

Kiszla: He's a Vonster. Linebacker Von Miller too much for Seahawks to handle in Broncos' victory.

By Mark Kiszla
Denver Post
Sept. 10, 2018

He's the Vonster. Half rhinestone cowboy, half football cyborg, like nothing the NFL has ever seen, and a force of nature quarterbacks like Seattle's Russell Wilson hope never to see again.

Broncos linebacker Von Miller routinely does things beyond the imagination of mere mortals. For example: After undressing the Seahawks with three sacks and two forced fumbles during a 27-24 victory, his Sunday go-to-dinner clothes were western duds fitting for a Chippendale dancer: Cowboy hat. Pink skinny jeans. A denim shirt (buttons optional) to show gold chains on his chest.

"I picked this out of my closet," said Miller, modeling his attire with runway flair that would've done Tyra Banks proud.

Earlier, while waiting offstage to describe his dominant role in the Broncos' season-opening victory, Miller politely departed the news conference room to sneeze so hard it rattled the stadium's walls. Why?

The Vonster is allergic to grass. That's not an urban myth, it's 100 percent true. Maybe the only downside of being the Vonster, who wrestles QBs to the ground for a living, is his most outstanding performances give him a stuffy nose, after all that rolling around in the grass.

On a sunny afternoon that reminded us all why we live in Colorado and not Seattle, the fury of Miller rained down on the Seahawks. When the Vonster wasn't running the width of the field to stop forward progress short of the first-down stick with a downfield tackle, he was ripping the football from the arms of 223-pound running back Chris Carson without stopping to say "please" or "thanks."

Wilson told reporters last week watching the Vonster is like having a \$1,000 courtside seat for NBA greatness. "When you're playing certain guys, when you're playing LeBron James or you're playing guys like Kobe Bryant or Steph Curry, they're going to make plays," Wilson said. "He's one of those guys for sure."

How prescient of Wilson. On the NBA court, the team with the best superstar often wins. In this NFL game, the Seahawks had Danger-Russ, but Denver had the Vonster.

Advantage, Broncos.

The turnovers and havoc created by Miller covered for issues the Broncos will have to quickly resolve if they want to flip their 5-11 record from last season to 11-5, and go from worst to first in the span of 12 months.

In his regular-season debut as starting quarterback, Case Keenum tried so hard to impress he sometimes pressed, acting like he had to be Slingin' Sammy Baugh instead of a good ol' boy from Texas managing

the dadgum game. "We all want it so bad. We can't press ... I don't have to be anyone but myself," said Keenum, whose three touchdown passes were offset by three interceptions.

The relentless pass rush of Miller did much to hide the mess formerly known as the No Fly Zone. With recently acquired cornerback Adam Jones pressed into extensive duty, teammate Chris Harris Jr. was the first to admit his role was harried kindergarten cop, directing traffic for a secondary still learning how to communicate. "Ain't got no time now, we've got to go, we've got to get it done this week," Harris said.

After Miller made another big play, a video camera caught him on the bench sucking on oxygen through a clear mask, proving even the super powers of a football avenger needs care and feeding. As more than 70,000 Broncomaniacs cheered his image on the scoreboard screen, Miller stood up and struck an Incredible Hulk pose.

So I felt compelled to ask: Wouldn't it be fair for the Vonster to share his oxygen with Seattle players he chased all over the field?

"No. This is not how it works. What they do with their free time" is none of his concern, Miller said. "This is my eighth year in the league. Every single time I've come to the sideline, I'm always on the tank."

Label No. 58 as one of the rarest athletic specimens on the planet. There's nothing else like Miller in the NFL. Not to go all conspiracy theory on you, but there might not even be anything like him on earth.

My current hypothesis: While the birth certificate insists Miller was born 29 years ago in Dallas, it's within the realm of possibility he was actually dropped off in Area 51 by aliens weary of his super-human powers wrecking all their intergalactic games.

"He's really a freak," Broncos teammate Todd Davis said.

Aha! Knew it.

The Vonster is a super freak from another planet that eats QBs for lunch and wears pink skinny jeans to dinner. Be glad he's on your side, using his powers for the good of Broncos Country.

"I'm glad I'm on the sideline, when he's on the field," said Keenum, speaking for NFL quarterbacks everywhere.

Aren't we all? The Vonster is scary good.

Broncos Analysis: It wasn't always smooth, but it was a win, 27-24 over Seattle

By Ryan O'Halloran
Denver Post
Sept. 10, 2018

Broncos' players talked about it so often during the offseason, training camp and preseason, it was like they were trying to convince themselves of their ability to handle adversity.

After taking a punch like a long touchdown, freaky injury or missed call, they guaranteed a fight-back, not turn-their-back approach.

And after unforced errors in missed tackles, penalties and turnovers, they promised a bounce-back attitude.

The proof matched their words in Sunday's 27-24 season opening home win over Seattle.

Quarterback Case Keenum threw three interceptions, but responded with three touchdowns.

Receiver Demaryius Thomas overcame a shaky beginning (a drop and a penalty) to catch the go-ahead touchdown pass with 11:11 remaining.

Rookie running back Royce Freeman gained only 34 yards on his first 11 attempts, but gained 37 yards on four rushes to help bleed down the clock in the late going.

And the defense gave up a 66-yard completion and a 51-yard touchdown, but closed the door over the final three possessions (punt, punt, interception), allowed only 64 yards rushing and had six sacks.

Maybe this Broncos team is different from the one that went 5-11 last year, like they have been saying since the first offseason practice May 21. Flawed? Absolutely, but every team is. And for one game, it appeared the Broncos can beat anybody so long as they smooth out their game.

"We definitely overcame (adversity)," inside linebacker Brandon Marshall said. "Nobody got down. We just kept working and playing regardless of the score. The fact we kept playing and came out with the win is a testament to our grit and never-say-die attitude."

Coach Vance Joseph led off training camp in late July talking about fighting through adversity. It was also a theme of his speech to the team on Saturday night. The first game is like a rollercoaster. The starters are rusty because they haven't played in two weeks. Nobody on either roster has played a full game so the conditioning is a factor. And the element of surprise always causes angst.

"We talked about it (Saturday), when adversity shows its head, just play right through it," Joseph said. "Last year, we had some chances where adversity showed and we didn't play through it."

Last year became a more distant memory because the Broncos were able to win their seventh consecutive season opener. Lose at home to a Seattle team in transition and there would have a here-they-go-again storyline surrounding the Broncos. It would not have erased the foundation Joseph spent the previous nine months building — new coaches, new players and new culture — but it would have been a blow.

Instead, the Broncos could leave the field confident Week 1 was the beginning of something much different, something more successful and something definitely more interesting. This was a team that stressed Seattle's defense (470 yards) and decimated the Seahawks' offensive line, led by Von Miller's three sacks.

The game featured two ties (7-7 and 17-17) and three lead changes (14-10 Broncos, 24-20 Seattle and the final score). Keenum's first interception set up Russell Wilson's 15-yard touchdown pass to tight end Will Dissly to start the scoring, his second interception erased a field goal chance before halftime and his third set up former Broncos receiver Brandon Marshall's 20-yard touchdown catch.

Seattle took a 24-20 lead with 14:46 left on Tyler Lockett's 51-yard touchdown.

The game was set to go two ways: The Broncos would fold or flourish.

They flourished.

On the ensuing possession, rookies Phillip Lindsay (14-yard run) and Courtland Sutton (25-yard catch) moved the Broncos into Seahawks territory. They overcame a holding penalty on left guard Ron Leary to convert a third-and-10 on tight end Jake Butt's 22-yard catch. One play later, Thomas completed his in-game turnaround when he tip-toed after catching Keenum's fastball for a four-yard score.

"It was a play designed for Demaryius to sell the fade and come back (toward the ball)," Keenum said. "I just threw it as hard as I could."

Keenum (25 of 39 for 329 yards), Thomas (six catches-63 yards) and receiver Emmanuel Sanders (43-yard touchdown as a part of a 10-catch, 135-yard game) represented the offensive veterans. The rookies were impressive, too. Lindsay and Freeman each rushed for 71 yards and Sutton had two catches.

The lead in their hands, the Broncos' defense didn't let it go, which qualifies as big-time encouraging and creates a thought that they can return to elite status. Seattle's final three possessions ended punt, punt and interception-as-time-expired. Included were sacks by Miller and cornerback Chris Harris and a tackle for loss by defensive end Derek Wolfe. Wilson finished 19-of-33 passing for 298 yards, but was often under siege.

"It shows what type of defense and what type of team we have," nose tackle Domata Peko said. "We had a great chip on our shoulder trying to start out fast."

Starting out fast was exciting ... and a relief. But now the Broncos can settle into their season with momentum and confident about their play-makers.

"It's definitely exciting to get this out of the way," safety Darian Stewart said. "Now we're ready to roll."

Denver Broncos open season with win over Seattle Seahawks

By Ryan O'Halloran

Denver Post

Sept. 10, 2018

The Broncos are 1-0 for the seventh consecutive season.

Using a dominant pass rush and huge production from rookie running backs Royce Freeman and Phillip Lindsay, the Broncos overcame three Case Keenum interceptions to beat Seattle 27-24 Sunday afternoon.

The Broncos took the lead for good with 11:11 remaining on receiver Demaryius Thomas' four-yard touchdown catch along the right sideline.

Linebacker Von Miller had three sacks and two forced fumbles (one recovery).

The Broncos took over with 3:28 remaining and got three carries totaling 37 yards from Freeman. They eventually punted, but forced Seattle to use its remaining timeouts.

Seattle started its final drive at its 12-yard line with 1:01 remaining. After an 11-yard pass to tight end Nick Vannett, quarterback Russell Wilson fumbled the shotgun snap, using up precious time. By the time he spiked the next play, only 21 seconds remained. His final pass at the gun was intercepted by Adam Jones.

Midway through the third quarter, the Broncos had a golden chance to extend their seven-point halftime lead. A forced fumble/fumble recovery by Miller gave the Broncos possession at the Seattle 40. But Keenum's third interception was returned 39 yards by Bradley McDougald. It was his second pick of the game.

The Seahawks tied the score at 17 when Wilson scrambled to extend the play before throwing a 20-yard touchdown to receiver Brandon Marshall (Bradley Roby in coverage).

The Broncos took a 20-17 lead with 2:01 left in the third quarter on Brandon McManus' 53-yard field goal. Justin Simmons set up the possession with an interception. The possession went nowhere, (three plays, no yards), setting up McManus' field goal.

On the second play of the fourth quarter, Seattle went back ahead (24-20) on Wilson's 51-yard touchdown pass to Tyler Lockett. On the second-and-10 play, Wilson rolled right and waited for Lockett to cross from the right to the left. Lockett was originally covered by Chris Harris, but Simmons appeared to lose him downfield and Simmons trailed in coverage.

The Broncos re-took the lead on the ensuing possession. Keenum threw 25 yards to receiver Courtland Sutton to the Seattle 31. Four plays later, on third-and-10, Keenum threw 22 yards to tight end Jake Butt. Keenum was hit late, adding five yards to the play. On the next snap, Thomas caught a four-yard touchdown; the ruling stood after a replay review. The Broncos led 27-24 with 11:11 remaining.

The Broncos built a 17-10 halftime lead, outgaining Seattle 297-157 despite two Keenum interceptions.

Keenum's first interception might have been a miscommunication — he threw the pass down the right seam but Thomas had not turned around. Free safety Earl Thomas, who ended his Seahawks holdout on Wednesday, returned the interception 25 yards.

Seattle made it 7-0 on the next play when Wilson threw 15 yards to tight end Will Dissly. On the play, Dissly was initially engaged with linebacker Bradley Chubb, but when he released his block, Chubb's eyes remained in the backfield.

The Broncos answered with a 29-yard catch and run touchdown by Lindsay. Keenum started the drive with a 20-yard pass to Sutton. On Lindsay's touchdown, he caught Keenum's pass in the left flat and sprinted down the sideline untouched.

The Seahawks used another big Dissly play — a 66-yard reception in which Simmons and Darian Stewart both missed tackles — to set up Sebastian Janikowski's 35-yard field goal early in the second quarter. A Seahawks touchdown was wiped out because of an offensive pass interference penalty by Brandon Marshall.

The Broncos took their first lead (14-10 with 10:29 left in the first half) on Emmanuel Sanders' 43-yard touchdown catch. Sanders caught the pass 17 yards downfield and front-flipped his way over the goal-line.

McManus' 51-yard field goal made it 17-10.

Seattle then moved to the Broncos' 32, but Miller had two sacks in a span of three plays and then Janikowski missed from 51 yards (which was negated by a Broncos offside penalty) and a 46-yard attempt.

The Broncos sacked Wilson four times in the first half.

The Broncos moved to the Seattle 26, but Keenum's pass was intercepted by McDougald.

Somersaulting Emmanuel Sanders flips the switch for Broncos' offense

By Mike Chambers

Denver Post

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Bearing down on the end zone to complete a glitzy 43-yard touchdown reception during his monster first half Sunday, Emmanuel Sanders honed in on the celebration somersault before he crossed the goal line.

A front flip was in order — a move the Broncos wide receiver has been doing since his college days at Southern Methodist. Sanders' extravagant touchdown play gave Denver a 14-10 lead en route to a 27-24 victory over the Seattle Seahawks at Broncos Stadium at Mile High.

Sanders' big first half featured seven receptions for 115 yards, and he finished with 10 catches for 130 yards as the Broncos won their season opener in comeback fashion of a back-and-forth game.

"Felt good to get back in the end zone (and) I decided to bust out the flip," Sanders said of his celebration. "At first I looked over, saw the (defender) wasn't close, so I was like, 'Hmmm, what can I do?' You know, you've got like a split-second to think about what you're going to do. It's not the first time I turned a flip."

It probably won't be his last.

Sanders starred in a game that saw fellow wide receiver Demaryius Thomas struggle at times. Thomas scored the winning TD — a 4-yard reception with 11:11 left in the fourth quarter — but caught just six passes (63 yards) in the 10 plays he was targeted.

"That was everything," Thomas said of Sanders' big game. "It's Thunder and Lightning. I see him do good and I want to do the same. He been putting the work in. He deserves it. He went out and made plays for our team, put us in good positions."

In the team debut for quarterback Case Keenum, Sanders caught all seven passes he saw from the newcomer in the first half. Keenum completed 25 of 39 passes for 329 yards — 234 coming in the first half — but was intercepted three times.

"We came out hot, man. I tell you what, we have an explosive offense," Sanders said. "But it's on us. We got to be able to take care of the football as well. I'm optimistic about the direction we're going and it feels good to have a win."

"But at the end of the day, we can't have three turnovers and expect to win all the ball games. I feel like Seattle was a good team but I feel like we made it a lot easier for them. We gave them like 17 points. We can't do that."

Sanders added: "I feel like this might be the worst game that Case will play all year. Good thing is, we walk away with a win."

Broncos' Freeman-Lindsay rookie running back duo proves lethal against Seattle

By Kyle Fredrickson

Denver Post

Sept. 10, 2018

Royce Freeman, RB: Excelled as the Broncos' starting rusher with 15 carries for 71 yards. His fourth-quarter production forced the Seahawks to use all three of their timeouts.

The future of Denver's backfield gained clarity Sunday afternoon with a recipe for explosion fueled by youth.

The Broncos will put the fate of their 2018 rushing success in the hands of two rookies: Royce Freeman, the 6-foot, 229-pound thunder, and Phillip Lindsay, the 5-foot-8, 190-pound lightning. They combined for 30 carries and 142 rushing yards against the Seahawks in their NFL debut. As for third-year running back Devontae Booker? Just two rushing attempts.

So the pair of rookie studs split tasks in Denver's 27-24 victory.

Lindsay opened the door. Freeman slammed it shut.

"They did a great job," quarterback Case Keenum said. "To have a one-two punch with those running backs, we've got a lot of weapons."

Added coach Vance Joseph: "Those two guys are mature players ... that's what we expect."

Lindsay wasted no time adding to his budding Broncos' legend as an undrafted free agent. The second time he touched the football, a short reception from Keenum in the left flat, Lindsay turned the corner and sprinted 29 yards for the score — his first career NFL touchdown and the Broncos' first points of the season. Lindsay explained why he didn't relish in the moment for long.

"I was so focused on the next play — I had to go out for kickoff (coverage)," Lindsay said. "When I'm in the zone, I don't think about things like that."

When the Broncos clung to a 3-point lead with time winding down in the fourth quarter, and Seattle holding all three timeouts, Denver asked Freeman to carry the load. He rushed for 17 yards up the middle on first down. Then, two snaps later, Freeman plowed for 15 more. The Seahawks burned their timeouts, got the ball back with just a minute to play, and Denver pulled through with a cornerback Adam Jones interception as time expired.

"In front of the home fans and everything, to come out with a victory, it definitely felt good," Freeman said. "It's all about going out there and having an impact when your number is called."

Good luck getting either rookie to talk up his own performance, though, giving answers to each reporter's question permeated with a team-first mentality. But ask these former Pac-12 foes to compliment one another and they'll both smile wide — and gush.

Freeman on Lindsay: "That (touchdown) was amazing, man. Our offense definitely needed that to start out on a good foot."

Lindsay on Freeman: "He's handling his business, he's making first downs and that's what we need. He closed the game out for us and I'm excited about that."

The rookie running back duo now moves ahead to their first matchup against division-rival Oakland in Broncos Stadium. Don't expect a history of bad blood to spook these runners, either, and especially Lindsay. The former Colorado Buffaloes was caught jawing with Seattle defensive lineman in the second quarter with trash-talk so strong that Keenum had to physically pull Lindsay back to the huddle.

Cue the fire response.

"That's just who I am," Lindsay said. "I'm not backing down from anybody. I don't care who you are."

A fearlessness that should give Broncos Country hope for a lethal run game in 2018.

Broncos Briefs: Case Keenum matches three interceptions with three touchdowns

By Ryan O'Halloran
Denver Post
Sept. 10, 2018

Broncos quarterback Case Keenum delivered credit to his team's defense after Sunday's 27-24 win over the Seattle Seahawks. The Broncos won despite Keenum throwing three interceptions, the second-most in a game of his career.

"They did a great job," Keenum said. "Saved my butt. I appreciate those guys."

The Broncos defense produced three turnovers and six sacks.

Two of Keenum's interceptions led to Seattle touchdowns and one interception came when the Broncos were in field-goal range.

"It was 17 points that I'm responsible for," Keenum said. "I know that, I realize that and it's something I'm going to fix and be better at."

Not the best debut, but Keenum did complete 25 of 39 passes for 329 yards and touchdowns to Phillip Lindsay (29 yards), Emmanuel Sanders (43) and Demaryius Thomas (four). The Thomas score came with 11:11 remaining to put Denver ahead for good.

Keenum's first interception appeared to be a miscommunication with Thomas, who kept running down the middle of the field. His second interception was an attempt to Sanders down the right sideline. And his third was trying to force a pass to tight end Jake Butt.

"A couple of bad reads," Keenum said. "Trying to make the big play. Two of them were on first down and another one, we were in the two-minute drive (late in the first half) and had moved the ball down the field and have three points in our back pocket. That took three points off the board."

Bowlen breaks tie. The Broncos' victory was owner Pat Bowlen's 349th (regular season/playoffs) career win, breaking a tie with the Raiders' Al Davis for fifth all-time by a team owner.

Bowlen, who bought the team in 1984, is 328-215-1 in the regular season and 21-15 in the playoffs.

The only NFL owners who have won more games than Bowlen: Bud Adams (Houston/Tennessee 409), Ralph Wilson (Buffalo 390), Lamar Hunt (Kansas City 381) and Art Modell (Cleveland/Baltimore 353).

Footnotes. The Broncos reported no injuries from the game. Seattle receiver Doug Baldwin (knee) left, returned then ultimately left the game for good. ... Reserve linebacker Joseph Jones led the Broncos with two special teams tackles. ... Cornerback Adam Jones assumed the No. 3 spot, but Tramaine Brock did see some playing time. Jones' interception came on the game's final play.

Broncos' up-down drill: Best and worst performances against the Seahawks

By Kyle Fredrickson

Denver Post

Sept. 10, 2018

UP: Running back Phillip Lindsay. The hometown hero ran 29 yards for a touchdown after his first NFL catch to become the only undrafted rookie in Broncos' history to record a receiving touchdown in a season opener. Lindsay's final stat line: 15 carries for 71 yards and two receptions for 31 yards (one TD).

DOWN: Broncos' tackling. Seattle tight end Will Dissly rumbled 66 yards on a first-quarter reception that included ugly missed stops by linebacker Brandon Marshall, safety Darian Stewart and safety Justin Simmons. It was one of several notable tackling busts by the Broncos.

UP: The Miller/Chubb pass rush. Chubb earned a half-sack on the first pass rush of his Broncos' career and finished the game with three tackles. Miller picked up his Pro Bowl play from where he left off last season with three sacks, two forced fumbles and one fumble recovery. He was a one-man wrecking crew.

DOWN: The opening series for Demaryius Thomas. The Broncos' veteran wide receiver finished the day with a respectable six catches for 63 yards and a touchdown. But his first drive proved disastrous: drop, holding penalty, drop.

UP: Kicker Brandon McManus. The Broncos' fifth-year place kicker connected from 53 and 51 yards out to give himself 13 career conversions of 50-plus.

DOWN: Broncos penalties. Seven for 60 yards. Yuck.

UP: Wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders' TD celebration. Never mind that Sanders totaled a game-high 10 receptions for 135 yards against Seattle. His real highlight was a nifty full front-flip into the end zone after a 43-yard catch-and-run. Impressive.

DOWN: Case Keenum's accuracy. After tossing only seven interceptions all of last season, the Broncos' new starting quarterback threw three against Seattle. Those picks allowed Seattle to stay in the game.

Broncos report card and game balls from Week 1 against the Seahawks

By Ryan O'Halloran

Denver Post

Sept. 10, 2018

Offense — B

Quarterback Case Keenum threw three interceptions, but also had three touchdown passes and did a nice job getting everybody involved (seven players had at least one catch). ... The run game was tough sledding early on, but finished with 146 yards on 32 carries (4.6 average). The Broncos will take that every week. ... A terrific debut for the offensive line, which allowed only one sack and that came on an apparent miscommunication. ... A lot to be excited about offensively because of the rookies (Royce Freeman/Phillip Lindsay) and the veterans (Demaryius Thomas/Emmanuel Sanders).

Defense — B

Six sacks and three takeaways tell most of the story. ... Von Miller was all-around great (three sacks, two forced fumbles, one fumble recovery). ... The defensive line played disciplined, not allowing quarterback Russell Wilson to leak out of the pocket (five yards rushing). ... Wilson's two touchdowns were Brandon Marshall beating Bradley Roby and Tyler Lockett finding space downfield for a 51-yard score. ... Areas of concern include missed tackles (a common Week 1 occurrence) and covering the tight end.

Special teams — A

Kicker Brandon McManus made both of his field goal attempts (51 and 53 yards). ... Punter Marquette King averaged 42.7 yards net and landed three inside the 20-yard line. ... Adam Jones debuted as the punt returner and showed good moves on a return that was called back because of a penalty.

Coaching — B

It should be fun watching offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave call plays. He used a variety of personnel groups and route combinations to get players open for six plays of at least 20 yards. He also did well in devising plays for Lindsay. ... On defense, Joe Woods picked a good time to blitz cornerback Chris Harris (fourth-quarter sack) and the staff coached up the players on not letting Wilson get free.

Game Balls

Von Miller: All he did was have seven tackles, three sacks, four total quarterback hits, two forced fumbles and one fumble recovery.

Emmanuel Sanders: Picked up where he left off in the preseason. Caught a game-high 10 passes for 135 yards, including a 43-yard first-half touchdown.

Chris Harris: He broke up two passes and had a sack.

Broncos Demaryius Thomas, Brandon Marshall stay in tunnel during national anthem

By Ryan O'Halloran

Denver Post

Sept. 10, 2018

As they did during the Broncos' four preseason games, inside linebacker Brandon Marshall and receiver Demaryius Thomas retreated to a tunnel behind the bench for Sunday's national anthem.

Marshall and Thomas were the only two Broncos players who did not stand on the sidelines before the game against Seattle.

The NFL season started this weekend without a league-wide anthem policy in place although there have been meetings between the league and the NFLPA.

In May, owners approved an anthem policy that required players to stand if they are on the field during the anthem, but also gave players the option to remain in the locker room. The policy subjected teams to a fine if a player or any other team personnel sat or knelt in the bench area.

Two months later, though, the NFL pulled the policy until further review.

Case Keenum's debut start for the Broncos? Rated worse than Tim Tebow's, but better than Paxton Lynch and Trevor Siemian's.

By Matt Stephens
Denver Post
Sept. 10, 2018

In terms of pure yards and touchdowns, no Broncos quarterback in the past decade — not even Peyton Manning — had a better debut start than Case Keenum did Sunday. Keenum completed 64 percent of his passes for 329 yards and three touchdowns; however, his day was far from perfect. Keenum threw three picks — the second time in his career he's tossed at least three — and had another potential interception dropped on Denver's opening drive.

Keenum's passer rating was 84.2, which ranks below Tim Tebow (100.5) and Kyle Orton (100.7), but better than Trevor Siemian (69.1) and Paxton Lynch (81.0) in their first career starts.

Here's a look at how Broncos quarterbacks have fared in their debut starts over the past decade.

Player	Year	Comp.	Att.	Yards	TD	INT
Case Keenum	2018	25	39	329	3	3
Paxton Lynch	2016	13	22	214	2	1
Trevor Siemian	2016	18	26	178	1	2
Brock Osweiler	2015	20	27	250	2	0
Peyton Manning	2012	19	26	253	2	0
Tim Tebow	2010	8	16	138	1	0
Kyle Orton	2009	17	28	243	1	0

Denver Broncos are the best team in NFL history on kickoff weekend

By Matt Stephens

Denver Post

Sept. 10, 2018

No team in NFL history has a better winning percentage on opening day than the Broncos. Denver's victory over the Seahawks on Sunday gave it a 39-19-1 record (.669) on Week 1 and also pushed its active kickoff weekend winning streak to a league-best seven games.

Here's a look at the NFL's all-time best performing teams on kickoff weekend:

Team	Wins	Losses	Ties	Pct.	Streak
Broncos	39	19	1	.669	Won 7
Cowboys	38	20	1	.653	Lost 1
Packers*	55	39	3	.582	Won 3
Bears*	54	39	5	.577	Lost 4
Giants	50	39	5	.559	Lost 2

* Entering Sunday night's game.

“On Sundays, it’s what you do”: Broncos fans return to Mile High

By Ellie Schmelzer
Denver Post
Sept. 10, 2018

Every September, the Grimm family opens the barn door and scrapes the dust off of the decades-old Winnebago RV painted in orange and blue.

They clean out the field mice that found a temporary home there. They turn the key and say a prayer. They hope the engine revs to life.

Like many things in Broncos football, driving the old RV to the Mile High Stadium every year is a tradition and an act of faith.

“It barely makes it,” said Joe Grimm, standing at his family’s tailgate early Sunday morning. “The brakes barely function. But we’re here.”

The Broncos’ 2017 season was rough for fans. There was the eight-game losing streak. The carousel of coaches. The constant swap of quarterbacks. The Broncos finished last in the AFC West with a 5-11 record.

But those statistics didn’t matter for the Grimms, or the other Broncos fans who gathered at the stadium Sunday for the team’s regular season opener against the Seattle Seahawks. By 7:15 a.m. Sunday, dozens of cars and RVs loaded with smokers and tables lined up outside the stadium parking lots waiting to claim a prime tailgating spot. Some fans cracked open a breakfast beer while they waited.

The Broncos sent the fans home happy, as Demaryius Thomas’ fourth-quarter touchdown reception gave Denver a 27-24 victory.

Larry Grimm, Joe’s father and the owner of the Winnebago, said he has attended every home game for the past 50 years. He timed both of his knee replacement surgeries to coincide with the off-season so he wouldn’t miss a game.

“Just like the players,” his son said as the two sat underneath their awning at about 8 a.m.

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Joe Grimm has been attending Broncos games his entire life. He drove 14 hours Saturday from Austin, Texas, where he now lives, for the game. The family woke up at 4:30 a.m. Sunday to claim their traditional tailgating spot.

“My whole life, it’s always been the Broncos,” he said. “On Sundays, it’s what you do.”

By noon, the tailgate gatherings filled the parking lots with the smell of burgers and exhaust. The pop of opening beer cans punctuated the cacophony of Denver’s largest party.

Amid it all, a man in orange and blue robes wandered the rows with a staff and a cardboard tablet inscribed with the “Broncos Commandments.” He paused to chat with a Seahawks fan and deliver his good news.

“A Broncos victory is already foretold,” he said, patting the visiting fan on the back.

The Mile High Prophet, as he called himself, said the most important of the commandments on Sunday was No. 4: “Remember opening day and keep it holy.”

The self-styled prophet, whose name is John Buckley when the Broncos aren’t playing, said he got the idea “after a little alcohol.” Although he and his wife have been attending games for more than 16 years, this opener is special for the couple because it’s their first as season ticket holders.

Being a Denver sports fan is infectious, Kristin Buckley said. Even if that means sweating under Broncos-themed robes in the 88-degree heat.

“After 40 years in the desert heat, this is nothing,” the prophet said with a chuckle.

Under the shade of their awning, the Laughlin family mulled the previous season at their nearby tent.

“It was a rebuilding year,” Michele Laughlin said. “It was disappointing.

“It was an experiment gone wrong,” her husband, Michael Laughlin, added.

The family has lived in the area for more than 50 years and have been season ticket holders for the past five. They were excited about quarterback Case Keenum’s Denver debut. Keenum threw for 329 yards with three touchdowns and three interceptions.

“That’s the best part about today,” Matt Laughlin said. “Everything is new. We can be optimistic.”

But the team’s success and failures aren’t really the point, the Laughlins said. Being a Broncos fan becomes part of who you are, if you let it.

“We’ll be here no matter what,” Michele Laughlin said. “We’ve been here in rain, sun and snow. It doesn’t matter. It’s the Broncos.”

Denver Broncos' rookie watch against the Seattle Seahawks

By Kyle Fredrickson
Denver Post
Sept. 10, 2018

Royce Freeman, RB: Excelled as the Broncos' starting rusher with 15 carries for 71 yards. His fourth-quarter production forced the Seahawks to use all three of their timeouts.

Phillip Lindsay; RB: Matched Freeman's rushing totals on the dot, but also recorded Denver's first touchdown of the season on a first quarter catch-and-run for 29 yards.

Courtland Sutton, WR: Arguably the most-hyped player out of Broncos' training camp showed why with monster receptions of 20 and 25 yards.

Bradley Chubb, OLB: Denver's No. 5 overall NFL draft pick got off to a strong start. He earned a half-sack on the Seahawks' first snap of the game and finished with three tackles.

Keenum bounces back, lifts Broncos past Seattle, 27-24

By Mike Klis

9 News

Sept. 10, 2018

Case Keenum was in a real rough patch.

The new quarterback who carries almost all hope for a better Broncos season had two early touchdown passes, but then he started throwing interceptions. He was floating the ball high over open receivers.

Worse, his counterpart, Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson, had thrown a 51-yard touchdown pass to Tyler Lockett for a 24-20 lead on the second play of the fourth quarter.

But Case Keenum is a tough-minded son of a gun who didn't overcome the odds and reach his position of prominence by folding whenever times were troubled.

"Play the next play," Keenum said. "The game is still in our hands. We're up and then they go down and score the touchdown – we've got to go make a play. You've got to forget about everything that you've done and play the next play. It was a big time drive when we needed it the most so I was real proud of my guys. They made some great plays and made some great calls at the right time."

Phillip Lindsay, the surprise hero of Day 1, got that drive started with a 14-yard run around left end. On second down, Keenum called on another rookie, second-round receiver Courtland Sutton, who made a 25-yard grab.

Now the Broncos were in business on the Seattle 31. It appeared bleak again when the Broncos faced third-and-10. But Keenum drilled a 22-yard seam route completion to tight end Jake Butt. Tack on a roughing-the-passer penalty and Denver had first-and-goal at the 4.

Keenum rolled right and drilled a perfect pitch to the outside corner at the knees. The equivalent being a pass that only a reaching, keep-the-tiptoes inside the painted line that only Demaryius Thomas could catch for a touchdown.

That was it. Broncos win, 27-24.

"Obviously, not exactly how you draw it up but it doesn't matter how, it matters how many," Keenum said.

It was the season opener on a warm, but mostly cloudy Sunday before a sellout crowd of 74,682 at Broncos Stadium at Mile High.

"That was our first one and I'm really excited about how good this football team can be," Keenum said. "Because we take care of the ball – I take care of the ball, those are all on me – we're going to be really, really hard to beat."

Another difference between victory and defeat: Broncos placekicker Brandon McManus hit field goals of 51 and 53 yards while Seattle kicker Sebastian Janikowski missed a 46-yard field goal attempt.

Broncos outside linebacker Von Miller turned in a sublime performance, sacking Wilson three times and forcing two fumbles.

It was Miller's best game since he was MVP of Super Bowl 50. He's never won the NFL Defensive Player of the Year Award, finishing second twice. But he might as well go for it now. This is the kind of start in which awards follow. In one game, he moved from a tie for 55th place on the NFL's all-time sack list to sole possession of 50th with 86.5 sacks. Not bad for a guy who just started his eighth season.

"I mean it's great to be 29 and in the top 50," Miller said. "The league has been around for 100 years so ... it's a true blessing. It just shows you the type of teammates that I've had from Derek Wolfe to Elvis Dumervil to Shaun Phillips, DeMarcus (Ware) of course and Bradley Chubb and Shane Ray and Shaq (Barrett). It just shows you the type of support system that I have."

Let's go back to Keenum's first two touchdown passes. The key was he delivered the ball quickly to his receivers and while they were in stride so they could take it in from pretty far out.

The first was a 29-yard swing pass to rookie running back Phillip Lindsay, who caught it in the wide-open left flat.

"It was a play we ran a lot throughout the week," Lindsay said. "It worked just like it did in practice. It looked like the linebacker kind of got confused. And DaeSean Hamilton had a great block for me."

An undrafted rookie from the University of Colorado and Denver South High School, Lindsay had a splendid NFL debut, rushing for 71 yards on 15 carries and adding 31 yards receiving -- his first 100-yard game.

The second Keenum touchdown pass was a 43-yard in-route to nine-year veteran Emmanuel Sanders.

The play was set up thanks to tremendous pass protection Keenum received from his offensive line. Maintaining his poise, Keenum waited for Sanders to break open, then delivered a medium-range strike.

Sanders cut from left to right, broke a tackle near the Seahawks' sideline, and raced in with an airborne, forward somersault exclamation point across the goal line.

"It's not the first time I tried to flip," Sanders said. "I've been flipping since I was in college."

The Seahawks opened the scoring with a 15-yard touchdown pass from Wilson to rookie tight end Will Dissly. That play was one play after Seattle safety great Earl Thomas III intercepted Keenum at the Denver 40 and returned it 25 yards.

On the play, it appeared Keenum thought Demaryius Thomas was going to cut off his go-route. Thomas kept going. By all accounts in the locker room, Thomas did right; Keenum was in the wrong.

"Just a poor decision on my part," Keenum said. "Very poor. Earl read my eyes and made a play."

Later, another Wilson to Dissly completion -- this one for 66 yards -- set up a first-and-goal at the Denver 5. However, the Broncos' defense stiffened thanks in part to a pass interference call against Seattle and

former Broncos receiver Brandon Marshall for pushing off cornerback Adam Jones that negated a Marshall scoring reception. The Seahawks had to settle for a 35-yard Sebastian Janikowski field goal.

"He could've let it go but it was the right call," Marshall said. "Pacman gave me what I wanted. That really hurt our offense."

Keenum threw his second interception late in the half that killed a Broncos' scoring opportunity in Seattle territory, and he threw another in the third quarter, again deep in Seattle territory which safety Bradley McDougald returned to Broncos' territory. That one set up a tying touchdown pass from Wilson to Marshall.

Keenum completed 25 of 39 for 329 yards with the three touchdowns but also three costly interceptions that led to 14 Seattle points. But to his credit, three picks didn't lead to four. Three picks led to his third touchdown that won the game. Not sure how good a quarterback Keenum is. But he thinks he's good and therefore, he is.

"He gives everyone confidence in the huddle," said tight end Jeff Heurman, who had a 15-yard reception down the left sideline to be counted among the seven who caught passes from Keenum. "Guys make mistakes, players make mistakes. He threw a couple balls I'm sure he wishes he could have had back but it's football. Guys make mistakes but he still gives us confidence. Even after an interception or two when he steps back in the huddle everyone still believes in him and he wound up making the throw to win the game."

Sanders had 10 catches for 135 yards. Royce Freeman after a slow start got rolling as the Broncos were trying to chew up the clock on their final possession and had 71 yards rushing on 15 carries.

Wilson was 19 of 33 for 298 yards with Dissly catching three for 105 yards. But he was sacked six times, once for a 22-yard loss by Shaq Barrett who was waiting for Wilson to retreat.

Given the Broncos finished 5-11 last year, winning the first game of the new year was considered significant. Then again, the Broncos are 18-1 in home openers since the turn of the century and they only turned eight of those wins as a catalyst into a playoff appearance. So maybe it wasn't that huge in the grand scheme that is a 16-game, 2018 season.

"It was big," Heurman said. "That was a big win for us. It wasn't pretty but it's also good to face a little adversity. We overcame it and got a win. Championship teams have to do that. You're not going to walk your way all the way to the Super Bowl. You're going to face tough stretches and face adversity and you have to keep grinding. That's what we did today. That was a big one for us."

Elway to have shoulder surgery after bicycle accident

By Mike Klis

9 News

Sept. 10, 2018

John Elway played 16 NFL seasons as the Broncos' quarterback, was sacked a record 516 times at the time of his retirement, and was hit and knocked down hundreds of other times.

Not once did he suffer a torn rotator cuff until he had a bicycle accident last week.

"It's (not easy) getting old," Elway said Sunday at Broncos Stadium at Mile High.

Ever the competitor, Elway and his top lieutenant, director of player personnel Matt Russell, had been regularly taking early morning bike rides in recent years. It was during one of these sessions last week that the accident occurred.

Elway will have surgery Tuesday to repair his shoulder injury and will be in a sling for a few weeks.

Had the injury occurred during his playing days -- Elway had shoulder injuries, but never a torn rotator cuff -- he would have been sidelined a while. Now that he's in his eighth season as the Broncos' general manager, Elway essentially won't miss any time.

Denver kid, Colorado Buff Phillip Lindsay scores first Broncos TD of season

By Jacob Rodriguez

9 News

Sept. 10, 2018

Finding himself open along the side of the field in the middle of the first-quarter, #30 for the Broncos caught the zinger from new quarterback Case Keenum and tore upfield. Thanks to an incredible block from wide receiver DaeSean Hamilton, Phillip Lindsay scored the first touchdown for the Broncos to bring it to 7 - 7 against the Seattle Seahawks at home.

He ran it 29 yards and the undrafted rookie from the Colorado Buffaloes silenced early grumblings about the Broncos offense during the season opener at Broncos Stadium at Mile High. While Keenum tossed an atrocious pick earlier in the quarter, the pass to Lindsay was clean and the touchdown hard fought.

The 5-foot-8, 165-pound running back went to South High School and then kept it in the state when he attended CU. During all four years of playing RB for the Buffs, he averages almost 5 yards a carry and managed 117 rushing touchdowns.

But he became known as a back with hands. His final season he caught 23 passes for 257 yards - an average of 11 yards a catch.

Already a big part of the Broncos offensive effort against the Seahawks, the Broncos are currently leading 14 - 10 midway through the second quarter and Lindsay just got a first down. It's a great day to be a Bronco/Buff/Denverite.

Lindsay gets in a lot of work in his NFL debut

By Rod Mackey

9 News

Sept. 10, 2018

The former CU Buffalo and South High School star wasn't supposed to get this much work in his NFL debut, but playing as well as Phillip Lindsay was, Vance Joseph opted to stick with the rookie college free agent.

"He was hot," said the head coach. "He ran downhill, he made guys miss, so we stayed with the hot hand. But we have three capable backs that dress for the game, along with our fullback. Whoever's hot gets the carries, and he was hot today so he carried the load."

Lindsay also scored the Broncos first touchdown in his very first NFL game, a special moment for sure, but the rookie running back didn't allow himself time to celebrate, instead choosing to focus on his next play.

"Honestly, I just thought about how I have to go down and kick off," said Lindsay. "That is my life. It is about winning and you learn fast. There are ups and downs."

It's the same thing Lindsay showed in Boulder. He's doesn't care a lot about individual numbers - he only cares about winning.

"This is the NFL. For me, I don't care about stats," Lindsay said. "It's about winning. It's about me doing my part, Royce doing his part, Booker doing his part. If we all stick together, we're going to be fine."

Lindsay may not like talking about himself, but his head coach was more than happy to share his thoughts about the rookie.

"He played well. He's a mature player. He had 104 yards I think from the line of scrimmage today, along with Freeman, 180 total from two rookies. Those two guys are mature players, they're special players and they're NFL backs so that's what we expect from those guys.

This was a moment, a game, that Phillip Lindsay will never forget. From scoring his first touchdown at the beginning of the game to exchanging NFL jersey's with his former CU teammate Tedric Thompson after the game.

"That's my brother. I was excited to be able to do that," he said. "I haven't got to see him in a long time. To be able to see him go out three, he actually made a couple tackles on me. It was exciting."

Exciting the perfect word to describe Phillip Lindsay.

Case Keenum shows why the Broncos went out to get him

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

Sept. 10, 2018

When the Denver Broncos surveyed the free-agency landscape this offseason in search of a quarterback, they wanted a player who could dig himself, and the team, out of trouble.

In his first regular-season start with the Broncos, new quarterback Case Keenum did just that.

"He just kept playing," said Broncos cornerback Chris Harris Jr. "He kept going out there and moving the offense and we got the win, and ... I expect him to play way better."

In a 27-24 win over the Seattle Seahawks Sunday, Keenum finished a robust 25-of-39 passing for 329 yards with three touchdowns and three interceptions. His two touchdown passes and a 234-yard performance in the first half had the team's faithful ready to marry Keenum after the first date.

But Keenum and the Broncos constructed some tough times Sunday as well. The Broncos' first possession after a summer of optimism included a drop by wide receiver Demaryius Thomas, a holding penalty and a near interception.

Keenum's sixth pass attempt of the game was intercepted -- by Seahawks safety Earl Thomas, no less, who had been with the team all of five days after ending his offseason holdout. The Seahawks turned that interception into a touchdown one play later, just like they turned Keenum's second interception into a touchdown in the third quarter, tying the game at 17.

"Couple of bad reads, just trying to make the big play when we don't have to," Keenum said. "... I realize that, it's something I'm going to fix, something I'll be better at."

Broncos general manager John Elway has said one of the biggest reasons he picked Keenum to lead the team was because Keenum had "been through some things, those tough times in games when you have to compete to get out of it because as a quarterback things aren't always going to go your way."

Before he passed for 3,547 yards and 22 touchdowns while leading the Minnesota Vikings to the NFC Championship Game last season, Keenum had been waived three times in his career and had been benched by two different teams. "He's been through some stuff, and that hardens you as a player if you come out on the other side," is how coach Vance Joseph has put it.

Far too often during 2017's cave-in, opposing offenses turned one of the Broncos' 22 interceptions into a touchdown. And when the Seahawks took a 24-20 lead with 14:46 remaining, with two touchdowns built on Keenum's mistakes, the Broncos' early-season hopes looked to be ground into dust.

"We're not going to get down, that's Case, that's some of us other players as leaders on this team," Thomas said. "Forget those things and play on. That's going to be our personality, it has to be. We're not going to carry all that negative stuff around with us. A new season."

So with the game on the line Sunday, Keenum went about the business of cleaning up the mess he helped to make. The Broncos put together a seven-play drive for a touchdown -- Keenum was 4-for-4 on the drive, including a 4-yard scoring pass to Thomas. It gave the Broncos a 27-24 lead with 11:11 left in the game.

"Just play the next play, the game is still in our hands," Keenum said of the drive. "Obviously they went down and scored a touchdown, we've got to go make a play, you've got to forget everything that you've done and play the next play ... it was a big-time drive."

With that lead, something the Broncos played with only 26 percent of the time during last year's 5-11 finish, Von Miller could be Von Miller. His third sack on the day shut down the Seahawks and the Broncos' offense then kept itself out of trouble the rest of the way.

It was a solid start for the quarterback who has given the Broncos a new outlook with the first win of the new season.

"It's not exactly how you'd draw it up," Keenum said. "But I'm really excited how good this football team can be, [if] we take care of the ball, I take care of the ball -- those [interceptions] are all on me -- we're going to be really hard to beat."

Sacks, an oxygen mask and a starring rookie class: How the Broncos edged the Seahawks in the season-opener

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

Sept. 10, 2018

Von Miller rushed off the field, grabbed an oxygen mask and took a few deep breaths before the camera zoomed in on him. Mid-inhale, Miller's mug flashed on the big screen as he flapped his arms to pump up the crowd.

Grabbing the oxygen mask is almost a tradition for Miller, who has suffered from asthma since he was a kid and is allergic to grass. Every time he comes off the field, he's "always on the tank," no matter the situation or the location, he said.

But tradition on Sunday afternoon gave way to a special happenstance that not even he could have planned.

Miller had just sacked Russell Wilson — for a third time. He had just joined the NFL's top-50 list in career sacks (86.5). And he had just capped a career first with a sack hat trick, two forced fumbles and a fumble recovery.

The Super Bowl 50 MVP who was once the top-paid defender in the NFL set a new bar for himself, maybe his defense too.

"When he got the first one, I was like, 'OK, he's something special,'" rookie linebacker Bradley Chubb said. "When he got the second one, I was like, 'OK, he needs to slow down. I need to get one.' And when he got the third one, I was like, 'This is his game and nobody can take that from him.'"

Miller's defensive heroics salvaged an up-and-down performance from the Broncos' offense to secure a 27-24 victory over the Seattle Seahawks. And for the first time in almost a year, the Broncos left their stadium with the exuberance of a winning team, the feels of the better team and the belief they may be all right after two years of disappointment.

"We talked about this last night and we talked about when adversity showed its head, we just play right through it," coach Vance Joseph said. "... It's a hard league, so you're going to have some ups and downs in a game, but you want your team to be resilient and play right through adversity. The good teams do that."

But perfect, it wasn't.

Quarterback Case Keenum tossed for 329 yards and three touchdowns — but also had three interceptions. Demaryius Thomas caught five first-down catches and the go-ahead touchdown, but opened with a couple drops and a costly holding penalty. The defense tallied six sacks and 11 quarterback hits, but struggled to contain a pesky tight end and missed multiple tackles.

But the end was what Denver sorely needed, and it was secured by many of the usual stars that flashed throughout preseason and training camp.

Phillip Lindsay, the local kid in Terrell Davis' jersey, was among the brightest.

Midway through the second quarter, with two other rookies — receivers Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton — in the formation, Lindsay caught a short pass from Keenum and dodged three Seattle defenders along the left sideline to trot into the end zone for the 29-yard touchdown.

The score was not just the Broncos' first of the season, but also the first receiving touchdown by an undrafted rookie in a season opener ever by a Broncos player. For the Aurora native and lifelong Broncos fan, the feeling had to be surreal as the stadium rocked.

Or not.

"I was so focused on the next play because I had to go out for the kickoff," Lindsay said flatly. "When I'm in the zone I don't think of things like that. I think of what can I do to help us win."

Lindsay finished with 71 rushing yards and 31 receiving yards. He also had a special-teams tackle that knocked Tyler Lockett back 2 yards on a Broncos punt in the third quarter. Seattle set up on its own 20-yard line after the stop and, three plays later, Wilson was intercepted by Broncos safety Justin Simmons.

The Broncos' youngest players have been among the promising pieces of their 2018 remake, and their regular-season debut didn't disappoint. Royce Freeman, appointed the first Week 1 rookie starter at running back since Davis in 1995, tied Lindsay with a game-high 71 rushing yards. Chubb, the Broncos' No. 5 overall pick, had a sack (he split credit with safety Darian Stewart) on his first play. And Sutton added 45 receiving yards on only two catches, the second of which helped to set up the Broncos' go-ahead score in the fourth quarter.

"We weren't brought here to sit on the sideline and not really help," Sutton said. "We were brought in to come in and contribute because they saw something that we can help with. That's what we're doing right now."

The adversity Joseph spoke of Saturday night hit a veteran early.

Thomas' first series was self-described as "kind of tough," with two dropped passes and an offensive holding penalty. But he turned the brutal beginning into a game-winning performance with five first-down catches and the go-ahead 4-yard touchdown catch, a toe-drag score in the fourth that was upheld on review.

The play was designed for Thomas to sell a fade and then come back on his route, which he did; Seattle's Shaquill Griffin stopped in his tracks as Thomas curled back looking for the ball. But safety Bradley McDougald settled on the edge of the end zone as Keenum unleashed a rocket for Thomas.

"I just threw it as hard as I could and I honestly didn't see Demaryius catch it," Keenum said. "Not that it should surprise me that he caught it because he's got great hands, but I threw it as hard as I could. He made a great play. It was awesome."

The early miscues, Thomas said, were symptoms of jitters. The most tenured Bronco still gets nervous before every game — he's been nervous since Wednesday — and the feeling intensified this week because of his renewed health. But after eight seasons, Thomas also knows how to flip the switch.

"I know how to forget it now," Thomas said of his mental regroup in the first quarter. "Like, it happened, it's over with. If you keep it in your head, something else tends to happen for some reason. Get over it and go to the next, because I've noticed every time I'm down, some of my guys around get down, so I keep my energy up so everyone does too."

Denver's offense, remade this year with new terminology and of course a new leader in Keenum, did what it so often failed to do last season. It kept the game alive until the end. It put up points and it moved the ball, and it showcased a balanced attack. While Lindsay and Freeman led a run game that recorded 146 yards, Emmanuel Sanders led all receivers with 10 catches and 135 yards, including his second-quarter touchdown.

But the altered offense had some lingering errors, namely the three turnovers that led to two touchdowns by Seattle.

"A couple of bad reads," Keenum said of his interceptions. "Just trying to make the big play when we don't have to. I think two of them were first downs, another one we're in another two-minute drive, moved the ball down the field and we've got three points in our back pocket. That takes three points off the board, then the other two they scored on. That's 17 points I'm responsible for. I know that, I realize that, it's something I'm going to fix and that I'm going to be better at."

The Broncos' defense, too, had its lingering errors, including commission issues in the secondary and the unsolved problem of covering tight ends (Will Dissly amassed 105 yards and a touchdown). But the big plays that were once the Broncos' defensive hallmark returned. Justin Simmons had a leaping interception. Adam Jones got another in the final seconds. Six of Wilson's passes were broken up and five different Broncos contributed to their six total sacks.

Chris Harris, promised more opportunities to blitz this year by defensive coordinator Joe Woods, got his.

"I just knew Russell, he's so elusive," Harris said. "I was like, 'Man, I can't get shook by this guy right now. I have to make sure I get him down.' It was a nickel blitz. It's something that Joe Woods — he said I was gonna get way more sacks this year. They usually block me. That was the first time they didn't block me. As long as they don't block me, I can go get them sacks."

But the Broncos' charge was led by a familiar name — and a face all-too-familiar to opposing quarterbacks.

Late in the second quarter, Miller sacked Wilson twice in the span of three plays, with the second takedown a strip-sack. Miller added another sack in the fourth to all but seal the Broncos' victory and move into 48th place on the NFL's all-time sack list with 86.5.

But the pièce de résistance came just before: a strip fumble, in which Miller simply snatched the ball out of the hands of running back Chris Carson. The play, Miller admitted, was really a correction — much like that time he corrected himself in coverage to intercept Tom Brady in the 2015 AFC Championship.

“I had ole’ed outside, and technically that’s not a good move,” Miller said with a smile. “You want to be stout, shock and scare. But I ole’ed outside, so I knew I needed to get back down to be able to make the tackle. And the running back, he was running and I just saw the ball and I just grabbed it.”

Minutes later, Miller headed back to the locker room with a wide grin and some sniffles from the grass.

In tow were three NFL officials, each rolling an oxygen tank.

Broncos LB Brandon Marshall launches new social initiative after protest

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

Sept. 10, 2018

Hours after he took a knee for the national anthem for the first time in 2016, Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall made a promise. He vowed to follow his protest with action. He said the knee was a conversation-starter, but his work away from the field would be the game-changer.

For seven games that year Marshall took a knee to protest social injustice and police brutality, and in the weeks during and the many more since, he's kept his word.

He's spoken at local elementary schools to encourage students to improve attendance. He donated more than \$15,000 — \$300 per tackle made in 2016 — to select Denver charities. He continued his work through the Rose Amond Center to support domestic violence victims, made Thanksgiving dinner for thousands at the Salvation Army, "adopted" a family to provide them Christmas gifts, met with the Denver Police chief to discuss its use-of-force policy, and established the Williams-Marshall Cares Program to mentor youth in Las Vegas and Denver.

Sunday, after staying in the tunnel for the anthem alongside receiver Demaryius Thomas, Marshall announced even more action.

His Williams-Marshall Cares program has partnered with Shop Now to Fund, an e-commerce marketplace that lets users start a fully digitized product fundraising online campaign, to launch the FEEL (Feed & Educate to Empower Leaders) Movement.

For every \$250 raised through Shop Now to Fund, a FEEL box will be given to families in Las Vegas, Marshall's hometown, and Denver. The boxes include items such as a month supply of non-perishable food for a family of two; a hygiene package with toothbrushes, toothpaste, shampoo and body wash; a notebook and pens; even a digital tablet loaded with digital books and educational programs.

Following the Broncos' season-opening win over the Seahawks on Sunday, Marshall announced the initiative on social media and contributed \$2,500 for the purchase of 10 FEEL boxes. He encouraged fans to contribute as well, with the purchase of FEEL boxes or through the Shop Now to Fund marketplace, where 40 percent of all purchases will go toward the purchase of a FEEL box.

Von Miller wrecks Seattle Seahawks' opener

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
Sept. 10, 2018

The Denver Broncos throttle back Von Miller every summer because if they don't, in the words of coach Vance Joseph, "he'll wreck practice."

So, Miller saved his wrecking ball for Russell Wilson and the Seattle Seahawks on Sunday.

Miller collected four quarterback hits, three sacks, three tackles for loss, two forced fumbles and a fumble recovery in leading the Broncos to a 27-24 win in Case Keenum's Denver debut .

Miller was in the Seahawks' backfield seemingly as much as Seattle running back Chris Carson, who was pick-pocketed in the second half as Miller simply snatched the ball out of his hands in one of the best plays of opening weekend.

"Technically, that's not a good move," Miller said with a chuckle, noting he should have set the edge instead of tossing aside fullback Tre Madden.

"You want to be stout, shock and scare. But I 'ole'ed' outside, so I knew I needed to get back down to be able to make the tackle. I just saw the ball and I just grabbed it."

Miller said in the lead-up to the opener that he hates playing Wilson, whom he considers the best QB in the game. Yes, ahead of Tom Brady, Aaron Rodgers and Drew Brees, the only three who were ranked higher in The Associated Press quarterback rankings that came out Friday.

"I still don't like playing against Russell," Miller said. "Running around out there, 20 yards, getting everybody tired. Luckily, we were able to get him before he could get started. That was in our scheme this week, we wanted to keep him in the pocket and (make) him beat us with his arm, which he's capable of doing.

"But we'd rather pick that poison and that strategy worked."

Wilson threw for 298 yards and three TDs, but was picked off twice and sacked six times and ran just twice for 5 yards.

"He got out of the pocket a couple of times, but that's Russ," Miller said. "He's a great player. He's going to get out of the pocket, but we kept some of the great plays to a minimum."

Miller didn't get to face Wilson in Super Bowl 48 because he'd blown out a knee toward the end of the 2013 season, the only one in his first seven years in the NFL when he didn't reach double digits in sacks.

Miller was back in the Super Bowl two years later and won the game's MVP honors after harassing Cam Newton, whom he strip sacked twice, leading to 15 points in Denver's 24-10 win over the Panthers.

The Broncos haven't been back to the playoffs since, going 14-18 over the past two years.

Although Miller collected 23½ sacks in that time, too many deficiencies on the roster and deficits on the scoreboard kept him from being the difference maker he was Sunday.

That doesn't mean he saw his performance as anything more than a good start.

"You know me, I never move faster than I have to. I never move slower than I need to," Miller said. "I just stay in the moment. We've got a great team. We got a great win today. We played great defense. This is how you want to start a season."

His three sacks moved him into 50th on the NFL's all-time sack list with 86½.

"It's great, to be 29 and in the top 50, the league has been around for close to 100 years now," Miller said. "It's great, man. It's a true blessing."

At one point Sunday, the giant scoreboard showed Miller inhaling oxygen on the sideline after one of his big plays and the crowd roared.

"I wasn't even paying attention and I look up and Case is telling everybody to be quiet," Miller recounted. "I kind of felt bad for a second."

It wasn't the only time Miller interrupted Keenum's focus, either.

Keenum normally spends his time between series on the bench studying pictures of formations and talking with to his coaches, "but it's hard not to notice when the crowd's going crazy and Von's out there crawling or whatever he's doing, whatever his sack dance is. That's impressive to watch.

"I'm glad I'm on the sidelines when he's on the field, that's for sure."

Wilson wasn't so lucky.

"I think that when it's third-and-3 or 4, I've spun out and make a lot of plays," Wilson said. "I would probably say most of the time it works.

"With a guy like Von, sometimes it doesn't."

Miller leads Broncos past Seahawks 27-24

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
Sept. 10, 2018

Case Keenum won his Denver debut despite throwing three interceptions to go with his three touchdowns.

He can thank Von Miller, who sacked Russell Wilson three times, forced two fumbles and recovered one as the Broncos held off the Seattle Seahawks 27-24 on Sunday to win for the 18th time in their past 19 home openers.

Keenum, who signed a two-year, \$36 million prove-it deal in Denver six months ago after leading the Minnesota Vikings to the NFC championship game, normally spends his time between series with his head down but he kept looking up to watch Miller's magic.

"I'm trying to stay focused on looking at the pictures, getting ready for my next series. "But it's hard not to notice when the crowd's going crazy and Von's out there crawling or whatever he's doing, whatever his sack dance is," Keenum said. "That's impressive to watch.

"I'm glad I'm on the sidelines when he's on the field, that's for sure."

Wilson wasn't so lucky.

"We played a really tough defense, one of the best defenses you're going to face all year. Obviously Von is a great player and he made some key plays," Wilson said.

Miller, whose best play came when he simply snatched the ball from running back Chris Carson's arms, said recently that he hates facing Wilson, whom he considers the best quarterback in the game today.

"I still don't like playing against Russell, I mean, running around out there 20 yards, getting everybody tired," Miller said. "Luckily, we were able to get him before he could get started. That was in our scheme this week, we wanted to keep him in the pocket and (make) him beat us with his arm, which he's capable of doing. But we'd rather pick that poison and that strategy worked."

Wilson threw for 298 yards and three TDs, but was picked off twice and sacked six times and ran just twice for 5 yards.

"He got out of the pocket a couple of times, but that's Russ," Miller said. "He's a great player. He's going to get out of the pocket, but we kept some of the great plays to a minimum."

Keenum, who threw for 329 yards, only threw seven interceptions last season and already he has three.

"I'm really excited about how good this football team can be," Keenum said. "Because if we take care of the ball — if I take care of the ball, because those are all on me — we're going to be really, really hard to beat."

SPUTTERING SEAHAWKS

After Demaryius Thomas atoned for several early hiccups by scoring the go-ahead TD with 11:11 left, the Seahawks gained just 3 yards in their final three possessions, the last one ending with Adam Jones' interception at midfield with no time left.

"It's frustrating," Seahawks coach Pete Carroll said. "Third downs we were lousy (2 for 12) and we didn't run the ball as well as we wanted (64 yards) and we got sacked a bunch of times. It was not a very clean game for us."

Wilson put the Seahawks ahead 24-20 when he found Tyler Lockett all alone for a 51-yard touchdown catch early in the fourth quarter.

HOMECOMING KING

Brandon Marshall's 20-yard TD catch for Seattle tied it at 17 and came against the team he started his career with back in 2006.

NO DOUBTING THOMAS

One of Keenum's interceptions came when Demaryius Thomas, who also had three passes go off his hands and was whistled for a holding call that negated a first-down run, never looked back and safety Earl Thomas snared it in his first game since ending his holdout Wednesday.

"I thought I had a pick-6," said Thomas, who was caught at the 15-yard line by Broncos speedy running back Phillip Lindsay.

No matter: Six seconds later, rookie tight end Will Dissly blew past rookie linebacker Bradley Chubb and hauled in the 15-yard TD pass.

"Just glad to get through the first game and get that out of the way," said Earl Thomas, who returned to the team after his pay-me-or-trade-me demands went nowhere.

SOMERSAULT CELEBRATION

Denver took a 14-10 lead when Emmanuel Sanders somersaulted into the end zone with a 43-yard score. That was his first touchdown since Week 2 of last season.

"It was good to get back in the end zone so I decided to bust out the flip," Sanders said. "It felt good."

TWIN TROUBLE

Shaquill Griffin's twin brother, rookie linebacker Shaquem Griffin, started the game with K.J. Wright out following minor knee surgery. It's another chapter in the remarkable story of Griffin, who had his left hand amputated as a child.

The Griffins had back-to-back tackles on Seattle's second defensive series.

INJURIES: The only injury of note from either team was Seattle WR Doug Baldwin (right MCL sprain).

UP NEXT:

Seahawks: Visit Los Angeles Chargers on Sunday.

Broncos: Host Oakland Raiders on Sunday.

Only a handful take action during anthem on NFL's 1st Sunday

By Eddie Pells
Associated Press
Sept. 10, 2018

Last season, the Seattle Seahawks led the league when it came to the number of players willing to make a statement while the national anthem played.

To start this season, that wave of Seahawks has dwindled to only two players.

Linemen Duane Brown and Quinton Jefferson walked off the field and waited in the tunnel while a field-sized American flag was unfurled and the national anthem played before their season opener Sunday in Denver.

In a league where more than 200 players once took some sort of action to protest police brutality and social injustice in America during the anthem, The Associated Press counted fewer than 10 across the league who did so on the NFL's opening Sunday. Only two of them — Albert Wilson and Kenny Stills of the Dolphins — kneeled while the "Star-Spangled Banner" played.

None of which bothered Brown much. He says he's committed to what he's doing.

"I made my decision," he said. "That was my decision. I wasn't paying attention to what other teams or other players are doing."

The lower numbers might reflect a new strategy many players are embracing to draw attention to the issues Colin Kaepernick raised when he began kneeling for the anthem in 2016. The then-San Francisco 49ers quarterback was looking to shine a light on issues impacting African American communities.

Since then, a group of NFL players have formed the Players Coalition . They want to move the focus away from the anthem, which has become a lightning rod, in part because of President Donald Trump's continued criticism of players who don't stand during the anthem.

"We're trying to move past the rhetoric of what's right or what's wrong in terms of the anthem, and really focus on the systematic issues that are plaguing our communities," said Malcolm Jenkins of the Eagles, one of the group's co-founders, who is no longer protesting during the anthem.

And yet, if Kaepernick is on board with all of that, it wasn't clear Sunday. He took to twitter to praise Wilson and Stiles .

"My Brothers (Stills) and (Wilson) continue to show their unwavering strength by fighting for the oppressed," Kaepernick said in his tweet. "They have not backed down, even when attacked and intimidated. ... Love is at the root of our resistance."

Kaepernick's message got through to his friends in Miami.

"I know he has our back," Stills said. "Really, there has been a huge difference between when we first started protesting and now. A lot of people are reaching out and supporting us, so I really appreciate that. To everybody out there ... let's keep doing our best to make positive change and have these conversations and make our country a better place."

Since opting out of his contract after 2016, Kaepernick has been unable to land a job with an NFL team and is suing the league for collusion.

But his voice is still being heard. Last week, Nike introduced an ad featuring the quarterback and his message: "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything."

Other than Stills, Wilson and the two Seahawks, Dolphins defensive lineman Robert Quinn raised his fist during the anthem. Niners receiver Marquise Goodwin did the same at San Francisco's game at Minnesota. In Los Angeles, Chargers left tackle Russell Okung raised his fist. And back in Denver, Broncos receiver Demaryius Thomas and linebacker Brandon Marshall retreated to their tunnel while the anthem played.

Marshall sent out a statement touting a charity designed to help people who are on the verge of homelessness.

"It is time that we build social currency by way of empowering our future generations," Marshall said. "This begins by addressing the most fundamental needs — by feeding the minds and bodies."

This came hours after Trump opened the day with a tweet that took digs at the NFL, linking low ratings for Thursday night's opener between Atlanta and Philadelphia (lowest for an opener since 2008) to players who refuse to stand for the anthem.

"If the players stood proudly for our Flag and Anthem, and it is all shown on broadcast, maybe ratings could come back? Otherwise worse!" he tweeted.

CBS and Fox, which carried Sunday afternoon's games, did not televise the anthem.

However, NBC did show the anthem Thursday night (but not before Sunday night's Bears-Packers game), and no players kneeled or protested in other ways.

But while the tumult over the anthem appears to be dying down, the NFL still hasn't collaborated with the players union to come up with a definitive solution.

In May, the league briefly put a policy in place, but rescinded it after the union filed a grievance. The union and league are still negotiating. Brown, of the Seahawks, said he has not received any message from the union to tamp down the protest.

"I don't think that would be the best idea to try to get people to move on from it," he said. "The country hasn't moved on from it, so I'm not going to move on from it either."

Broncos' Texas duo troubles Seattle

By Woody Paige

Colorado Springs Gazette

Sept. 10, 2018

The two good ol' guys from Texas, in essence and intrinsically, crossed paths for the first time of the afternoon as one was leaving the interview room and the other entered.

Case Keenum and Von Miller had joined and won together, although apart on the field, for the first time in their careers Sunday. The monster rushing linebacker was born in DeSoto (outside Dallas), Texas, in 1989. A gritty quarterback-to-be was born a year earlier in Brownwood (near Abilene), Texas — the two towns are separated by 180 miles of hard road.

Miller was dressed somewhat as a Texan — cowboy hat and boots, a powder blue work shirt and, uh, faded, fashionable pink blue jeans. He should have been riding a mechanical bull.

Keenum was wearing a checked short-sleeved shirt, dress pants and casual shoes — and looked like he ought to be carrying a Power Ranger lunch box and an orange backpack.

The two shared a handshake, a hug and happy-happy congratulations and again went their own ways.

Oddly enough, they had paid almost no attention to each other during the Broncos' grand-opening victory over the Seahawks.

On what he thought of Miller's most dominant performance since he was The Vonster and MVP of Super Bowl 50, Keenum admitted he missed it. "I'm more trying to stay focused looking at the pictures (of the opposing defense), getting ready for my next series," Case said, then added a however. "It's hard not to notice when the crowd is going crazy and Von is out there crawling or whatever his sack dance is (laughs). That's impressive to watch. I'm glad I'm on the sideline when he's on the field. That's for sure."

Von was too busy to keep up with Keenum when the Broncos' offense was out there because he was sucking air from an oxygen mask, which has been customary for every game. He has suffered from asthma since he was a kid and also is allergic to grass, which he acknowledged publicly in 2016.

Odd job choice for Miller, but he is one of the greatest linebackers to play professional football.

Miller said earlier in the week he hates to play against Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson, who cornerback Chris Harris Jr. told me after the game "seems to run around for two minutes and 20 yards on a lot of plays." But, in truth, Von, who could be a Western movie star when he's finished with football, only confronted Wilson and the northwesterners once before — four years ago this month. The Seahawks won, and the young Miller had three tackles and one sack.

Miller missed the Super Bowl mosh-up because of a torn ACL.

But, on Sunday, the Broncos got the best from Von, and he got the best of the Seahawks. He finished with a career-tying high three sacks and literally ripped the ball out of the hands of Seattle's Chris Carson.

“I had ol’e’ed outside,” Von said, referring to a term for an eager bullfighter, “and technically, that’s not a good move (laughs). You want to be stout and shock and scare . . . so I knew I need to get back down to be able to make the tackle. And the running back, he was running, and I just saw the ball and grabbed it.”

After causing and grabbing the fresh-air fumble, and with 8:31 left in the third quarter, Von responded to the crowd on the east side of Mile High Stadium, ripped away the mask, stood on the bench, waved and did a Hulk impression.

That act did catch Keenum’s eyes.

From atop the stadium, one can view the “Mind Eraser” roller coaster across I-25 at Elitch Gardens amusement park. Keenum appeared to be on that kind of ride with three touchdowns and three interceptions – and he did wind up with his first fourth-quarter, game-winning drive with the Broncos. He closed out with a four-yard pass to Demaryius Thomas, who pulled off a tight-rope Ringling Bros. catch just inbounds with 11 minutes to go, and Von and the defense held off the Seahawks.

“I still don’t like playing against Russell,” Von said. “We wanted to keep him in the pocket. We wanted to let him (try to) beat us with his arm, which he is capable of doing, But we really picked that position, and the strategy worked.”

With his three sacks, Miller has a combined regular season-postseason total of 90, and is in the top 50 all-time sack leaders. “It’s a true blessing.”

He is a blessing. Keenum could become one for the Broncos.

And Seattle ultimately learned not to mess with two Texans/Coloradans.

Case Keenum's Broncos deliver perfectly imperfect win in season opener against Seahawks

By Paul Klee

Colorado Springs Gazette

Sept. 10, 2018

This being Colorado and all, I'm guessing you found time to see what happened Sunday afternoon at Broncos Stadium at Mile High. The Broncos survived the Seahawks, 27-24, and they're 1-0 in 2018.

What transpired afterward, away from the cameras, is why the Broncos are going to be better than anyone outside their locker room and hallways seems to believe: Case Keenum cracking jokes with the five offensive linemen who kept him upright and clean for most of a 60-minute thriller; John Elway chatting up Keenum during an animated conversation next to the quarterback's locker; Keenum tugging at Von Miller's slick flowery dress shirt (cape?) until the buttons snapped undone.

"They saved my butt," Keenum allowed.

Just when Keenum's debut looked like a dud, it was remembered he's surrounded by dudes.

"I'm going to keep slinging the ball," Keenum said after throwing three bad interceptions.

Truth is, my lingering question about this edition of the Broncos was less about personnel and more about personality: how would they reply when the opponent knocked them to the turf?

And there was Seattle magician Russell Wilson waving his fairytale wand around Mile High to steal a 24-20 lead in the fourth quarter. That was the point in the story where last year's 5-11 Broncos slumped their shoulders and hunted for the closest exit. These guys kept slinging the ball.

"Bunch of fighters in there," Keenum said.

This was a perfectly imperfect season opener for the Broncos. They did some dumb stuff, like the Keenum interceptions that kept Seattle in the game. They broke in rookies Royce Freeman, Courtland Sutton and Phillip Lindsay, who combined for 218 total yards. They relocated veteran wide receivers Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders, who scored a pair of touchdowns. They saw Von Miller wreck fools — over and over and over.

"Von Miller is the best defensive end, linebacker, whatever, that I have ever played with," 14-year veteran Adam "Pacman" Jones said after Miller won the game with three sacks and a strip-fumble that he simply snatched from a tailback.

Mostly, the Broncos learned they have a margin for error again. It's been a while — the 2015 season, to be exact — since the Broncos could mess up that many times and still go home happy.

"This might be the worst game Case plays all year," Sanders said. "The good thing is, we still walked away with a win."

Sunday was a test to see if the Broncos possess the same intestinal fortitude that lifted Colorado and Colorado State to gutsy comeback wins the day before. After digging themselves a hole in matchups against Nebraska and Arkansas, the Buffs and Rams dug deep and found tough wins.

Then the Broncos did the same.

It said plenty about Keenum and the Broncos that he could complete three passes to the Seahawks and still come up firing a fastball through a closing window to Demaryius Thomas for the game-winning touchdown with 11:11 left in the fourth quarter. The proud Texan is a resilient son of a gun, evidenced by how many times he's been cut in the NFL (twice), and in his Broncos debut he threw for 329 yards and three touchdowns. That's a lot against the stingy Seahawks. That's a lot against anybody.

And he's going to keep slinging the ball. We're still getting to know the guy, so I asked Royce Freeman to describe Keenum's demeanor in the huddle when Denver suddenly faced a deficit.

"He was the same," Freeman said. "Him in that leadership role, he didn't bat an eye."

Soon after the Broncos survived, Denver South's Phillip Lindsay approached the big boss in the locker room: "Mr. Elway, thank you for the opportunity." You earned it, No. 7 told the new No. 30. We can only imagine what that felt like for a Colorado native who grew up on orange and blue.

It's worth noting Keenum's quarterback rating of 84.2 was almost identical to Trevor Siemian's 84.6 rating during his first season as the starter for the Broncos. Whether Keenum is good enough to lead them to the postseason is yet to be seen. But there's an optimistic locker room full of guys who believe Keenum is plenty good enough, and that matters.

"Nothing in my life has come easy," he said.

The Broncos want Keenum to keep slinging the ball.

Klee's Rapid Reactions: Broncos 27, Seahawks 24

By Paul Klee

Colorado Springs Gazette

Sept. 10, 2018

The Gazette's Paul Klee has three quick observations from Broncos Stadium at Mile High and the Denver Broncos' thrilling 27-24 win over the Seattle Seahawks on Sunday:

1. As quarterback debuts go, Case Keenum's was terrifying. The Broncos somehow still won. One game in, and Keenum was threatening to hit us with a new nickname: "Hat Trick." With three interceptions against the Seahawks, the Broncos' \$36-million quarterback had an introduction to forget.... and now it's one to remember. Memo to the new guy on the block: Broncos Country doesn't suffer interceptions. Just ask the guys who came before him. The Broncos beat up the Seahawks for three quarters. More first downs (17 to 11). More yardage (328 to 243). More penalties (ahem). But Keenum's three picks almost gave away the game with a trifecta ticket that Seattle tried to cash in.
2. Von Miller took it easy in the preseason. Then he took it out on the Seahawks. Toss in Houston's J.J. Watt, and there's still not another defensive player in the NFL who can take over a game like Vonnie Football: three sacks, two forced fumbles, one fumble recovery (when he stripped the ball away all on his own). All he didn't do was sack dance. Perhaps he's setting a positive example for young buck Bradley Chubb? OK, probably not. But there's no doubt No. 58 is hunting the lone award that so far has avoided his reach: NFL defensive player of the year.
3. The Phillip Lindsay story is so far-fetched that Hollywood might reject the script: blows out a knee in high school, sets records for the local college program, goes undrafted in the NFL draft... and scores the first touchdown of the season for his hometown franchise. Here's how the unforgettable scoring play went down: With 6:18 left in the first quarter of his professional debut, Lindsay caught a swing pass from Case Keenum, dodged a would-be tackle, tip-toed the sideline and hopped into the end zone. The South Stands lost its collective mind. The only thing missing? A Mile High Salute. Lindsay will have many more opportunities. What his debut showed us was that offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave is going to utilize Lindsay's quick-twitch fibers at every opportunity. From South high to Boulder to the Broncos, Lindsay is unbeaten against those who say he can't.

Broncos 27, Seahawks 24: Why it happened

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
Sept. 10, 2018

So many times last year, one mistake became three, three became six, and then the Broncos had an avalanche that they could not stop until they were hopelessly behind.

Miscues in NFL games are like forest fires. If you contain them, you can minimize the damage. Fail to do, and they spread to everything in sight.

That's why the Broncos' ensuing possession after a Case Keenum interception led to a 15-yard Russell Wilson-to-Will Dissly touchdown was so crucial.

Fewer than six minutes had elapsed in the game when the Seahawks took the lead. In 2017, such sequences sent the Broncos spiraling toward defeat. In the opening game of the 2018 season, Keenum completed five of six passes for 72 yards, the last 29 of which came as Phillip Lindsay took a swing pass, sprinted up field and darted past DaeSean Hamilton's block on Tedric Thompson for a touchdown.

"We talked about this last night, and we talked about [how] when adversity shows its head, we just play right through it," Head Coach Vance Joseph said.

Part of that comes from the players and units on the team being able to build a reservoir of trust over the course of their offseason work.

"At the end of the day, trust has 'us' in it. You take out the 't,' you take out the 'r' and you take out the other 't,' and it's 'us,'" safety Will Parks said.

"We've got to trust each other, we've got to believe in each other, and then everything else will play itself out. And that's the bottom line. Throughout preseason and OTAs, Coach kind of gave us a bond that was unbreakable. If any guy makes mistakes, on and off the field, pick them up."

That was among the biggest reasons why the Broncos won Sunday ... and it might be the reason that is the most significant. Many of the players from last year are the same, but the attitude is different, starting with that of the quarterback.

"I think the mental makeup [of the team] is a lot better," safety Justin Simmons said.

Here are some other reasons why the Broncos defeated the Seahawks:

Because Case Keenum shook off his mistakes

The Broncos didn't worry after the three interceptions, because Keenum himself was unruffled.

"Even when he had the turnovers, he came back to the sideline smiling, saying, 'We good, D, we good,' and I was just sitting there like, 'Oh, yeah, we good,'" Parks said. "That's the kind of guy you want -- the kind of guy that's not going to mope and pout because he did something."

"At the end of the day, Case is a leader ... and he believes, and he trusts us. I'm pretty sure he probably didn't think anything of it, because he has us as a defense."

Obviously, Keenum will want to cut the interceptions after throwing six in his last three games, including last January's postseason work with the Vikings. But he did not lose confidence in himself, and as a result, his teammates maintained their confidence in him, which kept the errors from spreading into a conflagration that would have burned down the Broncos' hopes.

"Him in that leadership role, he didn't bat an eye," running back Royce Freeman said. "So, we went out there and we executed like we needed to."

Because the Broncos were aggressive when the moment demanded it

Perhaps no play encapsulated this than Joe Woods' decision to send cornerback Chris Harris Jr. on a corner blitz on third-and-5 with 4:17 left in the game. The bold call worked, as Harris brought down Russell Wilson for a 9-yard loss, forcing a punt that allowed the Broncos to drain two minutes and 27 seconds from the clock in the game's waning moments.

It was Harris' first sack since the 2014 season. He had 3.5 sacks in his first four campaigns, including 2.5 sacks in the 2012 season alone when the corner blitz was a more frequent tactic of Denver's defense.

"[Defensive Coordinator Joe Woods] said I would get way more sacks this year," Harris said. "They usually block me, so that was the first time they didn't block me."

By the time the Seahawks saw the football again, they had just 61 seconds left, with no timeouts and the football at their own 12-yard line, limiting their options.

Because the Broncos sustained drives and allowed the defense to rest

Last year, 35.3 percent of the Broncos' ended without a first down as the offense frequently stalled before it had any chance to generate momentum.

Sunday afternoon, the Broncos moved the chains at least once on 85.7 percent of their 14 possessions. Meanwhile, the defense held Seattle without a first down on seven of 15 possessions, including three of four to start the second half.

With the sustained drives fueled by a strong running game that saw Phillip Lindsay, Royce Freeman and Devontae Booker combine for 146 yards and a 4.6-yards-per-carry average, the Broncos ran 17 more plays than the Seahawks and racked up a 10-minute, 16-second advantage in time of possession.

Because Von Miller was otherworldly

Pass coverage isn't a primary responsibility of the All-Pro outside linebacker, so it's understandable that the only item missing from his ledger Sunday was an interception.

But he did everything else an edge rusher can do: a fumble recovery, two forced fumbles, and a hat trick of sacks. The recovery came on a fumble he forced when he simply snatched the football from the grasp of Seattle running back Chris Carson.

Miller had half of the Broncos' six sacks, which was their highest tally since Nov. 27, 2016 against the Kansas City Chiefs. The Broncos' sack total was their highest in a regular-season opener since they brought down Neil O'Donnell and Frank Reich a total of nine times in a 31-6 win over the New York Jets to open the 1996 season.

Because the Keenum-to-Sanders connection thrived

It was clear throughout training camp and the preseason that Keenum and Emmanuel Sanders had synergy. Any doubts over whether that would translate to the regular season evaporated on the first series, when Keenum hit Sanders for a 14-yard gain at the right sideline on third-and-14, which was the start of a 10-catch, 135-yard, one-touchdown performance.

The 10 receptions matched Shannon Sharpe's total in 1995 as the most for a Bronco in a regular-season opener.

"There aren't too many people that can stick with Emmanuel," Parks said. "Actually, this week, I was guarding him as the nickel[back] for the scout team, and all I was doing was moving my feet getting ready for the game, and in the back of my mind, I was thinking, 'How do these guys even try to stay with him on the field?'"

Seattle's cornerbacks could not, and paid a heavy price.

"I don't think anybody can guard these boys," Harris said of the Broncos' complement of pass-catchers. "After getting work versus them all offseason and in training camp, I think they're ready."

Because Marquette King forced the Seahawks to play the long game

Even though the Seahawks started two drives in Denver territory, their average drive-start position was at their 27-yard line. No one had a bigger impact in that than King, who forced Seattle to start inside its 20-yard line on three of six punts.

King finished with a net average of 42.7 yards and helped prevent returner Tyler Lockett from any backbreaking runbacks. Lockett averaged just 3.7 yards on the three punts he was able to return.

Cover 4: Broncos beat Seahawks 27-24 after fourth-quarter comeback

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

Sept. 10, 2018

Game-changing moment:

The Broncos responded to their first deficit since early in the second quarter by piecing together what may have been their most substantial drive of the game. Aided by a 25-yard pass to Courtland Sutton, a 22-yard pass to Jake Butt and a roughing-the-passer penalty, Case Keenum and the Broncos moved the ball to the Seattle 4-yard line. That's when Keenum rolled to his right and threw a strike to Demaryius Thomas, who somehow got both feet down in the end zone for the go-ahead touchdown. Denver's defense held on the Seahawks' ensuing drives — including a last-gasp Seattle possession that ended with an Adam Jones interception as time expired — and the Broncos were able to start their season with a win.

Top performers:

For the third time in his career, outside linebacker Von Miller recorded two or more sacks and forced two or more fumbles. The last time he accomplished that feat? Super Bowl 50. Only Cameron Wake has compiled more games with those numbers. Miller added another sack and a fumble recovery to that line for good measure. On the rare occasion Miller wasn't in Russell Wilson's face, he drew enough attention to help his teammates get free.

On offense, Emmanuel Sanders hauled in 10 passes for 135 yards and a touchdown. Sanders hadn't totaled that many yards since a Week 9 game last season against New England. The nine-year veteran's best play of the afternoon came on a 43-yard catch-and-run touchdown that Sanders punctuated with a front flip.

Defining statistic:

2-for-12

The Seahawks kept the game close until the end, but they couldn't overcome their third-down woes. The Wilson-led offense started 0-for-6 on third down, as the Broncos' defense consistently found ways to get off the field. Denver's defensive third-down success prevented Seattle from sustaining the necessary drives to challenge the Broncos late. The Broncos held Seattle without a conversion in a variety of ways. Defensive end Adam Gotsis batted down a Wilson pass at the line of scrimmage, while Miller strip sacked Wilson to end another promising drive. And perhaps no third-down stop was bigger than Chris Harris Jr.'s sack of Wilson with just under four minutes to play and the Broncos clinging to a three-point lead. In an otherwise close game, those plays were enough to swing the game in Denver's favor.

Memorable highlight:

Thomas' late touchdown may have meant more to the Broncos in their winning effort, but it didn't include a front flip like Sanders' first-half score.

Justin Simmons also gets a nod for his leaping interception of Wilson in the third quarter.

After early mistakes, Keenum and Broncos offense rebound for season-opening victory

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
Sept. 10, 2018

Every play has a story, Case Keenum says, and though there were a few he wished hadn't been told in Sunday's 27-24 win vs. Seattle, he couldn't help but remain optimistic about where he and the rest of the team can go from here.

With 329 yards and three touchdowns, Keenum tasted the potential of the offense — explosive plays, the ability to consistently move the chains and resiliency to battle throughout game.

But with three interceptions, he also felt frustration — the frustration of missing a few reads and the frustration with some drives ending short of their scoring potential.

Yet, ever the optimist, Keenum sees that this game as a harbinger of greater things to come.

"I'm really excited about how good this football team can be," Keenum said. "[If] we take care of the ball — I take care of the ball; those are all on me — we're going to be really hard to beat."

Those turnovers could have derailed Sunday's game, but combined with some stingy defense, Keenum was able to rebound when needed. After the first interception, he immediately led a 75-yard drive that he finished with a 29-yard touchdown pass to running back Phillip Lindsay.

Then, after the offense struggled to just three third-quarter points and the Seahawks regained the lead on the second play of the fourth quarter, Keenum responded with another 75-yard drive that ended with a touchdown.

But prior to that point, momentum seemed to be slipping away. With a less-experienced quarterback under center, the Broncos might have faltered and been unable to retake control of the game.

Instead, Keenum found rookie receiver Courtland Sutton for 25 yards, tight end Jake Butt for 22 and Demaryius Thomas for a 4-yard touchdown, marching the Broncos down the field for the go-ahead score that would win the game.

"It's playing the next play," Keenum said. "The game is still in our hands. We're up, then they went and scored the touchdown. We've got to go make a play. You've got to forget about everything that you've done and play the next play. It was a big-time drive when we needed it the most, so I was really proud of my guys. They made some great plays."

Keenum's leadership, along with that of other veterans on offense like Demaryius Thomas, Emmanuel Sanders and Matt Paradis, ensured that the Broncos could move on from mistakes from previous drives and recapture the success that they had found earlier in the game through the air and on the ground.

“I think us as a group, we know how well Case handles those types of situations,” rookie receiver Courtland Sutton said. “He knows that we’ve got to move on to the next play and that we can’t dwell on that, because if we dwell on it, that’s when you ultimately start seeing more mistakes happen. Case was very calm, and he kept us calm. We all knew that he was going to rebound and we were going to go out there and be able to make plays.”

With that kind of comfort and confidence, Keenum’s ability to lead the offense is invaluable. But he made sure to point out that he’ll have to learn from the mistakes he made and avoid repeating them for the team to succeed.

“That’s 17 points I’m responsible for,” he said. “I know that. I realize that. It’s something I’m going to fix and that I’m going to be better at.

“But I’m excited because we’re going to be a really good football team. We are a really good football team.”

Rookie running backs help power Broncos over Seahawks

By Zach Pereles
DenverBroncos.com
Sept. 10, 2018

Going into the season, Head Coach Vance Joseph had no worries about his young running back stable, which featured two rookies: Royce Freeman and Phillip Lindsay. On multiple occasions, he lauded their maturity, their football smarts and their versatility.

Sunday's game against Seattle proved those words true.

Freeman and Lindsay each carried the ball 15 times for 71 yards on Sunday against Seattle. It's the first time since at least 1950 that a team has had two debuting rookies rush for at least 70 yards in the same game.

"Those two guys are mature players," Joseph said. "They're special players and they're NFL backs, so that's what we expect from these guys. ... I'm very pleased with those guys."

It was Lindsay — an Aurora, Colorado native and University of Colorado alum — who provided the first points of the year for the Denver offense. The diminutive back took a short pass out of the backfield, turned upfield and saw nothing but green grass in front of him, sprinting in for a 29-yard score.

Freeman, who was on the sideline for the play, was impressed by his fellow rookie.

"It was amazing," Freeman said. "The offense definitely needed that to start off on a good foot. He was going out there and making plays."

But Lindsay didn't have much time to admire his work in front of his home-state fans. After all, he made the roster largely thanks to his ability to play both offense and special teams.

"Honestly, I just thought about how I have to go down and cover kick off," Lindsay said. "That is my life. It is about winning, and you learn fast."

He finished the day with 102 yards from scrimmage and a special teams tackle.

Despite Lindsay's small frame (5-foot-8 and 190 pounds), he was an instrumental part of the game plan — no Broncos skill player had more total touches than Lindsay's 17. Of Lindsay's 15 carries, five went for first downs. And though he may look the part of a third-down back, Lindsay actually found his most success on first down, totaling 44 yards on six such carries.

"Each game is different," Joseph said. "... He was hot. He ran downhill, he made guys miss, so we stayed with the hot hand. ... Whoever's hot gets the carries, and he was hot today so he carried the load."

Though it was Lindsay who opened the scoring, it was Freeman who was able to help close the book. Of Freeman's 71 yards on the ground Sunday, over half (37) came on the Broncos' final drive. He started the

drive with a 17-yard carry, his longest of the day, dragging members of the Seahawks' secondary several yards along the way.

"I feel like I have that as part of my game," Freeman said. "And like I said before, when your number is called, it's just going out there and executing it. We were in a late-game situation, and my number was called."

Two plays later, he struck for another 15 yards, refusing to go to the ground once again. The effort earned him a raucous ovation from the fans inside Broncos Stadium at Mile High.

"I was proud of Royce for how he ran downhill," Joseph said. "It's a single-high, it's a loaded box defense every play, so it wasn't going to be easy running the football against these guys. But we stayed with it and it worked out for us."

That Freeman and Lindsay were able to carry the load was especially important in this contest after Case Keenum turned the ball over three times. The Broncos out-gained the Seahawks 146-64 on the ground and won the time-of-possession battle by over nine minutes.

"We got back to running the football after the turnovers," Joseph said. "We got back to running the football and really took the game back on the ground, and it made their pass defense soft."

Though Lindsay became the feature back at times Sunday, it was Freeman who helped put the finishing touches on the season-opening win. And just as Freeman had admired Lindsay's touchdown earlier, Lindsay enjoyed Freeman pounding away as the clock ticked down.

"At the end of the day, he's taking care of business," Lindsay said. "He is making first downs. That is what we need. He closed the game out for us. I am excited about that. Everybody has a role. We star in our roles."

Von Miller posts best stat line since Super Bowl 50 as he helps key Broncos to win over Seahawks

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
Sept. 10, 2018

With just over nine minutes to play, quarterback Case Keenum sat on the Broncos' sideline and reviewed the images of Denver's previous offensive possession.

He tried to, at least.

On the field, Von Miller was busy recording his third sack of the afternoon, and the crowd's reaction was deafening enough that Keenum had to turn to look.

"I'm more so trying to stay focused on looking at the pictures, getting ready for my next series," Keenum said after the Broncos' 27-24 win, "but it's hard not to notice when the crowd's going crazy and Von's out there crawling or whatever he's doing.

"That's impressive to watch. I'm glad I'm on the sidelines when he's on the field, that's for sure."

Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson wasn't as lucky, as Miller brought him down three times and jarred the ball loose from him in the second quarter.

Miller's performance Sunday was his fifth career game with at least three sacks. Only Justin Houston has more three-sack games since Miller entered the NFL in 2011.

He also boosted his sack total, which boosted his career total to 86.5. At 29 years old, Miller now has the 50th-most sacks in NFL history.

Those numbers — plus another forced fumble and fumble recovery — were enough to earn Miller the team's only game ball.

It also led Head Coach Vance Joseph to declare Sunday's game as Miller's best since Joseph began coaching the Broncos in 2017.

If the Broncos can keep playing with a lead, more of those performances should follow.

"He's a special player, but if you're not playing with a lead, he can't be special," Joseph said. "... Hopefully we can get more leads and he can be special each week for us."

Which of Miller's plays was best? Depends what you're looking for.

Want a momentum-killing sack? Watch Miller explode back inside and knock the ball away from Wilson.

Want a freakish display of athleticism? Watch Miller chase down Wilson as he tries to spur a comeback.

Just want to shake your head? Watch Miller snatch the ball away from Seahawks running back Chris Carson.

“[Defensive Coordinator Joe] Woods and [Assistant Defensive Line Coach Chris] Beake — all the defensive guys — they’ve been preaching running to the ball,” Miller said. “‘Run to the ball, run to the ball.’ This whole offseason, I’ve been like, ‘Why? Why? Why?’ Now I see.”

Miller’s only slight hiccup during the game was when he pumped the crowd up as he stood on the sideline. Keenum tried to quiet the crowd from the field, but the orange-clad fans were too into Miller’s performance to listen.

“I wasn’t even paying attention,” Miller said. “And I looked up, and Case was telling everybody to be quiet. I felt kind of bad for a second.”

He more than made up for it during the rest of the game, though.

Even when he wasn’t taking Wilson down himself, he freed up other players to get their own.

“He’s really a freak, and he does a lot of things that help other players make plays, too,” said linebacker Todd Davis about Miller’s role in a fourth-quarter Chris Harris Jr. sack. “The way he rushed off the edge and maintained that tackle and Chris was able to come off the edge and make a play. People see Chris make the play, but you don’t see what Von does again to make another sack happen.

“He’s a great player, and I’m just excited to watch him play, even when I’m on the field with him.”

Just how dominant was Miller on Sunday afternoon?

The last time he posted at least two sacks and two forced fumbles was Feb. 7, 2016.

Miller earned Super Bowl 50 MVP honors that night.

He wouldn’t look ahead Sunday afternoon to another potential playoff run or even a few weeks from now.

Asked how he would keep his team focused on improving as the season progresses, Miller feigned annoyance.

“Geez,” Miller said. “Let us have some fun.”

If he keeps playing like this, that shouldn’t be a problem.

Aaron Rodgers' Magic Caps a Wild First Sunday

By Albert Breer

MMQB

Sept. 10, 2018

It feels like it was just yesterday that we were all moaning about the officiating and sloppy play in a sideways Thursday opener at Lincoln Financial Field.

And then Aaron Rodgers happened.

Somehow, on Sunday night at Lambeau, Rodgers went from riding a cart towards an uncertain future, after an inauspicious start to this particular game, to slicing and dicing a loaded Bears D and announcing his return to the NFL in the most emphatic way possible. He wasn't just getting by out there, either. After his knee crumpled in a pocket collapsed by Khalil Mack and Roy Roberson-Harris, he got better.

"It would have had to take something really catastrophic injurywise to keep me off the field in the second half," Rodgers told NBC's Michelle Tafoya at the gun. "I went in the locker room, did all the tests, and then I was in the indoor facility, trying to loosen up. But I knew once I got back on field, the adrenaline would start flowing, I'd be able to hang in there."

He did more than that. Like, a lot more than that ...

At the time of his injury: three for seven, 13 yards, 50.3 rating; Packers down 10-0.

After post-halftime return: 17 for 23, 273 yards, three TDs, 152.7 rating; Packers outscore Bears 24-6.

The capper was a play where, as he said, he hung in, moving in the pocket long enough for his receivers to go into a scramble drill. Randall Cobb, sitting down right in Rodgers' sightline, broke off his route. And with most of the defense following the quarterback shuffling to his left, Cobb raced up the right sideline for 75 yards and the game-winning touchdown.

Week 1 got off to a bumpy start on Thursday, but now we're off and running.

In this week's MMQB, we'll look at Ryan Fitzpatrick, on his seventh team in Year 14, outgunning Drew Brees in a shootout at the Superdome; we'll give you Tom Brady's motivation as he ripped apart the Texans to kickoff Year 19; we'll explain how Ron Rivera's sturdy operation in Charlotte has its foundation; and we're going to Miami to show how the longest game in NFL history revealed the difference in the Dolphins.

But could you start anywhere else but with the Packers on the first full Sunday of the NFL season?

The great thing about this game was that, over the first half or so, the story seemed pretty unlikely to be the one we'd be discussing on Monday morning. At that point, Packers-Bears was playing out like as if we were all watching a real-time referendum on the Raiders' decision to trade Khalil Mack.

First there was the pressure on the play on which Rodgers got hurt, with 9:22 left in the second quarter. A few minutes later Mack came free, sacked backup DeShone Kizer, and ripped the ball from the QB's

hands. And finally, with 27 seconds left in the half, he picked off a bungled Kizer screen pass and ran it in for a score.

At that point, some Packers figured they'd seen the last of Rodgers for the night. The cart coming out to get you is typically a good sign of that a player is done for the day. Kizer even addressed his teammates at halftime, telling them he needed their trust. Then they went out to warm up for the second half, and you-know-who snuck on to the field behind them.

"He was in the back as we came out and we heard the crowd," veteran tight end Lance Kendricks told The MMQB's Kalyn Kahler. "And we were like, 'Oh, there he is.' It was cool."

And then, everything changed.

The Packers made a slight adjustment—snapping Rodgers the ball out of the pistol, to limit how much he'd have to move—but the rest was business as usual.

Shut out in the first half, the Packers scored on all four of their meaningful second-half possessions. The three touchdown drives were of 81, 75 and 75 yards. It was one of those nights.

"Aaron Rodgers was remarkable," coach Mike McCarthy said. "I just can't tell you how proud I am of him."

The NFL should be too. Because of him, we're all waking up on Monday morning with a pretty different feeling about pro football than we did on Friday. And given all that's happened the last few months, the folks at 345 Park could use that.

BRADY'S BACK

At dinner a few hours after the Patriots beat back the Texans by a 27-20 count, someone in Tom Brady's party asked the question that a lot of people have over the last few years: "The end of this game, Tom's fresh as a daisy. How does that work?"

Tom Brady's dad, Tom Sr., certainly understood where that was coming from, after his son threw for 277 yards, three touchdowns and one pick (off a deflection) on 26-of-39 passing against a Texans defense welcoming J.J. Watt and Whitney Mercilus back to the lineup. Brady didn't just make throws we've never seen 41-year-olds make before in the win. He made throws very few guys on the planet can.

"It just stuns me," the elder Brady said from his car, late Sunday night. "It's been an amazing ride."

It wasn't always smooth over the last few months. There was tension at Gillette Stadium at the end of last year. Brady kept away from all voluntary parts of the offseason program for the first time in his career. There was plenty of parsing of his social media activity, and questions on whether he'd come back again.

But what Brady's dad saw through it all was that his kid's passion for football hadn't gone anywhere. Brady Sr. has said he'd be fine with Brady Jr. retiring—and he fully understands why No. 12 won't.

"He absolutely loves football," Brady Sr. said. "He's said it, after watching 50,000 or 60,000 hours of film, it's not hard anymore. The only thing that's hard—mentally, intellectually, it's not hard for him;

physically, it's hard. That's unless you're in spectacular physical condition, which he's able to achieve through all the work he's done with his body coach."

That body coach, Alex Guerrero, was at the center of the ongoing storyline over the last year. And while Tom Sr. wouldn't say it, and his son himself has been a little less outspoken about it of late, this has to be satisfying for all of them, to continue to defy Father Time. Brady's top receiver on Sunday, by the way (seven catches, 123 yards, one TD), happened to be another Guerrero devotee, Rob Gronkowski.

It's tough to argue with the results. I'm not sure there's another quarterback in football who makes the throw Brady made to Gronkowski for 28 yards down the seam with 1:05 left in the first half, setting up New England's third touchdown. Nor is there one, if you listen to him, who felt as good as he did going out to eat after the game was over, part of why his dad gets a different feeling watching him play now.

"Twenty years ago, 18 years ago, I couldn't eat two days before a game," Brady Sr. said. "Now I'm eating without a nervous stomach an hour before the game. I guess I'm conditioned to having a very successful son. I don't have the same fear I had 15, 20 years ago, and that's because I've seen how he's done things, prepared, and been able to perform."

Lots of questions around Brady these days revolve around finding signs that the end might be near. I'll just say that that there weren't many out there on the Gillette Stadium turf on Sunday afternoon.

FITZMAGIC FALLOUT: A QB QUESTION IN TAMPA?

Chris Godwin didn't take the bait, just so you know. I did ask the Bucs' second-year receiver if it could be a little awkward when Jameis Winston returns from his three-game start-of-the-year suspension, given how Ryan Fitzpatrick played in New Orleans on Sunday, and that coach Dirk Koetter has made it clear that Winston isn't guaranteed his job back. Godwin at least acknowledged that the question make sense, but went no further.

"That's not something that we worry about, honestly," Godwin said after landing back in Tampa. "We got a really big win today, and the next task at hand is to learn from this and go play the defending Super Bowl champions. We'll cross that bridge when we get there. Right now we'll enjoy this win and prepare for the big challenge ahead."

That bridge will be crossed soon, though, and it looks a little different than it did 24 hours ago. Fitzpatrick completed 21 of 28 for 417 yards and four touchdowns in winning a 48-40 defense-optional war at the Superdome. It was Fitz's first four-touchdown game in three years, and his 156.2 rating was a career high. As Godwin noted, the Eagles are next. After that, the Steelers.

What if Fitzpatrick keeps crushing it? Would Jason Licht and Dirk Koetter actually leave Winston, the quarterback they tied their futures to in 2015, on the bench? That would be hard. But it'd also be hard to see the Bucs moving away from what we saw on Sunday, given everything that's on the line for the GM, coach and everyone else in football operations in 2018.

What's interesting is that while Sunday's performance will be tough to duplicate, it's understandable why the players aren't totally slack-jawed over it. Mike Evans is a star. DeSean Jackson is a scary downfield weapon. Godwin and fellow 2017 draftee O.J. Howard have high-end potential. Licht has invested high draft picks on the offensive line and imported tough-guy center Ryan Jensen from Baltimore in March.

Add a tough camp (the Bucs were in pads pretty much every day allowable this summer) in the Tampa heat to the equation, and the result is what you saw against New Orleans.

“After the training camp we had, we really felt like we could come out and put on a show,” said Godwin, who had three catches for 41 yards and a touchdown. “You have so many weapons that Fitz had the ability to throw to. And he did a great job of spreading the ball around and getting guys involved, and the offensive line did a really good job blocking. Just the confidence we had from training camp, with the talent we have in the room, the combination of all of that, we ended up with the result we had.”

There are other factors, too, of course. It’s Week 1, so new play-caller Todd Monken had the advantage of holding stuff back and springing it on the Saints.

That said, you’ll notice that Godwin mentioned Fitzpatrick as one element of the operation that he expected big things from. The receiver added that the only thing that surprised him about Fitzpatrick’s performance was the 12-yard run on third-and-11 with 2:42 left in the fourth quarter, which sealed the win. “I didn’t know he was that fast, man,” Godwin said of the 35-year-old QB. “Fitz was moving!”

Clearly the guys in the locker room think he can play. We all need to stay tuned to this one.

THIS TIME, THE STORM DOESN’T UNSETTLE THE DOLPHINS

Some nuts and bolts on the weather-addled Titans-Dolphins game in Miami:

- At 7 hours, 8 minutes, it was the longest game since the merger.
- The first lightning delay came with 1:11 left in the second quarter and lasted 117 minutes. The officials cut halftime down to three and a half minutes as a result.
- The second delay came with 6:47 left in the third quarter and lasted 122 minutes.
- The temperature at kickoff was 89 degrees, with a heat index of 99, which makes it the hottest game the Titans has played in since becoming the Titans in 1999.
- Food consumed by players during the downtime: barbecue.
- That’s right, barbecue. Seeing it out, in fact, was the one thing that caught coach Adam Gase off guard.

“The only thing that I thought was weird, when we came back in the second time ... we’d been waiting for an hour, maybe hour and a half, and I just saw all these Mission BBQ boxes out,” Gase told me from his office a couple hours after the game finally ended. “And I’m going, ‘We’re playing a game.’ I think it was 5 o’clock. It was crazy, considering our guys had been in there and had their pregame meal at 10.”

The food and the weather delays weren’t the only weird aspects of the day. The score was 7-3 when the game was stopped the first time, and it was 7-3 when it was stopped the second time. From there, over the final 21:47, all hell broke loose.

Each team scored a kickoff return touchdown (Jakeem Grant for Miami, Darius Jennings for the Titans) in the fourth quarter, and Dolphins receiver Kenny Stills’ second touchdown catch of the day, also in the fourth quarter, was good for 75 yards. Back-to-back drives ended in picks (one from Blaine Gabbert, in for a nicked up Marcus Mariota). And the Dolphins survived, scoring 20 of the 37 post-delay points.

The best news? Well, the 27-20 win also was a nice validation of the retooling that Gase, GM Chris Grier and EVP of football ops Mike Tannenbaum undertook this offseason. Part of the reason for it was that

last year's Dolphins had trouble steering things back on course when they went awry (Hurricane Irma, Chris Foerster's video, Ryan Tannehill's ACL).

So they went about trying to build a sturdier locker room with better leaders, letting Ndamukong Suh and Jarvis Landry (among others) walk, while bringing in guys like Danny Amendola, Josh Sitton, Frank Gore, and Robert Quinn. At least for one day, all THE change seemed to have the intended affect: Weird circumstances (and the team has had plenty in recent years) didn't affect the '18 Dolphins quite the same as they had in the past.

"These guys hang out off the field, they like being around each other," Gase said. "And I think today was one of those times where these guys being around each other as much as they have been probably paid off, because they were able to stay engaged and juice it back up when we went back out there the first time and then did the same thing the second time."

Which is why, when everything was going down on Sunday, Gase said, "I was never worried about it, just because this group, there's a lot of veteran presence, and guys that have been through a lot of things in their career, both good and bad. So I felt good about where our leaders were at."

Whether it means more than just a win on Sept. 9 remains to be seen. But I'd say getting this sort of result would have been far from a sure thing last year.

THE PANTHERS D IS THE FOUNDATION

I'm guilty of the same thing most everyone else is regarding the Panthers. A lot of the focus in Carolina this offseason centered on two issues: David Tepper buying the team, and Norv Turner being hired to work with Cam Newton.

It was really neither of those things that won Tepper his first game as owner and Turner his first game as OC yesterday, 16-8 over Dallas. It was, instead, what it's often been throughout Ron Rivera's eight years in charge: the defense. And that's notable because the Panthers are now on their third coordinator on that side in as many years.

Sean McDermott the head coach in Buffalo now, and Steve Wilks has the Arizona job. Successor Eric Washington didn't miss much of a beat on Sunday. Carolina held the Cowboys to 232 yards and just 4.1 yards per play.

Washington has been groomed for this for a while. Like McDermott and Wilks before him, the new DC had a long history with Rivera (he was Rivera's intern in Chicago for the Super Bowl season of 2006, when Rivera was the Bears' coordinator). And as was the case with his predecessors, Rivera has given Washington full play-calling authority for a defense that he and McDermott designed back in 2011.

But more important than any of that is that he's passed along a certain standard that a lot of people have had their hands in establishing, and not just coaches. Four or five years ago, middle linebacker Luke Kuechly told me he wanted to build a legacy defense in Charlotte, like the Steelers and Ravens have. By maintaining their level over the course of different play-callers, it seems Kuechly's group is close to achieving that.

"One of the biggest things I do, and this is in all phases, they need to take ownership, they need to understand what the standard is," Rivera said over his cell last night. "Set the standard, and hold

everyone accountable to the standard, and if it slips, they're the ones that have to be responsible to get it back on track. I tell the guys, I shouldn't have to cheerlead every day at practice.

"It shouldn't be me running around, yelling and screaming constantly. If they see something, correct it. And that's been one thing that's helped us as a football team, the willingness of our guys to take the standard, understand what it is, and then hold each other accountable."

Never was it more apparent than at the end of the game. The Cowboys finally looked to have gotten their offensive act together early in the fourth quarter, with a 10-play, 75-yard touchdown drive. Rivera's radar was up, at that point, for any sign of trouble within his ranks. Instead, he looked at the bench and saw a poised and calm group.

That unit closed things out from there, generating a turnover on downs, then a strip sack from Mario Addison (a Panther since 2012) to end the Cowboys' final drive.

"Great effort," Rivera said, "And Mario's one of those guys who's been here the whole time. He understands what our standard is and what kinds of things are acceptable and what aren't."

I expect we'll see Newton get better in the coming weeks, because I do believe that Turner and his son, quarterbacks coach Scott Turner, have made progress with Newton that will take root on game day soon. But they do have a little time, because of the margin for error the defense gives them, and has always given the offense.

As for specifics, Rivera said Washington brings a mix of the hyperaggressive Wilks and the more conservative McDermott from a play-calling standpoint. And yes, he sees Washington as getting his head coaching shot at some point too, which is why he's already looking at who might come after that.

He's also shown that whoever does will get to put their own mark on the job—Rivera gives the DC full autonomy, only making suggestions periodically and never in front of players or assistants—and probably get the same familiar results.

... OF THE WEEK

QUOTE

"Just felt grateful and appreciative to be here. This may sound a little cheesy, but I was so excited to get to run on the field as a Colt, and to get to play with T.Y. and Jack and Vinny ..."

Colts QB Andrew Luck on being back out with teammates T.Y. Hilton, Jack Doyle and Adam Vinatieri. The sentiment is genuine. One thing you realized if you were around Luck this summer was that when he was hurt—and a lot of players go through this—he felt like he was even on the team anymore. That's over now. And despite the loss to the Bengals (remember, he looked to have converted third-and-15 before tight end Jack Doyle was stripped of the ball at the Cincinnati 15 with under a minute left), there were plenty of good things to build on. But Luck is being real when he says he's just happy to be throwing the ball around with his buddies again, and that's very much the way he sees all this. Which is pretty cool.

SIX FROM SATURDAY

A look at the college football weekend from an NFL perspective:

1. All eyes remain on Oklahoma coach Lincoln Riley, who orchestrated a blowout of Chip Kelly and UCLA on Saturday. And now, for his NFL admirers, it's how Riley adjusted his offense for new starting QB Kyler Murray, the Oakland A's first-round pick who's in his last year of football before embarking on a baseball career. Murray is shorter than Baker Mayfield, with more athleticism and less arm talent, but the Sooners haven't missed a beat. "Lincoln has an answer for everything," one personnel exec said. "If he knows what you're in defensively, it's a wrap."
2. Talking to SI's Ross Dellenger, USC coach Clay Helton compared his star linebacker Porter Gustin's build to that of a "Marvel superhero," in explaining the benefits of his very strict diet. Of late, Gustin's game has matched his physique. Scouts took note of how disruptive he was in a loss to Stanford.
3. An up and a down from Georgia's win over South Carolina ... Up: LB D'Andre Walker is starting to look like the star he's been projected to be, though he got nicked in the game ... Down: CB DeAndre Baker. Yes, he had a near pick-6, but he also drew two PI calls, and scouts are growing a bit concerned about his physicality.
4. I tweeted it Saturday so I'll write it here: I think Nick Bosa is better right now than Joey Bosa was at any point in his three years at Ohio State. He looks borderline unblockable and put Rutgers freshman QB Art Sitkowski out of commission on Saturday.
5. Clemson has built quite the rep for developing receivers (DeAndre Hopkins, Sammy Watkins, Martavis Bryant, etc.), and the next great one there might be true sophomore Tee Higgins.
6. Speaking of impressive performances in the Clemson game, Texas A&M sophomore quarterback Kellen Mond put on a heck of a show—and might have gotten the upset if not for the dumbest rule in football.

TEN TAKEAWAYS

1. The lack of an anthem policy, for now, seems to be a non-issue, and so I'd expect the union and league to do what they've done the last few weeks—not much—about it. The reality is that there was support from some corners of NFL ownership for leaving the policy as it has been, and the players would certainly be for that, and so my sense the sort of wink-wink agreement to drag the talks out a little makes sense. This way the owners and players get a chance to give the "do nothing" solution a test drive, and the rest of us get to see if the conventional wisdom that this was the way to go all along is correct.
2. Le'Veon Bell's monocled emoji after the Steelers' mucked-up tie in Cleveland was another example of the star back twisting the knife on the team in a "You've made me uncomfortable the last two years, so I'm not doing you favors now" kind of way. Do I think staying away is smart for Bell? No, I don't. He's losing \$855K a week, and that money isn't coming back—and most NFL people I talk to aren't so sure there's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow waiting for him. He has four things working against him in that regard. First, his age. He'll be 27 in February and going into year seven of his career, which is pretty far down the line for a running back. Second, he has a suspension history. Third, he's been hurt (sports hernia, MCL tear, etc.) Fourth, teams have taken note of how his teammates reacted to Bell not

reporting last week. Again, Bell's a great, great player. But if I'm another team, I'm not sure I wouldn't just look to the draft for get younger, cheaper running backs.

3. No getting around it—Nate Peterman was awful on Sunday for Buffalo. But I'll repeat what I've said before in this space. My belief is, based on the investment they've made, the priority in the Bills' handling of the quarterbacks this year has to be what's best for Josh Allen. And I have a hard time seeing where playing behind the Buffalo line is what's right for Allen's development right now.

4. While we're on Peterman, his predecessor Tyrod Taylor didn't exactly set the world on fire on Sunday either, throwing for 197 yards, a touchdown and a pick on 15-of-40 passing for the Browns against Pittsburgh. Those numbers were a part of why Cleveland struggled to get even a tie despite generating six takeaways on defense. But Taylor struggled a bit with his accuracy from the pocket, which was a problem for him in Buffalo too. We'll see if he can get back on track in New England on Sunday.

5. Kansas City's Patrick Mahomes was mighty impressive in throwing for 256 yards and four touchdowns on 15-of-27 passing. And there were plenty of good signs beyond the numbers that the Chiefs brass took from the 38-28 win over the Chargers. There's what they knew—Mahomes' touchdown throw to Tyreek Hill was the kind rope that made him the 10th overall pick in the draft in the first place. And there's what the Chiefs are still learning—how good he is extending plays in live action. He showed that part of his game in converting a third-and-13 to Hill for 34 yards late in the third quarter. Mahomes is going to be fun to watch from here on out.

6. What I liked about the Eagles on Thursday: It was ugly for a while, and they rode their defense, until the offense got the running game in gear, and they just found a way—which illustrates how they're a team that wins by a lot of different means. That's a great sign for Philly, and coach Doug Pederson agreed when I asked him about it on Thursday. "There are a lot of ways to win a football game. That's a great thing, because until all three phases catch up and click, it's great to see the defense step up, and it's great to see the offense make some plays in the second half, the special teams cover some kicks, [punter] Cam [Johnston] kicked the heck out of the football tonight. It's coming. it's a slow process, but we've got some time and we'll keep working."

7. Kirk Cousins looked very comfortable in Week 1, and his numbers reflected that—and he looked a player who doesn't feel like he has to do everything to win. Vikings safety Harrison Smith wound up as the star of the afternoon, with a fumble recovery, a sack and game-clinching interception, and the run/pass breakdown was pretty close to 50/50, with the Vikings running the ball 32 times for 116 yards. I think all of that is just find with the \$84 million man.

8. I wouldn't worry too much about Jimmy Garoppolo's worst day as a Niner. I don't think anyone paying attention expected John Lynch and Kyle Shanahan to have the team fixed in 20 months, so it should come as no surprised that the roster isn't quite where they need it to be yet.

9. Case Keenum threw three picks, so his Broncos debut certainly wasn't perfect. But you have to like the way Keenum kept swinging. His teammates certainly did. "We're not going to get down, that's Case, that's some of us other players as leaders on this team," receiver Demaryius Thomas told the Denver media. "Forget those things and play on. That's going to be our personality. We're not going to carry all that negative stuff around with us." On the game-winning drive against Seattle, Keenum was nails: 4-for-4 for 39 yards and the clinching touchdown.

10. I can't believe I'm saying this in 2018: Adrian Peterson looked really, really good in Week 1. His performance—166 yards from scrimmage (on 28 touches)—was one of the better surprises from Sunday.

FIVE-DAY FORECAST

Two new coaches and a new quarterback get unveiled tonight, but I think it's the other team in the mix that's most interesting. The Rams have spent this offseason trying to maximize the window they have while Jared Goff is still on his rookie deal. And so now a splashy offseason is put to the test.

As a result, Aqib Talib, Ndamukong Suh, Marcus Peters and Brandin Cooks are all aboard and will be front and center tonight in Oakland. Of course, we've seen these chemistry experiments—adding big-time names/egos to a contender to try to get it over the top—fail in the past.

Why won't this one? Sean McVay's track record in Washington and L.A. has shown he has an ability to manage big personalities and different types of players, which has allowed the Rams to cast a wide net for talent. And the best part is that he doesn't mind much that all the splashy moves put a little pressure on everyone to win now.

"I don't want our players ever to fear failure," McVay told me a little while back, when we discussed the moves. "We always talk about attacking success."

One thing's for sure, starting tonight, it won't be boring.

FMIA Week 1: On Seven-Hour Games, Undefeated Browns and the Greatest Game Aaron Rodgers Ever Played

By Peter King

FMIA

Sept. 10, 2018

At halftime in Wisconsin on Sunday night, after an entire state finished hyperventilating and began to come to grips with the notion that, My God, Aaron Rodgers might be gone again, Randall Cobb walked into the Packers' locker room at Lambeau Field. The veteran receiver was looking for Rodgers. He wanted to tell him to hang in there. He wanted to tell him he loved him.

But no Rodgers.

"Where is he?" Cobb asked.

"Working out, testing the knee," one of the trainers told him.

Early this morning, in his car on the way home from the game, Cobb told me: "I was confused. He was what?"

Rodgers, in the second quarter of the first game of the Packers' 100th season, collapsed in a pile of players and immediately grabbed his left knee. He tried to get up but couldn't walk, and fell back to the field. A few minutes later, a cart came to take him off the field and you just felt with that cart there was something more than Rodgers riding away. It was the Packers' season. Right? MCL, ACL, whatever. Not good. Could this be the second straight season that ended way prematurely, with The Franchise out for some or more of the season, and the Packers' hopes down the tubes again? Sure looked like it.

So Cobb said a couple of positive things to the shaky backup, DeShone Kizer, before the Packers went back on the field to try somehow to get back into it. Chicago led 17-0, and new Bear Khalil Mack was absolutely wrecking the game.

"We went out for the second half," Cobb said, "and Aaron's walking out too. He's in uniform. Looks ready to go. I asked him if he was okay. He said, 'Yeah, I'm good.' So he got to the sidelines and starting talking ball, like normal. And I'm like, Well, I guess he's playing."

At one point early in the half, Rodgers said in the huddle: "Do your jobs, and I'll handle the rest."

Wishful thinking. When it was over, someone asked Rodgers what he was thinking when he looked up and saw the score in the third quarter: 20-0.

"Seven times three," Rodgers said.

Maybe he'd get the ball four more times on one leg, and he knew he needed three touchdowns at least, and maybe one more score. These are the things great players think, even when they're not sure how

they're going to make it through the next 23 minutes of gametime because they really can't protect themselves.

The Lead: Bears-Pack

I wonder sometimes, after covering sports for almost 40 years, what happens when a player who shouldn't be on the field or the court or the ice begins to play. Do his teammates really elevate their games? Or at least try their damndest to do so because they know they have to or The Franchise could really be lost for the year.

That's how it looked Sunday night. The line that allowed Rodgers to be hit consistently in the first half got better. Even with Rodgers basically stapled to the pocket because his usually fluidity was gone, he seemed to have a second more per dropback. And he knew he couldn't afford to waste a series. It felt like a waste when he settled for a field goal with just over 18 minutes left in the game. Chicago 20, Green Bay 3 meant he still needed three scores.

"The protection was really good, and obviously, being more of a statue back there, I had to deal the ball on time and make sure we had guys getting open," Rodgers said later.

They had maybe three series left. On the first came a throw that will have to go on the Hall of Fame reel. A minute into the fourth quarter, unable to plant with his right leg and fire forward with his left leg (the damaged one), Rodgers somehow wrist-flicked an arcing ball 52 yards in the air, to the right side of the end zone, to a covered Geronimo Allison. Allison made the contested catch and tumbled out of bounds. Chicago 20, Green Bay 10.

Three-and-out for the Trubiskies. Rodgers, again with good time, took three minutes to go 75 yards, Davante Adams finishing it with an effort TD at the left pylon. Chicago 20, Green Bay 17.

Great clock management by the Bears then. They held the ball for almost seven minutes, Trubisky consistently snapping the ball with less than five seconds on the play clock. With 2:39 left, a Cody Parkey field goal made it Chicago 23, Green Bay 17.

Now Rodgers had enough time. He didn't have to hurry. Maybe it was the Lambeau Karma God interceding, but Bears cornerback Kyle Fuller—the cornerback Green Bay almost stole in free agency last March—dropped the easiest interception of his life on the first snap. Life, precious life.

Third-and-10. Green Bay 25.

The protection was really good, Rodgers had said. And now, on the next play, the line, so leaky early, had its best play of the night. Rodgers took the snap, and I timed how much time he had before the ball left his hand. 4.35 seconds. Luxurious for your average passer. For Rodgers, an eternity.

"I was running my route," Cobb told me, "and I didn't get the ball in rhythm and timing like I usually do. So in that case, we go to scramble mode. You look for an opening. So I looked for one, then looked back to Aaron and the ball was already in the air. I'm like, SHOOT! Ball's coming! Here it comes."

Safety Eddie Jackson, playing Cobb, dove for the ball, trying to flick it away. He couldn't get to it. Cobb grabbed it and turned to run upfield.

“Nothing but green grass,” Cobb said. “Just run. I felt like I was back in my track days.”

“When you watch the replay, you’ll be amazed,” I said. “Khalil Mack ran practically the length of the field. He almost caught you at the 1-yard line.”

“Well, I was weaving,” Cobb said, and laughed.

Green Bay 24, Chicago 23.

“I had a little moment with Aaron,” said Cobb. “Told him I love him. He’s such a warrior. It was amazing having him out there, after we thought he was done. He figured exactly how to play too: short, quick throws, rhythm and timing. That just reinforced what I already knew about him. I’ve seen it for years. But this was special.”

“Where does this game rank for you in your career?” I asked.

“I would say it’s probably the greatest,” said Cobb, in his eighth year with the Packers. “My wife and I just had a son. This is the Packers’ 100th season. It’s the Bears. This was a big night.”

Brett Favre had his moment in Oakland, the night after his dad died, when he played an impossible game with some great throws. This is Rodgers’ 14th season, and this might be his moment, the moment we’ll all remember when he’s on stage in Canton one day and the question is asked: What was Aaron Rodgers’ best game?

He’ll have gaudier games, and he’ll have a Super Bowl MVP game (at least one). But will he have a game when he had to play mostly on one leg and come back from a 20-point deficit? Will he, while hobbled, do something no Packers quarterback in 111 tries had ever done—win a game when trailing by at least 17 points starting the fourth quarter? Will it be against the team he loves to beat the most, the rival Bears, on a similarly historic night at Lambeau Field?

No. Aaron Rodgers is 34. He’s one of the best quarterbacks ever to play. And we just saw the best game of his professional life.

The Best of Week 1

It’s Overreaction Monday, the same as it is after the first Sunday of every NFL season. It’s the time when we can confidently say—this year—that Matt Ryan’s done, the Ravens are winning the Super Bowl, the Bills are going 0-16, the Browns will win nine, Watson and Garoppolo are frauds, Tyreek Hill is some combination of Barry Sanders and Bob Hayes, and somehow, some way we all fell for the Chargers again and the Chargers can only break our hearts; it’s an NFL rule.

Aside from the Rodgers fairy tale, my three stories of the day:

Fitzmagic

Ryan Fitzpatrick face-timed with his family after the craziest game of the weekend, the 88-pointer (Bucs 48, Saints 40) in New Orleans. His wife got the six kids around the phone, and there was yelling and

happiness and a family moment Fitzpatrick will remember for a long time. “We really didn’t have to say much, and I couldn’t say much,” he said. “I was overcome with emotion.”

There was also a fantasy football lesson.

“So my 9-year-old son, Tate, convinced my 11-year-old son, Brady, to put me on his fantasy team today,” Fitzpatrick told me from New Orleans. “I didn’t even know Brady played fantasy football. I guess it was a good decision.”

You tend to win in fantasy football when your quarterback gives you 417 yards and four touchdowns and no picks and a rating of 156.2. Here’s what was so cool about Fitzpatrick after this game: He was totally, absolutely not surprised. He had no interest in going down the can-you-keep-Jameis-on-the-bench-when-he-returns path, because he knows the Bucs play Philadelphia and Pittsburgh in the next two weeks, and it’s fruitless to speculate about starting jobs that are three weeks away. His fatalism, his realism ... those impressed me.

Watch Fitzpatrick’s deep throws on the highlights today if you can—things of beauty. His bomb to Mike Evans for a touchdown couldn’t have been thrown better by Marino or Elway. “I have so much confidence in my ability that a day like today is not a surprise to me—at all,” he said. “I go out there when I start, and I think I’m gonna have this game every week, especially with this team. All offseason, I’ve seen how deep our skill-position group is. We’ve got five or six guys who, if they’re in one-on-one matchups, you know you can win with any of them. As a quarterback, it’s a dream to be in the huddle with these guys.”

But he wouldn’t say this was the best game he’d played in the NFL on his long and winding road through St. Louis, Cincinnati, Buffalo, Tennessee, Houston, the Jets and Tampa. “When I was with the Jets, we beat New England [in 2017]; in Buffalo, we beat New England [in 2011]. Those rank right up there. I remember I got benched for Ryan Mallett [in 2014], and when I got back in the lineup, I threw six touchdown passes to beat Tennessee. That was the most satisfying game of my life.

“I’m realistic about how hard this game is. I’ve thrown six touchdowns in a game. I’ve thrown six interceptions in a game. How do you come back from those? This game is a week-to-week proposition, and you better understand that. I’ll go home tonight and we’ll feel good about this one because it’s a big accomplishment beating the Saints here. But then I’ll get ready for the next one—the next one will be all that matters.”

The weird upshot of this game is the Saints might not be what we thought they were, particularly on defense. This is going to be a tense week around the Saints, and I wouldn’t be thrilled to be the Browns this week. They’re the next team up in New Orleans next Sunday.

The Marathon

Tennessee Titans at Miami Dolphins

National Football League Game Summary

Paid attendance: 65,184

Time: 7:08

Now that's weird. Delays of 1 hour, 57 minutes (after a lightning strike at the stadium, with 1:52 left in the first half) and 2 hours, 2 minutes (after another lightning strike midway through the third quarter). Thirteen points scored in the first three quarters, 34 in the fourth. Dolphins 27, Titans 20.

"I've never been in a rain delay in a game in my life, and today we had two, and they were both long," Dolphins quarterback Ryan Tannehill said from Florida when it was long past dark. "The first one, we came in and they said it'd be like 30 minutes, so we all just stayed loose and stayed ready. Turns out it was two hours. The second one was supposed to be a long one. They said we wouldn't come back out till 7:30, so we came in, took our cleats off and lots of guys took their uniforms off. We watched football. The Red Zone. I had a little chicken. I took a nap—I think about 15 minutes. Then all of a sudden someone comes in and says, 'You're back on the field in 10 minutes—we're playing. That was around 6:30. So we all had to hustle to get ready.'"

It was a big day for Tannehill, who missed 19 straight games with two injuries. Credit coach Adam Gase and the Dolphins for not panicking and drafting the next supposed heir to Marino, and for giving Tannehill one more chance in 2018 to show he can be an above-average NFL starter, a player who can win in Miami. He was accurate Sunday against a 2017 playoff team, completing 20 of 28, but he also threw two picks and said later: "It was up and down. A few throws I'd really like to have back."

In that spirit, I liked what Tannehill told me about Miami's day off. Coaches often give players "victory Monday," an extra day off in addition to Tuesday, when the team either is tired or had a big win. Gase gave the team Monday off. But Tannehill went to his offensive mates and said he thought they should come in to dissect the tape today, then leave for a day-and-a-half of rest. "I went around and told everyone we've got to get better, and we should take time in our [position] groups to watch this game," Tannehill said. "I was glad to see everyone wanted to do it." Especially after a seven-hour game.

Browns Gonna Brown

No, they're not, actually. Half the Twittersphere chortled uproariously when, with 13 seconds left in overtime, kicker Zane Gonzalez had a 43-yard field-goal try blocked by T.J. Watt of the Steelers. That's so Browns. But the players didn't chortle. The players were ticked off. Wideout Jarvis Landry, the unofficial we're-not-gonna-take-it-anymore, hold-your-feet-to-the-fire guy in this locker room, left the field cursing, angry and said he refused to get used to this. And they didn't lose!

Here's why I think there's more Landrys in the room than there used to be: The Browns rallied late, for once. With eight minutes left in the fourth quarter, Pittsburgh had the ball and led 21-7. Cleveland forced a turnover and got a quick score, and Cleveland recovered a James Conner fumble to set up Josh Gordon's first touchdown since the Nixon Administration, and it was tied. The Browns, historically, haven't been fourth-quarter fighters. Now, with Landry and Tyrod Taylor and collegiate winners like Ohio State's former star cornerback, Denzel Ward, the Browns are building a culture that doesn't accept Brown-ness.

That's all well and good, of course, but it's going to come down to Taylor needing to be better than he was Sunday (15 of 40 passing), or letting Baker Mayfield play earlier than coach Hue Jackson wants. I like what I saw Sunday afternoon. Myles Garrett is the genuine item. Taylor might be better suited to back up Mayfield, but we'll see about that. And a tie pissed them off. That's a start.

Rodgers-Starr Story

I could write 10,000 words on what made my three-minute TV story happen on NBC's "Football Night in America" Sunday. Instead, I'll go with the background on how it all happened, along with a couple videos that help tell the story of Aaron Rodgers' appreciation of Packer history, and his deep affection for Hall of Fame quarterback Bart Starr.

NBC wanted me to get Rodgers for a TV story for the first Sunday night game of the year. In early August, in camp, I went to Rodgers with three ideas. Oh-for-three. He didn't like them. "Go back to the drawing board," he said with a smile. He wasn't being a jerk; he just had no interest in the normal. So I went to work with the story-idea people at NBC and thought of two more, with some tentacles to the first game of the Packers' 100th season. One of the ideas Rodgers liked: a story about his relationship with Starr, a man 50 years his senior. The Starr family had some interest too—with an asterisk; he's been ill, and they had no idea if he could be involved in the story. But Rodgers, 34, deeply admires Starr, 84, and the feeling was mutual. No commitment yet, but interest from Rodgers moved us along.

We needed to convince Starr and his family and his family's rep, Lee Ann Nelson. Starr had a stroke in 2014, and he suffers from aphasia, which happens sometimes to people who suffer strokes. It results in difficulty to comprehend words, and to speak cogent sentences, and to focus enough to do both. Nelson spoke to the family—Bart, wife Cherry (they've been married 64 years) and son Bart Starr Jr., who often speaks for the family. They wanted to do it, and perhaps it would be done with Bart Jr., speaking for his dad. I agreed to go to Birmingham, their home, to interview at least Bart Jr. Depending how Starr Sr., felt that day, perhaps we could get Bart to read a note of admiration to Rodgers.

I showed up to Starr's plain office adjacent to some woods on the south side of Birmingham with producer Kristen Gerringer and our Alabama-based crew. Here came Bart Starr, in sweatpants, a dark Packers polo and sneakers, with Lee Ann firmly but gently holding both hands as he walked very slowly into the office. Bart was smiling, and he wanted to meet everyone in the crew and welcome them. Lee Ann was his guiding light. Starr barely spoke, and when he did, it was almost in a whisper. When I met him, I looked into his eyes and said what a pleasure this was, and he whispered, "Glad ... for Aaron."

He sat on a couch, and Bart Jr., came in and sat next to him, and I spoke to them—the son, mostly—on camera for about eight or 10 minutes, learning why the two quarterbacks a half-century apart in age are close. Soon after being drafted by Green Bay, Rodgers played in a charity golf tournament in Wisconsin run by Bart Sr., who appreciated Rodgers making the effort. In 2008, with the mayhem surrounding Brett Favre leaving/returning and Rodgers getting his shot at the job, Starr wrote a couple of letters of encouragement to Rodgers.

"What do you think of Aaron Rodgers?" I asked Starr the elder.

"Tremendous," he said, in a whisper.

"Tremendous?" I said.

Softer now. "Tremendous. Yeah."

Now Lee Ann and Bart Sr., were going to practice his message of admiration for Rodgers, the one he wanted to deliver on the eve of this historic season. For 15, 20 minutes they went over the lines on the couch, and then I helped move him to his desk, taking his right arm while Lee Ann took his left. Arduous.

Sometimes he responded. Sometimes he read the note, and sometimes he just sat, staring, resting. When he did say a sentence, it was faint, less than a whisper.

This was painful to see.

After a few more minutes, Lee Ann said we should all just take a timeout and let Starr rest. So we did.

More frustration with the whispered message. Then Lee Ann suggested we take a walk with Starr around the office. I took his right arm again, she his left, and we walked the short lap around his office—maybe 40 feet in all. I thought about making small talk. “Bart, you know what I’ve always admired about you?” I said. “Your autograph.” He stopped. He looked up at me. I said: “Your autograph is perfect. Perfect penmanship. Today, you can’t read anyone’s autograph. They’re a mess. So let me ask you: Why’d you do your autograph so perfect?”

He looked hard into my eyes.

“Why ... would you want to do it ... any other way?” he said.

Clearest, loudest words he’d spoken all day.

“That’s ... the only way I know,” he said.

Lee Ann beamed. “Did you know that his autograph took between 33 and 44 seconds to do—every one? He just wanted to get it right, every time.”

We walked around the office the same way, each of us with a Starr arm. Slowly. Importantly. He sat back down, and worked a little more on the 23 words he wanted to say.

Twenty-three words. An hour, and now more, to get it right. Aphasia was his enemy, his reality. He wouldn’t give in.

“You are a strong leader,” Starr said into the camera, his eyes boring into the note he was reading.

Practice. More practice. Five minutes more.

“Cherry and I are admiring you ...”

Practice. More practice.

The clock ticked away. No one was in any hurry. We all just felt for this man, trying to do something kind for a friend. What was he thinking? I have no idea. Maybe this was something I imagined; it probably was. But I saw a competitor here. This wasn’t the Dallas defense in the Ice Bowl he had to beat now. He had to beat a sentence. And man, was it hard. Damn hard. Maybe he wouldn’t have felt a thing if we just packed up the cameras and thanked him and walked away. I don’t know. I thought he wanted to win this sentence. But we felt awful about it. The silent crew and the silent reporter (me), thought the same thing: We are abusing this giant of a man. Please, please, let it end. We can just walk away now and tell our bosses back at NBC, “We tried. We tried for over an hour. Bart was gallant, but it just wasn’t the right day.”

“One more line, Bart,” Lee Ann Nelson said. “You can do this. I know you can do this.”

Pause. Smile from Starr. He stared at the note.

“Because you are one of the finest men we have ever ... MET.”

Smile.

Starr rested now, and I went to him and thanked him. “Good,” he whispered with a huge smile, “... for Aaron. Good for Aaron.”

Five days later. Labor Day afternoon. Green Bay. The Packers’ tunnel onto Lambeau. I explained the hour-plus deal in Starr’s office, and Starr’s determination to get the damn thing done. I showed the video of those 14 seconds to Rodgers.

Rodgers smiled widely. He nodded. No words. He didn’t have any right then. I didn’t either.

On Kaepernick and Nike

When Nike announced that Colin Kaepernick would be a chief spokesman for the shoe/apparel giant last week, it took the NFL by surprise ... to put it mildly. Nike will pay the NFL hundreds of millions through 2028 to be the official uniform and apparel supplier of the NFL for at least the next 11 seasons. When this deal went down last spring, the NFL’s EVP of media, Brian Rolapp, called Nike a “long-time and trusted partner” of the league.

Kaepernick is the biggest burr in the NFL’s saddle. He sued the league for collusion, claiming he’s been kept out of football since the beginning of 2017 after he spent 2016 kneeling for the national anthem as a 49ers quarterback, in protest of the treatment of African-Americans in society.

I met a University of North Carolina history professor who studies the intersection of sport and politics, Matt Andrews, in 2016. One of his classes, Sport and Civil Rights, made me think he’d be a great resource person here. He answered questions for me over the weekend about Kaepernick, the Nike deal, and the NFL.

Me: Kaepernick is starting to remind me a little of Muhammad Ali—hated in his time but appreciated as an icon later in life. Any similarities to you?

Andrews: Absolutely. Ali was the catalyst for the revolt of the black athlete in the 1960s. He paved the way. When Tommie Smith and John Carlos used the medal stand at the 1968 Olympics as a platform to express their frustration with the slow pace of racial change in the United States—an act that I see as precisely the same as Kaepernick taking a knee—they were following the path paved by Ali. Kaepernick has been walking that same path. Ali was the first to say that as a high-profile black athlete, he had an obligation to use his fame to bring attention to issues like racial injustice and the war in Vietnam. He put his name, his legacy, and his future earnings all on the line, just like Kaepernick did.

Me: Is there a historical precedent for the Kaepernick/Nike deal?

Andrews: Yes and no. On the one hand, Kaepernick's Nike contract isn't just unprecedented—it's overturning previous precedent. Previous athletes who made dramatic gestures of protest were shunned, losing endorsements and athletic opportunities, be it Tommie Smith in 1968, Craig Hodges and Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf in the 1990s, or others. As heavyweight champion, Muhammad Ali stood at the absolute pinnacle of the American sports pyramid, and what did he get to endorse? Roach killer. So Kaepernick getting a Nike contract because of his activism flips the script. On the other hand, this is not entirely unprecedented. Being a fierce critic of racism did not preclude Kareem Abdul-Jabbar from getting a lucrative shoe deal with Adidas. Nike clearly believes that linking themselves with Kaepernick will pay off in the long run. They have certainly noticed that LeBron James's outspokenness and direct criticism of the President has not hurt his popularity one bit. And Kaepernick's rebelliousness fits the maverick image that Nike has worked hard to craft.

Me: What's the end game for Kaepernick, and do you think he plays football again?

Andrews: I'm tempted to trot out the Yogi Berra line here—"I don't make predictions, especially about the future." I've been wrong about Kaepernick before. I was certain that some NFL team would give him a shot last year. I mistakenly believed that NFL owners wanted one thing above all else—wins. We now know that's not true. They either fear losing community support if they sign Kaepernick or they are so outraged by his actions that they want to make him pay. It's probably a combination of both. I would not bet on Kaepernick winning his collusion case. It's difficult to find the "smoking gun" that proves collusion. Will Kaepernick ever play in the NFL again? Probably not. But at this point, why would he want to? He has his health, he has his dignity, and now he has his Nike contract and, thus, a future platform.

Quotes of the Week

"Oh, I'm playing next week."

—Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers, to NBC's Michele Tafoya, on the field, after leading the greatest comeback in the Bears-Packers rivalry. Green Bay rebounded from a 20-0 deficit to win 24-23 ... with Rodgers playing wounded after hurting his left knee in the first half.

"Overall, I thought we could have been better at a number of positions."

—Bills coach Sean McDermott, after Buffalo fell behind 40-0 early in the third quarter on the way to one of the most embarrassing losses in team history, 47-3 at Baltimore on Sunday.

McDermott would be very good working in public relations for the Titanic.

"Philip Rivers is going to sue his receivers for lack of support."

—CBS analyst Dan Fouts, after Chargers wideout Travis Benjamin dropped a second-quarter bomb from Rivers, the fourth drop of the first half, in Sunday's home loss to the Chiefs.

"YOU PLAY ... TO WIN ... THE GAME!"

—Arizona State offensive lineman Jarrett Bell, channeling his inner Herm Edwards, after the Sun Devils and their new coach upset nationally ranked Michigan State 16-13 in Tempe on Saturday night.

"I would love to play at 41, 42, 43, 44, 45. It'll be a challenge for me. It's f—ing going to be hard to do. I think it's going to be very hard to do. But I think I can do it."

—Tom Brady, in the epilog of the Gotham Chopra series "Tom vs. Time" about Brady for Facebook.

The Award Section

Offensive Players of the Week

Ryan Fitzpatrick, quarterback, Tampa Bay. The man who defines “journeyman” in the NFL—seven teams, 15 years, 120 starts, 105 games on the bench—had the game of his life Sunday in New Orleans. He had a career high in passing yards (417) and rating (156.2, the second-highest in the 43-year history of the Bucs) in a totally bizarre 48-40 upset of the Saints.

Joe Flacco, quarterback, Baltimore. Have you heard? The Ravens drafted a quarterback in the first round this year. Lamar Jackson. And Flacco, barring a major turnaround from his recent mediocrity, would be playing for his job in 2018. He got off to a job-preserving start Sunday in a 47-3 win over the University of Buffalo. I mean, the Bills. Flacco’s performance (25 of 34, 236 yards, three touchdowns, no picks, 121.7 rating) marked the first time in four years he had a day with a rating over 120 and a TD-to-pick ratio of at least plus-3.

Defensive Players of the Week

Denzel Ward, cornerback, Cleveland. Near the end of the first quarter and near the end of the second quarter, Ward, in his first NFL game, intercepted Ben Roethlisberger with the Steelers already in field-goal range. Once at the Browns’ 10, and then at the Browns’ 29, Ward prevented the Steelers from scoring what could have been fairly crucial points in a 21-21 tie. I watched a chunk of this game, and Ward played fearlessly in coverage against Antonio Brown. He added six tackles.

Harrison Smith, safety, Minnesota. Smith led the Vikings with eight tackles in the 24-16 win over San Francisco, but that’s not why he’s winning this. He wrecked the Niners’ last two drives in a one-score game when Jimmy Garoppolo had given the Niners life. On third-and-five at midfield with 6:32 left, Smith came on a well-disguised safety blitz and nailed Garoppolo for a 10-yard sack. Punt. On second-and-10 with 1:45 left, Garoppolo threw deep downfield, over the middle, and Smith picked it off, ending the game. Just two more reasons why Smith is the best all-around safety in football.

We interrupt these defensive awards for a quick word about Khalil Mack from SVP:

T.J. Watt, outside linebacker, Pittsburgh. Sacking Tyrod Taylor four times and producing 11 tackles wasn’t quite enough for the rusher with the great bloodlines. So Watt, with the ultimate embarrassment—Cleveland, on the Steelers’ watch, winning a football game for the first time since Christmas Eve 2016—staring the Steelers in the face, plowed through a crease in the Browns’ front on the potential winning field-goal try in overtime, blocking it. Surely the Steelers boarded their buses for the two-hour ride home after the game angry that they turned it over so much and couldn’t beat the Browns, but imagine how they’d have felt without the play of Watt.

Special Teams Player of the Week

Tyreek Hill, wide receiver/punt returner, Kansas City. It took all of 1:57 for Tyreek Hill—who wreaked havoc on the Patriots in Week 1 last year—to do the same to the Chargers in California on Sunday. He took a punt—the first Chiefs’ touch of the 2018 season—at his own 9, and ran left, and kept running, and he left every Charger in his wake. The 91-yard punt return was the 12th touchdown of 50 yards or longer in his young career. He’s 24 years old.

Oh. And he made it 13 of those long TDs just seven minutes later. He caught the first touchdown of Pat Mahomes’ career, a 58-yarder, midway through the first quarter.

Ryan Allen, punter, New England. Fifty-one seconds left. Patriots nursing a seven-point lead. They've got to punt from near midfield, and the Texans will have one more chance. Allen boots it ... high ball. Long. Will it get to the end zone? No ... Defensive back Jonathan Jones downs it at the 1. A 54-yard punt, downed at the 1, and Deshaun Watson would have 43 seconds, on the road, to go 99 yards for the tie. Not happening. What a clutch kick by Allen, who had six punts for a 46.8-yard average in the Pats' 27-20 win.

Coach of the Week

Dirk Koetter, coach, Tampa Bay. The Bucs, with a backup quarterback and still wondering whatever will happen to their suspended starter, walked into New Orleans and put up 48 on the Saints. Koetter was in job jeopardy after the Bucs' 5-11 season last year. He's significantly more secure this morning.

Goats of the Week

Nathan Peterman, quarterback, Buffalo. Enough. Forty-to-nothing is not all his fault. But 40-0 in 35 minutes? That's two incredibly unprofessional appearances in two starts for Peterman. We've seen enough of Peterman, Sean McDermott.

Mike Gillislee, running back, New Orleans. The former Bill and Patriot was a pickup of necessity by the Saints with the four-game suspension to Mark Ingram to start the season. Gillislee may not be in Louisiana long. With the Saints driving to cut into a stunning Bucs lead late in the first half at the Superdome, Gillislee took a handoff from Drew Brees, and on a routine run around left end, he got hit by cornerback Vernon Hargreaves and the ball spun out of his grasp. Tampa Bay recovered, and safety Justin Evans returned it 34 yards for a touchdown. Amazingly, the Bucs led 31-17.

Kyle Fuller, cornerback, Chicago. As the Packers stared down a 23-17 deficit with 2:39 left Sunday night, Aaron Rodgers had first-and-10 from his 25. He had Davante Adams on a short incut, but Adams stumbled ... and the pass went right into the chest of Fuller. This was not a particularly difficult ball to catch—not a bullet, but a touch pass. And Fuller, who dropped six picks last season (per Cris Collinsworth), dropped this one. Fuller will never have an easier pick in his life. Had he caught it, the Bears could have—minimum—tried a game-clinching field goal somewhere near the two-minute warning. What a drop.

What I Learned

Rams coach Sean McVay, who begins his second season tonight at Oakland, on what he learned in his rookie year, as the youngest coach in modern NFL history:

"I would say the most important thing I learned is this: It's okay to think you don't have the answer to everything. There's actually strength in being able to say, 'I don't know, but let's figure it out together.' Or, 'Let's lean on the people who have a lot more experience than I do,' to be able to learn from them. What you also learn is that this is an extremely humbling game. You know when I learned that? When I got hired to be a head coach, and I got a chance to hire some of these guys to come on to our staff—guys who I am thinking to myself, 'I get to coach with this guy?' Wade Phillips on defense, Joe Barry as an assistant head coach. John Fassel on special teams—I know nothing about special teams, and here's this guy who's as good as anyone in the league, on our team. All our coaches, working together. If you get a staff like we had, we all make each other better.

“I learned this from Mike Tomlin—who’s been a big help to me: Everybody’s got all the answers and no accountability. I was that guy. Before I called plays or even got into this role, you’re like, ‘Oh yeah, I’d do it this way.’ Well it’s a little bit different when you actually have to do it.

“I learned how important it is to bring in the right people to influence your team. Andrew Whitworth, Robert Woods. Smart guys, team guys who can help influence and affect the locker room in the right way. There’s real power in that.

“Something really important I learned: If I was trying to be involved in every facet of the job, I think I would’ve been really overwhelmed—and I would have done the team a disservice. Defense and special teams ... I knew enough so that I could at least communicate to our players. But to try and stick my nose in and be involved in those areas when I had smarter people to do it, that would not have been smart. If there’s a major decision to make, or a [replay] challenge on a defensive play or special-teams play, we’ll talk about it. Mostly, though, I’m not gonna override Wade Phillips’ call. Why would I?

“And it’s okay to devote myself to the offense especially when you’ve got a young quarterback who needs me like Jared [Goff]. People might say, ‘Well, why aren’t you standing on the sidelines to watch the defense?’ I think people have the misinterpretation that I don’t care about the defense. Of course I care about defense and special teams. But I just think it’s too hard to call plays in this league and think that I’m not gonna look at what just happened in the previous series when the offense comes off the field. It’s okay to do what’s best for the team that way, even if it doesn’t look like what a head coach should do.”

Numbers Game

Watching the Falcons stumble offensively throughout the loss to Philadelphia, I thought, This has to be the highest-paid collection of offensive talent in football. How do they look so feeble here? Credit to the Eagles, of course, for swarming around Matt Ryan all game. But let’s see how the Falcons’ big-money guys on offense compare to the other big offenses in football. I used Over The Cap, and added the cap numbers of the seven highest-paid offensive players on some of the best offensive teams in football.

- Atlanta’s top seven adds up to \$67.61 million ... and that’s with a reasonable \$17.7M this year for Ryan. His cap hit in two years will be \$31.8 million.
- The Saints, fourth in the NFL in points scored last year, and with Drew Brees counting for \$24 million this year: \$65.46 million for the top seven.
- The Eagles, third in the NFL in points scored last year: \$53.44 million for the top seven.
- The Patriots, second in the league in scoring last year: \$53.38 million for the top seven.
- The Rams, first in scoring last year: \$50.95 million for the top seven.

One game is not a fair way to judge an offense. At all. But the Falcons’ last two games have been in Philadelphia. They’ve scored 22 points in eight quarters. It’s not good enough, and the Falcons haven’t looked like a good NFL offense in either game. They’ve got to be better to be playing football in February.

Factoidness

We won't award style points here, but it is worth noting that in his last four games—against 11-6 Atlanta, 14-3 Minnesota, 15-3 New England and 0-0 Atlanta—Nick Foles is 4-0, with a 68.6 completion percentage and a 99.9 rating.

King of the Road

What would you say if I told you the best hotel in the NFL is in Green Bay? It is. It's Lodge Kohler, across the street from Lambeau Field.

Last week, in town to do the Aaron Rodgers-Bart Starr story for NBC's Football Night in America show, I had a pretty good night, for a nightly rate of \$119 in Lodge Kohler. I checked into my room, saw the cool 1959 Packers bench portrait of Paul Hornung, Max McGee and Jim Taylor on the wall, used the bedside tablet ("WELCOME PETER KING") to check the weather for the next day's TV shoot in Lambeau Field, had a Hinterland Cherry Wheat brew while doing the writing at the brew pub next door, came back to the fifth floor of Lodge Kohler and ate a dinner of walleye with a fresh salad, and went to sleep in some sort of nirvana-type king bed. Silent night. Not a sound to be heard. In the morning, I went down for a latte in the breakfast place on the ground floor, sat outside and took in a warm and murky morning as Green Bay woke up. Then I went back to the bathroom with the apt photo of a mud-splattered Willie Wood and Herb Adderley on the wall, and thought how much they would like this bathroom after a day in the Lambeau mud. I used the shower with the Kohler fixtures and the double shower-head with the digital thermostat regulating just how hot I wanted the water (what a country) ... and then walked over to Lambeau Field to interview Rodgers on the field after their midday practice.

The place reminds me of a high-end Park Hyatt or Le Meridien, except with a gigantic black-and-white photo of Bart Starr burrowing in for the decisive touchdown in the Ice Bowl in the lobby. There is no way you'll sniff this Spring Hill Suites-like \$119 nightly rate at Lodge Kohler on a football weekend, or maybe most weekends. But come to see the new Titletown District, with food and drink a football field to let the kids run till they drop, and maybe just sit at the bar overlooking Lambeau and have a New Glarus Spotted Cow ale. Life could be worse.

Intelligent Football

This week, I asked Pro Football Focus for some telling tidbits you could use in your pre-game study for Jets-Lions, who play the 15th game of the season in the early ESPN tilt. Here goes:

- The Robby Anderson factor. The fleet and unknown Jets deep threat will be just that for rookie starter Sam Darnold tonight. On passes of 20 yards or longer downfield last year, Anderson led all receivers in the league, with seven. With Jermaine Kearse doubtful tonight, look for Darnold-to-Anderson down the field three or four times.
- Beware Glover Quin, Jets. When targeted last season, the Detroit safety allowed a puny passer rating of 55.4. I remember in Lions camp this year Matthew Stafford raving about Quin. Darnold has to know where he is on every snap. And Quin's not the only stingy guy back there: Darrius Slay allowed a 55.6 rating when targeted.

- Dropbacks under pressure. Only Russell Wilson was pressured more than Stafford's 230 drops under pressure in 2017. If you've got Leonard Williams in your fantasy sack league (kidding), put him in your lineup tonight. But then there this ...
- This is why Frank Ragnow was such a hot commodity by draft day, and why Stafford's glad to have him. The rookie starting guard for the Lions played 42 games at Arkansas. Sacks allowed in his college career: zero.
- Targeting Darron Lee, perhaps? Could be a bullseye on Lee, the Jets' inside linebacker, in coverage tonight. He allowed 50 completion in 69 coverage snaps last season, and an opposing passer rating of 111.4. Among 52 ILBs ranked by PFF, Lee was dead last in cumulative ILB ratings.

Newman!

Email from the readers...

On the debacle in Miami. From Lee S.: "I understand safety issues during a storm, but ... this game is not fair to players on either team, or the fans. There's got to be a better way to deal with this. Any thoughts?"

I think the alternative to playing the game to its conclusion on Sunday is probably worse in any scenario. It was nearly a seven-hour ordeal. But the game was over at 8 ET, meaning the Titans probably got back to Nashville by about 11 p.m. CT. As bad as it was, the Titans could get a fairly normal night's sleep, then get up Monday to prepare for their home opener next Sunday on a fairly normal schedule. Say after the second delay, the NFL called the game and said the game would be resumed on Monday. That meant the Titans would have to find a place to stay overnight, and then prepare to play an hour or so of football at some point on Monday. Would the Dolphins give refunds? Open the stadium Monday to fans for the conclusion of the game? Play in front of no fans? Finishing the game Sunday was the best of some bad alternatives, I think.

He's not the only Big Blue fan who feels this way. From John D.: "Why can't the Giants cut Ereck Flowers? If Eli gets hurt because of him, he'll need witness protection."

The good news, John, is that Flowers, who obviously was a sieve against the Jags on Sunday, was not drafted by Dave Gettleman, and his head coach, Pat Shurmur, has no reason to be invested in him. Believe me: If they have even a slightly better option with backup Chad Wheeler, an undrafted swing tackle who started 40 games in his college career at USC, they'll give him a shot. Hard to imagine he'd do worse than Flowers.

The anthem stuff bugs a Swedish fan. From Peter W. of Sweden: "Love your column. I've been a long-time fan of the NFL since the early 80's. Recent years have been a revolution through NFL GamePass; instead of spending occasional all-nighters, I've been able to enjoy all games of the season at my convenience. However, when my subscription came up for renewal this season, I cancelled. The reason is simple: I believe in freedom of expression, and the NFL—through the anthem protest ban—does not. As much as it pains me, I will not be financing an organization that acts in this way towards its one true asset: the players.

The NFL has a difficult problem on its hands this year, particularly if the very limited demonstrations continue. They seem to be dying down—Malcolm Jenkins stood for the anthem Thursday night instead of staying inside the locker room—but it’s always going to be an issue for some in the American audience who are infuriated by an expression of opinion during the anthem. And the league has to hear voices like yours, Peter, because you’re a good fan who cares about the game and about freedom of expression. Thanks for writing, and for reading.

10 Things I Think I Think

1. I think these are my quick-hit thoughts of Week 1:

a. 8:13 p.m. Central Time. Quietest I’ve heard Lambeau in a big game in a long time. When Aaron Rodgers is down on the field and his knee might have been injured, there’s a hush all over the state, not just the stadium.

b. Tarik Cohen: Darren Sproles II.

c. Pats have now beaten Houston four times in Foxboro since September 2016—by 27, 18, three and seven points.

d. We might have been early, we national media doofuses, in promoting the Chargers to kings of the AFC West and thinking the Chiefs would have a new-quarterback-adjustment season.

e. Pat Mahomes does not look like he needs much of an adjustment. To anything.

f. The speed of the Chiefs is downright toxic.

g. It’s going to be a loooong year for Ereck Flowers, the new right tackle for the Giants, and he handled his awful game against the Jags’ front with not much class; he was the only one of five offensive linemen to not be available to the press post-game.

h. Nice debut for Niners linebacker Fred Warner, the third-round rookie from BYU, playing for Reuben Foster. Looks very much like he belongs.

i. Congrats, Adrian Peterson—not only for passing Jim Brown on the all-time rushing list with a 96-yard rushing day ... but also for running harder and with more elusiveness than the 2017 Adrian Peterson. Impressive performance at Arizona.

j. What is that coverage plan, Jags, that releases Odell Beckham Jr., to freedom across the middle, with no one covering him?

k. A.J. Green with two fumbles at Indy, giving him eight in his last 46 games. Too many.

l. All those who had the Bucs scoring two touchdowns in the first 13 minutes at trendy Super Bowl pick New Orleans, raise your hand. (Stop. Just stop. You did not think the Bucs would score two touchdowns all day, never mind in the first quarter.) And to think that was only the beginning.

m. Ravens receivers looked good, particularly on the toe-tap, back-of-end-zone TD by Michael Crabtree.

- n. Anybody running against the Jags this year? I don't see how.
- o. Yannick Ngakoue is going to be a very good and very impactful player in the NFL for a long time.
- p. Good to see Todd Haley in midseason form, taunting Steelers corner Artie Burns midway through Cleveland-Pittsburgh.
- q. Take a bow, Howie Roseman, for realizing how important the offensive and defensive lines are. The Eagles GM built great depth especially on the defensive front (Michael Bennett, Haloti Ngata, Chris Long) at the expense of offensive skill players.
- r. That's a winning formula, because going seven deep on the defensive line will be significantly more important than receiver depth when two or three on the DL are nicked come January.
- s. I know Julio Jones is great, and he probably got jobbed on what would have been a 50-yard bomb that he juggled and likely caught Thursday night, but he drops too many balls (33 since opening day 2014).
- t. Yikes: "Here's a guy who doesn't give a damn," Steelers guard Ramon Foster told Ed Bouchette of the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, speaking of Le'Veon Bell, and the reception for Bell will be downright chilly if he ever reports to the Steelers this year.
- u. Very good nugget from Ian Rapoport on NFL Network, with news that the Patriots signed offensive coordinator (and perhaps head-coach-in-waiting) Josh McDaniels to a five-year deal to keep him in New England, and that McDaniels is "being paid like a first-time head coach ... At one point his contract eclipses \$4 million per year."
- v. Cool pooch punt by the Chargers, erasing Tyreek Hill for a moment with kicker Caleb Sturgis dumping a weird punt inside the 15-yard line.
- w. It's like Andrew Luck never left.
- x. Another year, another disaster of an offensive line for Seattle. It's John Schneider's Achilles.
- y. Glad to see Akiem Hicks getting the Al-and-Cris props last night in Bears-Packers. He's one of the small handful of truly underrated players in the NFL right now.
2. I think, Bills fans, it's time to do something you may not want to do but simply must: Flood your team's switchboard this morning demanding your team sign Colin Kaepernick.
3. I think the charming, compelling story of Week 2 will be the Le'Veon Bell story. Or, rather, the Le'Veon Bell/James Conner story. Or maybe the James Conner/Le'Veon Bell story. So many possibilities in the wake of the great first game of the year by Conner—a league-high 31 carries for a league-high 135 rushing yards in the 21-21 tie in Cleveland. Add in his 57 receiving yards, and that's 192 scrimmage yards. Bell hasn't had more in a game since December 2016. So what do you do if you're Mike Tomlin and Bell comes in this week or next? I think I'd do what Bell and his agent apparently want the Steelers to do: don't overuse Bell. That way, he'd theoretically be fresh as the season gets into its biggest days. He'd be fresh, relatively speaking, for free agency next spring. Conner's performance was a revelation. If

I'm Tomlin, I'm secretly thrilled despite the tie, because now he can say they're going to be fine without Bell and mean it, and he can think if Bell comes in they've got the best rushing attack they could possible have.

4. I think the best news for both the league and the players was Adam Schefter's report Sunday that the two sides are unlikely to come to an agreement on player compoment during the national anthem. Nothing good for either side can come unless all sides agree to a solution.

5. I think, after watching Khalil Mack's performance in 42 of 60 defensive snaps Sunday night, anyone who thinks Mack is overpaid, or thinks the Bears overpaid for him ... well, you're probably not a person who is steeped in logic.

6. I think it's time for your quickie Green Bay Packers history quiz, commemorating the start of their 100th season. Ready? (Answers in number 9, below.)

a. The Packers went 10-1 in 1919. What was the name of the team that beat them in the final game of that season?

b. The greatest two coaches in Packer history, who have statues at Lambeau Field, both finished their careers as the head coach of which NFL franchise?

c. Who caught the last pass Brett Favre ever threw in Lambeau Field as a Packer?

d. On the morning of the Ice Bowl, Dec. 31, 1967, a Dallas Cowboy took some coffee back to his room at a Green Bay hotel to try to warm up. When he picked it up off his widow sill a few minutes after getting to his room, it was filled with coffee ice chunks. Who was the player?

e. Bart Starr retains a physical memory of that Ice Bowl game today when it get chilly where he lives, in Birmingham, Ala. What is that physical memory?

7. I think I have tried to tell Mike Florio 68 times that an 18-game or 17-game schedule (barring a scenario in which non-punters/kickers are limited to only 16 games per season) is never happening. But he won't listen to me. Maybe he'll listen to influential Giants owner John Mara, who, via the indefatigable Steve Serby of the New York Post, said this about expanding the NFL slate: "We were negotiating the CBA in 2011 ... Jerry Jones was in one of our meetings. We were on a break and we were about to go in and talk to the players about the schedule. He said, 'I want to try to sell them on the 18-game regular season.' And my response was, 'Jerry, they're adamantly opposed to that. You have no chance.' He says, 'I'll bet I can sell 'em on it.' I said, 'You sell them on the 18-game season, I will walk around Times Square for the week in a Dallas Cowboys sweatshirt.' He said, 'You're on.' We walked into the meeting room, and he barely got the words out of his mouth, and the players said: 'No way. That's a deal breaker. We'll walk out of here right now.' So I did not have to walk around Times Square wearing a Dallas Cowboys sweatshirt."

8. I think John Mara will never have to walk around New York in a Cowboys sweatshirt.

9. I think you'll like the answers to the Packer quiz.

- a. The Packers lost to the Beloit Fairies, 6-0, on the last day of the 1919 season. (In fact, the Packers lost once in 1919 and once in 1920, both to Beloit.)
- b. Curly Lambeau and Vince Lombardi finished their NFL coaching careers in Washington.
- c. Corey Webster of the New York Giants. His interception in overtime of the 2007 NFC Championship Game led to a Giant upset of the Packers.
- d. Defensive tackle Bob Lilly had that iced coffee in 1967.
- e. The tips of some of Starr's fingers were frostbitten that day, so when it gets cold in Alabama, he feels a tingle in the fingertips.

10. I think these are my other thoughts of the week:

- a. I still feel bad for Serena Williams. She's a great champion who melted down in the finals of U.S. Open. It was a bad look to lose her cool, and the game penalty certainly seemed excessive. That chair umpire had waaaaay too quick an emotional trigger and influenced this match too much. I empathize more with Williams than with the rules of the game. And then for Williams to admonish the crowd by saying, "No more booing!" ... what a roller coaster it was.
- b. And what a match by Naomi Osaka. Beating Serena in straight sets ... wow. Osaka is a fitting and honorable successor to Williams, if Saturday is the judge.
- c. A stupid rule, telling coaches they can't coach during a match. What sport prohibits coaches from coaching during competition? What sense does that make? Plus, as Chris Evert said on ESPN: "Every coach coaches." That's what led to this crap. Fix that rule.
- d. Man, that trophy presentation had to be the toughest assignment of Tom Rinaldi's life.
- e. Tougher than our "CNN NFL Preview" show back in the day, Tom? When the audience was seven janitors in Kansas, plus our families?
- f. My favorite story of the week: It's from a master craftsman of storytelling, Dave Sheinin of the Washington Post, about a pitcher who, at 30, had his heart broken on the evening of his first major-league game for the Phillies.
- g. It's hard to imagine never forgetting a day as arbitrary as Sept. 5, 2006, and it's hard to imagine never forgetting the weather on Sept. 5, 2006. But then, we're not Brian Mazone. Dave, that's a gem.
- h. Football Story of the Week: Gary Klein of the Los Angeles Times has done a really cool series on the four big players the Rams acquired this offseason—Brandin Cooks, Ndamukong Suh, Marcus Peters, Aqib Talib. Klein did four oral histories. What a smart, well-executed concept. My favorite: The Suh story, which highly educational on how the Rams do business, and how bright Suh is.
- i. Podcast/Radio Hour of the Week: I brought this to your attention a year ago when I first heard it, and if you didn't listen to the Radio Lab gem then, please do so now. It aired again over the weekend on

many public radio stations. It's about the man, Oliver Sipple, who saved Gerald Ford's life one day in San Francisco—and, in the process, cost himself his own life. A truly amazing story.

j. Anecdote of the Week: from my buddy Don Banks, for the Patriots team site, a great story from Gene Steratore, the next CBS rules analyst and former NFL ref. Steratore did 16 Tom Brady games over the years and tells this story about being in the trenches with Brady: "I had to dig Tom out of pile one time against the Jets and wound up getting a bloody nose for it. In a (2011) New York Jets game there was a fumble and a pile underneath ... Tom was underneath a pile of Jets players and as a referee you're always concerned about your quarterback if he gets hit ... So I was clearing things out, getting defenders out of there and Tom kind of turned his head really quick underneath the pile and my nose being so small, it got in the way, and when he turned his facemask it just clipped my nose. I didn't know it, but he cut my nose actually with his facemask. One of my crew-mates came over and said 'Gene, you got popped on the nose. Do you want to put a bandage on your nose?' And I said, 'No, I'm not going to put a bandage on this nose. It's already big enough to draw attention.'"

k. Memo to Florida State, after the night game last week with the weird uniforms: It's fruitless to put names on the jerseys in whatever blackish color that was when you can't read the names.

l. Not to overreact or anything, but the Houston Astros are still the best team in baseball. The bullpen convinces me. Those guys—never heard of anyone but Roberto Osuna—all throw such gas.

m. Alex Bregman, the future is yours. What a swing. The Astros have so much good talent. For their sake, and for the sake of baseball, and the sake of Ben Reiter's book, I hope they can stay intact for a long time. ("Astroball," baby!)

n. So glad CNN put "RBG" on TV last week. If you haven't seen it, it's the tale of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. It's also the story of an American hero.

o. My wife and I were fortunate to see the "Springsteen on Broadway" show the other night. As Bruce Springsteen vets—we've seen him 20 or so times—we entered the theater in New York City not sure how this show would compare to a concert. It's impossible to say what's better, a Springsteen concert in his prime, or this show, with Bruce telling stories about growing up in New Jersey (before it was cool to be from New Jersey, thanks largely to Springsteen) and singing/talking some of his favorite songs. It's like asking the question: Who's better—Michael or LeBron? I mean, who knows? Who cares? Both are incredibly good at basketball. Same with Bruce the master concert guy and Bruce the vulnerable Broadway guy. He's so human in it, putting himself down. He pokes a lot of fun at himself. He says he wrote about all these teen and post-teen moments of life in cars, and yet didn't have a driver's license. "I've never worked 9 to 5," he told the audience in the 939-seat Walter Kerr Theater. "I've never done hard labor. Yet, it's almost all I've written about."

p. It's really hard to categorize this show. It's not a concert. It's not a play. It's a confessional/storytelling session. So much about the meaning of his mother and father, like the time he had a dream he was sitting with his father watching a Bruce Springsteen concert, and thinking how much he owed his dad, even though they had a contentious relationship. The show was all like that—peeks into an interesting man's life.

q. Two other things: Mostly, the theater was silent. So strange to hear audience silence during "Tenth Avenue Freezeout," and all of the 15 songs. I loved it. What really comes through is how great a

musician Springsteen is—at the piano and with the guitar and the harmonica. It's special to really hear it without the screams of a crowd.

r. Springsteen obviously is doing the show by rote. (He's got a teleprompter.) But you hear the vulnerability in his voice and his body language so often, and his gratitude to us for his great life—"Thank you for the joy you've given back to me" is how he put it—seemed so heartfelt.

s. So yes. I recommend it. You might have to take a loan out to do so, but run to see it. Do not walk.

t. Beernerdness: My very strong recommendation for you when you take the drive across the United States, and figure you want to see Green Bay and Lambeau Field (good choices), is to pop into Kröll's West, across from Lambeau on the west side of the stadium, and have a cheeseburger and a ridiculously ice-cold Spotted Cow (New Glarus Brewing, New Glarus, Wis.) on draft. There might be better dinners on this planet, but I am not familiar with them.

u. Coffeenerdness: Thanks for putting Luna espresso in the Luna Stout, Hinterland Brewing (Green Bay, Wis.) That is some rich, delicious espresso.

v. Three weeks and 18 games left, and the Orioles have 102 losses.

w. Interesting story from Chris Suellentrop of Politico, who accomplished an incredible feat of self-flagellation in one month: He read all 20 Bob Woodward political books. And he rated them from worst to first.

x. I mean, if you're questioning the veracity of "Fear: Trump in the White House," the Woodward book about the chaos of the Trump presidency, consider a couple of things. One: the dogged reporting of Woodward and Carl Bernstein got Richard Nixon out of the White House. Two: Woodward has a history of getting White House staffers to tell him what's going on inside presidencies ... and he keeps getting book contracts to write more of them. Book publishers do like salacious details. They also do not like to be sued. And if Woodward was an unreliable reporter, Simon and Schuster would not have engaged him to do this book. You don't do 19 political books, many to critical success, and then all of a sudden make up stuff in the 20th.

Monday, Monday

Fruitlessly, I take my own stab at picking the Monday nighters.

New York Jets 22, Detroit 17. It hasn't been too big for Sam Darnold yet, and I don't think it'll be too big for him tonight at 7:10 ET. Plus, I like the Mr. Inside (Steve McClendon) and Mr. Outside (Leonard Williams) aspect of the Jet front, particularly because I don't trust (yet) the Detroit offensive line, or the running game.

L.A. Rams 33, Oakland 16. Jon Gruden's on TV tonight. ESPN. Monday Night Football. Same as it ever was, except he'll be on the ground instead of in the TV booth, and he'll be in a visor and windbreaker, not a coat and tie. Not the best foe for a re-debut. "We might have to go out there and score on every possession," Raiders wideout Amari Cooper said the other day. Well, at least six of them, assuming four touchdowns and two field goals. I just don't see the post-Khalil Mack Raiders (who allowed opposing passers to complete 68.1 percent last year—only the Browns were worse) getting enough pressure on

Jared Goff to significantly influence the game. I can't wait to see the impact of the Aaron Donald/Ndamukong Suh duo playing together for the first time. I like the Raider interior of left guard Kelechi Osemele, center Rodney Hudson and right guard Gabe Jackson, so it'll be interesting to see how destructive the Rams can be up front.

The Week Ahead

Tuesday ... Baltimore. Happy 40th birthday, Ed Reed, the seventh-leading interceptor of all time.

Wednesday ... Sunrise, Fla. Happy 45th birthday, Ki-Jana Carter, the first pick in the 1995 draft.

Thursday ... Watkinsville, Ga. Happy 50th birthday, Brad Johnson, the Super Bowl 37 champion quarterback for the Tampa Bay Bucs.

Sunday ... Jacksonville. AFC Championship Game rematch, in friendlier confines for the Jaguars. Tom Brady, though, is 3-0 in Jacksonville in his career, including the three-point win over the Eagles in Super Bowl 39.

The Adieu Haiku

Might be early, but ...
Can we vote for MVP?
Now? Aaron Rodgers.

Von Miller has three sacks, moves into top 50 all time

By Charean Williams
Pro Football Talk
Sept. 10, 2018

Everyone will wake up Monday morning talking about Khalil Mack's debut with the Bears, and rightfully so. But before anyone gives Mack the defensive player of the year award after one game, it's worth glancing at Von Miller's stat line.

Three sacks of Russell Wilson. Seven tackles. Four quarterback hits. Three tackles for loss. Two forced fumbles. A fumble recovery.

Miller was asked if today signaled his return to an elite level of play.

"I just took it one day at a time," Miller said, via quotes distributed by the team. "You know me, I never move faster than I have to. I never move slower than I need to and just stay in the moment. We've got a great team. We got a great win today. We played great defense. This is how you want to start a season off."

Miller moved into sole possession of 50th place on the league's all-time sacks list. He now has 86.5, having just started his eighth season after the Broncos made him a first-round pick out of Texas A&M.

He passed Leonard Marshall, La'Roi Glover, Greg Ellis, James Harrison, Osi Umenyiora and Willie McGinest on the sack list Sunday.

"It's great," Miller said. "To be 29 and to be in the top 50, the league has been around for [close to] 100 years now. It's great, man. It's a true blessing. It just shows you the type of teammates that I've had, from Derek Wolfe to Elvis Dumervil to Shaun Phillips to DeMarcus [Ware], and of course, to Bradley Chubb and Shane Ray and Shaq [Barrett]. It just shows you the type of support system that I have. My teammates, I make it hard on those guys every single day, and they make it easy for me, so it's great to have teammates like I've had. It's great to be on this journey."

Miller finished second to Mack in defensive player of the year voting two years ago. Neither player received a vote for the award in last year's voting.

Emmanuel Sanders' big day lifts Broncos over Seahawks

By Michael David Smith

Pro Football Talk

Sept. 10, 2018

New Broncos quarterback Case Keenum had an up-and-down game in his Denver debut, but whenever he threw to an old reliable receiver, he was up.

Emmanuel Sanders had a huge game today, catching 10 passes from Keenum for 135 yards, and the Broncos held on for a hard-fought 27-24 victory.

When throwing to Sanders, Keenum was 10-for-11 for 135 yards. When throwing to all his other receivers, Keenum was 15-for-28 for 194 yards. Keenum threw three touchdown passes and three interceptions.

Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson also threw three touchdown passes, despite losing No. 1 receiver Doug Baldwin to a knee injury. The big revelation for the Seahawks was Will Dissly, who had three catches for 105 yards and a touchdown.

Denver's pass rush got to Wilson for six sacks, including three from Von Miller. With Miller and Sanders continuing to play well, the Broncos may be contenders in the AFC West. But they'll need more consistency from Keenum.