaryius Thomas, who had a then-Super Bowl record 13 catches, and linebacker Brandon Marshall, who came off the bench. ...

The Broncos and center Matt Paradis, who can become an unrestricted free agent after this season, have held contract-extension discussions but as the season opener approaches, a deal is not imminent.

Klis List of how the Broncos can beat Seattle

By Mike Klis
9 News
Sept. 9, 2018

This is a huge season opener for the Denver Broncos.

Unless they lose.

If that happens then, you know, it's only one game with 15 more to go.

In the previous 10 seasons, eight Super Bowl champions won their first game. The 2014 New England Patriots and 2011 New York Giants did not. And so the opener may or may not be significant to the big picture that is the 2018 season.

Still, after the Broncos went 5-11 last year, life would be so much easier in week 2 for second-year head coach Vance Joseph and first-time quarterback Case Keenum if they won Game 1.

Here is a Klis List of 9 key factors for the Broncos to start the season with a win:

1. Miller Time

In just seven seasons, Broncos outside linebacker Von Miller is already tied for 55th all-time with 83.5 career sacks. If he gets 2.5 more, he will pass Leonard Marshall, Howie Long, James Harrison and Osi Umenyiora, among others, and become tied with Willie McGinest for 50th place.

The Broncos could use 2.5 sacks from Miller against arguably the league's best off-script, scrambling quarterbacks in Seattle's Russell Wilson. In what should be the game's biggest mismatch, Seattle right tackle Germain Ifedi has no chance of handling Miller one-on-one.

2. Case and his cast

The brunt of the 5-11 blame went to the Broncos' three quarterbacks last year – Trevor Siemian, Brock Osweiler and Paxton Lynch – none of whom are back with the team. Case Keenum was signed to the rescue.

After a rough preseason opener in limited play, Keenum and the first-team offense moved the ball well in their next two preseason games.

3. Roll rookie Royce

As it played out, it was rookie Royce Freeman who replaced C.J. Anderson as the Broncos' starting tailback with Devontae Booker returning as the No. 2 tailback. Freeman is 10 pounds bigger and 5 years younger than Anderson. Freeman was terrific in the preseason while showing a knack for smelling the goal line.

4. Chat up, Russell

For the second consecutive year, there's a national story about how Seahawk veterans resent the preferential treatment coach Pete Carroll gives quarterback Russell Wilson.

Many of those outspoken veterans are gone, but the Denver D might as well keep the story alive with a little smack talk whenever possible.

Hey, Russell, how can you play quarterback knowing your teammates hate you!

5. Don't test, Lockett

Seattle's Tyler Lockett was the league's top kickoff returner last year. Brandon McManus can thwart that with nothing but touchbacks at Mile High.

6. Stay strong through trouble

The Broncos did not handle adversity well last season. See their eight-game losing streak and eight of their 11 losses by at least 10 points.

In almost every NFL game, there is a point when momentum is with the other guys and winning appears dire.

The Broncos have Keenum and a mature group of college captains for greater maturity this year.

7. Red zone

The Broncos ranked 32nd in red-zone efficiency last season by converting just 39.6 percent of their red-zone possessions into touchdowns. The NFL does not have a 33rd team.

The Broncos should have some better red zone weapons this year in tight end Jake Butt, No. 3 receiver Courtland Sutton, and running backs Phillip Lindsay and Freeman.

8. Stay back

There were too many breakdowns in the Broncos' secondary last year and Wilson is the type of quarterback who can scramble guys open for big plays. Seattle has nice receivers in Doug Baldwin, Lockett, Brandon Marshall and Jaron Brown.

9. Where's the game at?

There is such a thing as Mile High Magic as the Broncos are 17-1 in home openers dating back to 2000. Seattle's 12th man will be watching from their couches.

Broncos have advantage, but altered Seahawks team can't be overlooked

By Tyler Polumbus
The Athletic
Sept. 9, 2018

The Denver Broncos are fortunate to open the season at home against the uncharacteristically vulnerable Seattle Seahawks. The Seahawks are in the midst of a roster turnover and for the first season in recent memory, they're not considered a favorite to win the NFC West.

But while the Seahawks may not be the team once a play away from creating a dynasty, they certainly can't be overlooked. John Clayton of ESPN 710 Seattle told me that the Seahawks "are probably better than people think they are, but they are still not who they have been over the past six or seven years."

Brian Schottenheimer has taken over as the offensive coordinator and is committed to running the football in a more efficient manner than the team has in the past. Russell Wilson will attempt to get receivers Tyler Lockett (who recently signed a three-year contract extension), Doug Baldwin and Brandon Marshall (a former Bronco) the ball often.

Defensively, the Seahawks have lost much of their intimidation. The "Legion of Boom" secondary has been dismantled, and although safety Earl Thomas has returned to the team after a contract holdout, there are questions regarding how much he will play Sunday.

As for the pass rushers, well, they are certainly not the type of threat that Seattle has become accustomed to over the years. Frank Clark is the best of the group with 22 sacks in his first three years, but he missed most of the preseason recovering from a hand surgery. Dion Jordan is Seattle's second-best rusher, but he was just activated off the non-football injury list because of offseason knee surgery and there is uncertainty over how much he will play. He was listed as limited in practice for much of the week leading up to the game.

The Seahawks are known for one of the most simplistic defensive philosophies in the NFL under coach Pete Carroll. They run an under front with their front seven and a Cover 3 on the back end with the secondary. Traditionally, they haven't been very creative in the blitzes, nor have they worked hard to disguise their coverage. They got away with it in the past because they had had so much talent. But Clayton pointed out that, in response to the depleted talent, they'll have middle linebacker Bobby Wagner blitz the A gap, between the center and guard, and use more corner blitzes, particularly with Justin Coleman from the slot.

"They are trying to mix it up more to make up the difference," Clayton said.

Keys to a Broncos victory

1. Tempo, tempo, tempo

Since 1984, when Pat Bowlen purchased the team, the Broncos have lost only four home openers. The altitude is a huge part of it. Teams hate playing in Denver during the season because of the altitude, but this is especially true for the first game. It is impossible to get in football shape without playing football,

and this will be the first four quarters the Seahawks starters play this season. No team is in true football shape yet. The Broncos should play as fast as possible on offense to take advantage.

2. Keep Russell Wilson in the pocket

The majority of Wilson's big plays come when he is off schedule and scrambling outside the pocket. If you keep him in the pocket, he can look like a different QB at times. He has had issues over the years with batted passes, so if the Broncos' defensive linemen can contain him and get their hands up, they will take away his biggest weapon.

3. Win the turnover battle

I spent two seasons with the Seahawks, and every Thursday is the same. "Turnover Thursday" begins with a speech from an offensive coach on how to best protect the football and is followed with a speech from a defensive coach on how to best rip the ball away from the ball carrier. Practice is a competition and the winner of Turnover Thursday is announced at the end of practice.

The Seahawks preach the turnover battle every week and the Broncos ranked 31st in the NFL in turnovers last season. The Broncos need to fix this and what better opponent to turn it around on than a team that prides itself in this category as much as any in the league.

Broncos Denver7 keys to victory over Seahawks

By Troy Renck
KMGH
Sept. 9, 2018

Multiple times last season, I arrived in the tunnel to the playing field as time expired standing next to general manager John Elway. He stared intently, if not helplessly. I have never covered an athlete more competitive than Elway, the quarterback. Elway, the executive, grapples with the inability to control the outcome after kickoff.

After the Broncos' 5-11 mess, Elway went to work. He signed free agent quarterback Case Keenum, knowing a team can nowhere without belief at the game's most important position. He drafted with a purpose, going after experienced players and leaders -- all but one of his picks was a team captain. For the Broncos to rebound, they needed a quarterback, an infusion of youth, and for coach Vance Joseph to improve dramatically.

Hope has returned. But it is fleeting without winning. The challenge starts in Sunday's opener against the Seattle Seahawks. My Denver7 keys to the game:

1) Win the turnover battle

No team is better when it takes care of the ball than the Broncos. Dating to 2012, they have won 32 straight games when winning the turnover battle. Last year, the Broncos gave the ball away 34 times, ranking 31st in the NFL. Part of the issue was atrocious teams play that will improve under new coordinator Tom McMahon and veteran punt returner Adam Jones. Seattle will take chances, and fly around. It's imperative the Broncos secure the football if they are to extend their season-opening winning streak to seven games.

2) On the Case

The Broncos know who Case Keenum was last year with Minnesota. Do they know who Case Keenum is this year? Keenum fired 22 touchdowns with seven interceptions for the Vikings. He protects the ball. The Broncos require flashes of brilliance, not just a game manager. Keenum posted zero touchdowns in the preseason. It is a balancing act. The Broncos don't need him to force the issue. However, when plays pop -- especially deep strikes -- he needs to be fearless in going to Emmanuel Sanders and Courtland Sutton. If Keenum can post a 3-to-1 TD to pick ratio, the Broncos will return to the playoffs and avoid back-to-back losing seasons for the first time since 1972.

3) Run the ball

Don't forget when Keenum excelled in Minnesota he leaned on a powerful ground game. The Seahawks are vulnerable against the run. Royce Freeman represents the first Broncos rookie to start at running back since Terrell Davis in 1995. He plays older, and has the type of vision to make second-level defenders miss. It might be boring early, but Denver must commit to the ground game to set up play-action in the second half.

4) Muscle Russell

The Broncos understand the problems Seattle quarterback Russell Wilson presents. If not the best mobile quarterback, he ranks second to Green Bay's Aaron Rodgers. Broncos linebacker Shane Ray compared Wilson's footwork to Michael Vick's. The Broncos must contain him on third down when he runs with purpose against teams that lean heavily on man coverage. I would put a spy on him, if necessary. The key is making the Seahawks one dimensional. Chris Carson runs violently, but has little experience. Seattle has not been effective running the ball since Marshawn Lynch left, and the Broncos, on paper, should be stout against the ground attack. Keep the Seahawks one dimensional, and it will force Wilson into a few mistakes.

5) Let Von Win

Von Miller represents the Broncos' best player. Seattle will chip him and slide protection to his side. Defensive coordinator Joe Woods must be better and more creative than a year ago in how he frees up Miller. Having rookie Bradley Chubb and a healthy Shane Ray should set up Miller for more sack opportunities. Tackles can't block him on Twitter. Get Von into space, and allow him to deliver a strip sack. The winner of the Von-Wilson matchup should determine the game's outcome.

6) Get a lead

It sounds simple. But starting fast carries huge benefits at home. It riles up the crowd, makes audibles difficult, and it allows cornerback Chris Harris Jr. and crew to take chances against an undermanned Seattle receiving corps.

7) Coach better

Vance Joseph knows he must prove himself with the clock ticking. No more benefit of the doubt after last season's humiliating eight-game losing streak. The faulty game plans, mindless penalties and awful special teams fell on his doorstep. Now, he has a competent quarterback and revamped coaching staff that challenges players. No excuses. Be organized. Be aggressive. And play to win, not to avoid a loss.

RENCK PREDICTION: Broncos 23, Seahawks 16

Case Keenum must lead Broncos to playoffs within two seasons, or else

By Woody Paige
Colorado Springs Gazette
Sept. 9, 2018

Captain Case will become the 21st quarterback to start an opening game for the Broncos on Sunday.

He obviously aspires to be the 16th to win one.

“It’s the first game, so it’s really important. ... You want to start fast; you want to start right at home. ... I want to win, especially bad,” Case Keenum said the past week after being voted a team captain by the players before taking a formal snap with the Broncos.

Only seven quarterbacks have started a playoff game for Denver. (You forgot about Gus Frerotte.) If Case is to be the next Broncos’ QB in the postseason, much depends on His Own Self.

Is he “The Miracle Worker” from the last playoff game the Vikings won against the Saints, or a mediocre worker who won nine of 24 starts previously, and never had appeared in the postseason?

Is a superhero cape apropos for Capt. Case?

USA Today’s “For The Win” Thursday ranked Keenum 29th of NFL starting quarterbacks heading into this season. Despite the 11-3 record he registered after taking over in Minnesota he is only rated ahead of the Bills’ Nathan Peterman, Jets rookie Sam Darnold and Blake Bortles (who helped get the Jaguars to the AFC Championship Game). Case is not on the same planet with Aaron Rodgers, Tom Brady and the man he idolized — Drew Brees.

Other publications classify Case at 23rd or 24th.

He certainly isn’t esteemed — even in the AFC West. Case is placed fourth behind Phillip Rivers, Derek Carr and Patrick Mahomes, who had one start (in the finale in Denver last season).

What does a guy have to do to get some respect around here?

For starters, “You have to score points to win in this league, and you have to take care of the ball, which isn’t easy against Seattle,” Keenum said.

Yet, he has beaten the Seahawks and their short, exceptional quarterback, Russell Wilson, twice in three previous starts, which is more than the Broncos have done in this decade.

Keenum — one of the sharpest, smartest and nicest quarterbacks ever to play in Denver — will captain a revised offense with six, or even seven, players who weren’t starters with the Broncos in the victory over the Chargers in the 2017 home opener. As he acknowledged, the Broncos must score 20 points or more, a level they didn’t reach 10 times last season. And they definitely can’t give up 22 interceptions and 20

fumbles (not counting six wasted away by Isaiah McKenzie, who was returned to the roster after nobody else was interested).

All except two of the culprits (including three quarterbacks) in those miss-demeanors are no longer on the active roster, and five coaches were fired.

The Broncos' offense was abysmal, appalling, atrocious and awful, among adjectives and adverbs.

The new leader, Keenum, will be responsible for turning around an offensive offense.

He's got the older, mostly dependable Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders, who used to account for 180 combined catches and more than 2,300 yards annually before falling off the field in '17.

The duo will be relieved by the presence of air apparents Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton.

Underachiever Devontae Booker has been replaced at running back, mercifully, by rookie Royce Freeman, and Phillip Lindsay is the amazing Swiss Army Knife.

Keenum will be grateful for those guys, but uncertainty abounds again at tight end with the Big Ten Conference Alumni Club — Jeff Heurman (Ohio State), Jake Butt (Michigan), Matt LaCrosse (Illinois) and Troy Fumagalli (Wisconsin), who is on IR. Can Capt. Case connect with any of them for more than 20 receptions and two touchdowns?

The offensive linemen have to be Case's best friends. Last year the Broncos' Three Stooges were sacked 52 times (tied for third worst in the NFL). Keenum suffered the same number over the past six seasons.

Keenum doesn't have to be John Elway or Peyton Manning, but 3,800 yards and 27 touchdowns, with 10 interceptions and a 10-6 record, would be cheered.

On a two-year contract, Capt. Case must put the Broncos back in the playoffs in 2018 and/or '19 — or else.

Or else, a 22nd quarterback will start the 2020 opener.

Mason's Mailbag: Expecting more from the tight ends

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
Sept. 9, 2018

@MaseDenver #askmase Big game first game of the season tomorrow. What does it mean for Janovich? Lots of stories about Lindsay, but I haven't heard anything about Janovich.

-Doug
CU alum that bleeds red.

Phillip Lindsay is a bigger story media-wise because he's a rookie who pulled off the Colorado trifecta -- playing high-school, college and pro football in the Centennial State. The fact that he came from Denver Public Schools, where he starred at South High School, only adds to the story.

That doesn't mean Andy Janovich is insignificant. But when a player makes the first 53-man roster for a third consecutive year, it just isn't as big a story, even though he will be a team captain for the first time, joining Brandon McManus as a special-teams captain. Plenty was written and spoken about Janovich after he delivered two blocks that led directly to touchdowns on Aug. 24 at Washington, and you don't have to listen to our radio show for long to hear me, Steve Atwater or Ryan Edwards call up our most passionate voices to say, "Love Jano."

What sort of production can we expect to see from the tight end group? #AskMase #ShouldhaveaskedonTuesday

I think you're looking for league-average production. Last year, Denver's tight-end complement ranked 29th in receptions (50) and 21st in yardage (41.1 yards per game) and finished in a tie for 19th place with four other teams in touchdowns (5).

Last year, the league averages for tight-end groups by team were 71.8 receptions, 795.0 yards and 6.2 touchdowns. If the Broncos' collective of Jeff Heurman, Jake Butt and Matt LaCosse can reach that level of production -- with an above-average touchdown tally, because Case Keenum found his tight ends for eight touchdowns last year with the Vikings -- the Broncos should be in good shape.

#AskMase our cap space is not so good, will that play a part during regular season?

Not particularly. The NFLPA's official salary-cap report, which is generated daily, still has the Broncos with \$11,913,575 of cap space. That still gives them room to add a few players in a pinch in the inevitable event of injuries arising. The decision to waive quarterback Paxton Lynch creates more dead money on the 2018 salary cap, but it also gives the Broncos another roster spot with which to work.

Will the Broncos make the playoffs this year? #AskMase

I'm guessing that they will. In our prediction segment on Orange and Blue 760 during Thursday's show, I picked them to make the postseason as a wild-card entrant. Of course, Steve Atwater had the Broncos winning the AFC West and finishing 12-4. But he is a self-admitted optimistic realist; I am more of a pessimistic realist. We cancel each other out.

Three Keys to Broncos-Seahawks

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
Sept. 9, 2018

If you go by preseason indications, this Broncos season should be far different than the last.

The starting offense found its footing after three three-and-outs to start its preseason work. The defense overcame early hiccups and improved its form over its three games of work. Quarterback Case Keenum has been as advertised, delivering precise work with judicious risk-taking predicated on trusting his big downfield targets to haul in more than their share of 50-50 balls.

Now the Broncos know they must turn those positive signs into a reality that ensures 2017 will stand as nothing more than an unfortunate blip amid decades of consistent contention and relevance.

What happens Sunday will not reveal everything about what is in store for the Broncos' 59th edition. But just as Broadway shows are reviewed on opening night, so, too, will this team.

Keenum and the newcomers, including three rookies listed on the first team -- running back Royce Freeman, outside linebacker Bradley Chubb and kickoff returner Phillip Lindsay -- are primary reasons why this year's team could be different. But if the Broncos are to return to the postseason, at least as much will depend on their returning players who endured through last year's struggles.

For some of them, the 5-11 season provides an extra tank of motivational fuel.

"A lot of us already forgot about that, but at the same time, a lot of us use that as motivation throughout the practices and throughout the offseason," safety Will Parks said.

"For me, there were a lot of plays that I left out on the field last year. In order for me to do great this year, there has to be some type of motivation for me in the back of my mind, to say 'Hey, man, you've got to make that play. You didn't make it last year. Do it this year, and you'll probably help your team out.' I'm pretty sure a lot of the guys could say that.

"So that's definitely going to be one of the key factors as far as using something as motivation to go out there and make plays. And if you do that, man, you should be making plays all day long."

If 46 active players stack together big plays like Parks suggests, the Broncos can get off to a flying start against Seattle with the potential to sustain it from there.

What are the keys to Sunday's game?

Establish ground control on both sides

Denver wants to have an offense that is equally capable of beating a foe on the ground or in the air -- but Head Coach Vance Joseph knows that his team must establish the run first.

"That's our formula to win," he said. "Obviously, this [Seahawks] defense, it's a really, really stout front. They are a single-high coverage team, so they're going to have one more guy in the box than you can account for every down. We have to have a great plan to block that guy or influence that guy, but we can't get frustrated with the running game."

Since Pete Carroll became Seattle's head coach in 2010, the Seahawks are 23-1 when they hold opponents to fewer than 50 rushing yards and 36-0 when the opponent rushes 19 or fewer times. The second record is a bit of a chicken-and-egg proposition, as teams typically ditch the run when they fall behind.

Considering that Seattle is 4-19-1 in the Carroll era against teams who run 35 or more times, the Broncos' task is clear: Maintain fidelity to their ground commitment, even if it takes a while for success to arrive.

"We have to stay with it," Joseph said. "It may look ugly sometimes, but we have to stay with and puncture some runs to make our pass game more available."

On the defensive side, multiple players pointed to gap-control issues as the primary cause of the first-team defense's occasional problems containing the run in the Broncos' first three preseason games. In those contests, Denver's No. 1 defense held opponents to one yard or fewer on 13 of 35 attempts. But the Broncos also allowed six gains of 20 or more yards -- a rate of one double-digit pickup every 5.83 attempts. Last year, Denver allowed run of 10 or more yards once every 10.19 attempts.

The key to preventing that is for each defensive player to focus on his task.

"Everybody wants to make plays," Defensive Coordinator Joe Woods said, "and I always tell them, 'Just do your job and make the plays you're supposed to make, because every time we call defense, the ball might go somewhere else. Your job is to sit in your gap and then run to the ball. So just do your job and relax.'"

Contain Russell Wilson

Just five active quarterbacks have started and won at least one Super Bowl and possess a career passer rating of over 90.0. Wilson is one of them, and with a 98.8 career rating, he has the second-highest mark of any active quarterback with at least 300 attempts, trailing Green Bay's Aaron Rodgers.

Since Wilson broke into the NFL in 2012, only Drew Brees has more touchdown passes than Wilson's 161, and only Carolina's Cam Newton and Cincinnati's Andy Dalton have more touchdown runs than Wilson's 16.

"The offense runs through him," safety Will Parks said.

Defusing him starts with limiting his options. The Broncos must generate pressure, but it has to be prudent in nature; they can't simply fly off the edge, because then Wilson can squirt past the inside shoulders of the edge rusher and offensive tackle and take off for a lengthy gain.

"We might have to play the slow game with Russell," outside linebacker Shane Ray said. "We might have to pin him up there [in the pocket] for a while, and then -- boom -- maybe in the third or fourth quarter, then we start getting some snaps or some pressures."

"You've got to have extreme discipline," inside linebacker Brandon Marshall said. " coverage, we're going to have to cover a long time. Hopefully the rushers will get to him -- and I think they will -- but we've got to cover well and when he scrambles, we've got to try to get him down. He's fast. He's quick. So it's going to be a tough challenge for us."

Win the turnover battle

Keenum was brought to Denver to help ensure the Broncos avoid a repeat of last year's poor form in this critical statistic, when the Broncos had more turnovers (34) and a worse turnover margin than every team but the Browns.

No position was more culpable than quarterback. Denver's three passers turned over the football once every 25.7 plays (passing attempts, rushes and sacks). This is a significant part of the reason why none of them remain with the team.

The Broncos signed Keenum to change that. Last year, he turned the ball over once every 67.9 plays, with just seven interceptions and one lost fumble.

"We want Case to manage the game and to use his weapons," Joseph said. "The quarterback's best friend is running the football and having an efficient pass game to keep the third downs manageable."

"I want Case to be Case. I don't want him to be anything special. Just be our quarterback, be a great leader, take care of the football -- that's his job."

The NFL's Long-Awaited Next Generation of Stars

By Andrew Beaton
Wall Street Journal
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If you took a nap 10 years ago and just woke up for the start of this NFL season, you would be forgiven for thinking that it's still 2008. Tom Brady looks the same. Larry Fitzgerald is still posting 1,000-yard receiving seasons. The Browns still aren't any good.

This has been the NFL's blessing and curse in recent years: The stars have remained the same. They haven't disappeared, and their popularity sustains the league. But there hasn't exactly been an infusion of new pizzazz, either. Brady and the Patriots have spent nearly two decades ruling over the league. Eli Manning and Philip Rivers are still around. Drew Brees, at 39 years old, seems to be getting better.

"It's been a lot of the same faces for a long time," one league executive lamented.

But for a league facing challenges—from ratings declines to polarizing player protests during the national anthem—there's a new opportunity as this NFL season begins. Finally, there's a fresh crop of prospects that seems certain to produce new icons.

A pack of injured stars that spent part of last season hurt—including the Eagles Carson Wentz and Houston's Deshaun Watson—is back, joined by a historically robust crop of rookie quarterbacks. "You're seeing a changing of the guard," said former Steelers coach Bill Cowher.

The league has been promising a new generation of stars for years and, to be sure, some emerged. But something always tripped up the new hopes. Some players expected to become big hits turned out to be big flops like troubled Browns flameout Johnny Manziel.

Last season, injuries caused some of the league's best young players to spend more time on injured reserve than on the field. Arizona Cardinals running back David Johnson, a popular No. 1 pick in fantasy football drafts last year, played just part of one game before suffering a season-ending wrist injury. Wentz, who emerged as an MVP favorite in his second season, went down with a knee injury. J.J. Watt, the Texans defensive lineman who is a nightmare to quarterbacks and publicly beloved for helping to raise millions of dollars for victims of Hurricane Harvey, missed most of the season for the second straight year. Giants wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. barely played. Colts quarterback Andrew Luck didn't play at all.

The toughest blow came to the player with the most meteoric rise. Houston's Watson came off the bench during the Texans' first game of the season and immediately looked like one of the best players in the game. Even before he played, he was nationally known for his prolific career at Clemson, which included taking down Nick Saban and Alabama in a thrilling national championship game.

It's not just that Watson was good—he was a viral sensation on and off the field. His big passes captivated fans. So did his charitable work when he donated his first game check to three women who work at Houston's NRG Stadium. Then Watson suffered his own season-ending injury midway through the year.

This discouraging gamut of injuries left a stunning lack of new players for fans to actually get excited about.

Now, those players are back, and they're being joined by a group of new faces of the game that, in at least one way, is unprecedented. For the first time ever this spring, four quarterbacks went in the top-10 of the NFL draft. One, the Jets' Sam Darnold, is set to become the youngest first-week starting quarterback in the game's modern history. There's also Baker Mayfield, the No. 1 overall pick, by Cleveland; Arizona's Josh Rosen; and Buffalo's Josh Allen, whose arm strength is so prodigious that even his incompletions have become highlight reels.

There's one young quarterback more tantalizing than any of them, though. He's not a rookie and has appeared in one career game in which he didn't even throw a touchdown. But the Chiefs believed in Patrick Mahomes, the second year quarterback out of Texas Tech, enough to trade up for him in the 2017 draft and then trade Alex Smith away to the Redskins.

As with the rookie quarterbacks, nobody has any clue how good he might be or if he's actually good at all. Yet the prospect of him budding into that type of player has already boosted the business side. "If you look at the history of NFL franchises and you take a quarterback in the top 10 picks in the draft, it's going to have an impact," Chiefs president Mark Donovan said in July.

To be clear: It's not as if the old guard is going anywhere immediately. Brady, 41 years old, wants to play for years to come. Ben Roethlisberger has hinted at retirement but never actually done it. For the first time in a long time, though, these elder statesmen may have some young company.

"It's almost like you're watching the baton being passed," Cowher said.