

Lunch Special: What can Broncos fans expect from Case Keenum this season?

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
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Denver Post columnist Mark Kiszla answered questions about Denver sports in a live Lunch Special chat on Monday. Here are the highlights:

Kiz, how did everyone miss on Phillip Lindsay? He looked really good in yesterday's win.

Kiszla: I watch a whole lotta college football. Do I grade every player on every snap? Nope. But I do know this: At the college level, I thought Phillip Lindsay was a more impressive running back at Colorado than Royce Freeman was at Oregon. And the Broncos drafted Freeman in the third round. But the word from NFL scouts was this: 1) Lindsay was undersized (well, duh), and 2) He was not necessarily great against great opposition. Well, he's proving a whole lotta scouts wrong. And it's not a fluff story, it's real, to steal a line from Broncos coach Vance Joseph.

Kiz, love your work. Is this CU football team the real deal? Beating CSU was expected, but taking down Nebraska was huge! Should we expect a bowl game this year?

Kiszla: Thanks much. And thanks for reading. Tell your friends to subscribe to the online version of The Post (shameless plug). Is CU team for real? Well, I know this much: The arm talent of quarterback Steven Montez is NFL caliber. And, so far this year, Montez has taken a much more serious approach to his craft than in earlier years, when few on the CU campus had more fun than the QB (not that there's anything wrong with that). Maybe a bigger deal: The emergence of Laviska Shenault. He's 6-foot-1, 215. Great speed, great hands.

That's an NFL player. For certain. At beginning of season I thought 6-6 and bowl game was reasonable goal for the Buffs. Now, they can strive for me. How far can CU go and how high can Buffs climb in the polls? That's up to how much the defense can improve.

Kiz, can Von Miller continue this insane pace and rack up 48 sacks this year? Seriously, he looked amazing yesterday. What did he do in the offseason?

Kiszla: Von Miller is one of few NFL players alive that can both record 3 sacks in a game and wear pink skinny jeans after the game ... and do both with style. 48 sacks in a year? Well, even Miller isn't that big of freak. But 20 sacks? Possible. And if he gets 20 sacks, the Broncos are going back to the playoffs. Guaranteed. What did Miller do in the offseason?

Maybe it's what the Broncos did ... John Elway got Miller help in Bradley Chubb. Add a healthy Shane Ray back in the pass-rush rotation and it's impossible for foes to consistently double — or triple — team the Vonster. As we saw in Super Bowl 50, Miller is the most important player on the Denver roster.

What's your thought on moving Adam Jones to the No. 2 cornerback spot and putting Bradley Roby back as the third CB? Denver got killed several times deep.

Kizla: Let's put aside, at least for a moment, the history of Pacman Jones off-the-field troubles. When the Broncos brought in a corner that's turning 35 years old late this month, it screamed that the coaches and front office were not happy with the way the secondary looked. I made mention repeatedly during the preseason, and sometimes to the annoyance of "media" members paid to spin everything in the Broncos' favor, that Bradley Roby was getting torched by rookie Courtland Sutton in practice. This was a sign Sutton was the real deal. But it was also a sign that if Roby was having trouble covering Sutton, the regular season would see him targeted by opposing offensive coordinators. Roby is a solid football player. But as I've said from Day 1, I think his future in this league might be at safety.

Where does Devontae Booker fall into everything now? Phillip Lindsay and Royce Freeman look like they're the clear 1-2 punch for the Broncos.

Kizla: Newsflash: Things can change over the course of a long NFL season. Injuries happen. Stuff happens. (I do a pretty fair imitation of Captain Obvious, don't you think?) But what you saw from Devontae Booker in the season-opener will be his role until something changes. He will be given a carry here or there to give Royce Freeman and Phillip Lindsay some rest. He will be used some in pass situations, as both a blocker in the backfield and a receiving target. If Freeman and Lindsay both struggle in a game, Booker will have a chance to get back in the active rotation ... at least for a quarter or two.

Jake Butt or Jeff Heurman? Did either one stand out more than the other for you on Sunday?

Kizla: I admit. I don't get the Broncos love affair with Jeff Heurman. Nothing against Heurman, but Butt is a better option. Now, that being said, Butt does have his limitations. He's good at finding the soft spot in the zone. He's good at bringing in the football. But he doesn't have the skills to be a game-breaker on anything close to a regular basis. While Case Keenum should have a competent target when looking for the tight end, this isn't a Pro Bowl position for the Broncos. And, as I recently told our old friend, former Nuggets coach and fantasy-football geek Doug Moe, Keenum's favorite target this season on third down, and often in the red zone, is going to be Emmanuel Sanders.

What are your thoughts on Case Keenum? He showed flashes of brilliance and flashes of terribleness. Regardless, after last season, it's nice to watch a Broncos game where Denver is actually able to move forward down the field.

Kizla: Case Keenum will have better games than the season-opener against Seattle. And he'll have worse games. But this game was a microcosm of what Keenum is ... and isn't. The more I watch Keenum, the more I see Alex Smith. Keenum is good at reading the defense prior to the snap, good at checking down, good at working the middle of the field. He can keep a play alive with his feet. But his arm talent is mediocre, by NFL standards.

As coaches have been telling you all offseason, and as Keenum repeated after throwing three interceptions against the Seahawks, Denver needs him to manage the game. He's not a top 10 QB in this league. But he's low maintenance, which the coaches love, provided Keenum doesn't try to do too much. Can Denver ride Keenum to the Super Bowl. No way. No how. Carrying the Broncos to the Super Bowl is Von Miller's job. Keenum is here not to mess it up. He's a big improvement over Trevor Siemian. But don't expect brilliance, be happy with solid game management from Keenum. Please. And thanks.

How would you describe the defense? It held Seattle to 25 points and sacked Russell Wilson six times but we are giving up big plays.

Kizla: I would describe the Denver defense like this: Von Miller is a Vonster. But the secondary is a mess. Chris Harris Jr is great. Justin Simmons is a safety on the rise (especially when he rises up for a pick). But the No Fly Zone is dead.

I do a radio segment every Saturday at 8:15 a.m. on 1600 AM (another shameless plug). I was asked last weekend my biggest concern about the Broncos heading into the season. While most folks had tabbed the offensive line as the biggest area of concern, I picked the secondary. And I saw nothing against the Seahawks that changed my mind. TGFV. Thank Goodness for Von.

Fantasy football time: Demaryius Thomas or Emmanuel Sanders and why?

Kizla: You don't have a draft after the first week of games, do ya? Now that would be one whack league. But if you have to pick between Demaryius Thomas or Emmanuel Sanders from your roster, you go with Sanders. All. Day. Long. And. Every. Week. Sanders is Case Keenum's favorite target. By far. Sanders was Keenum's favorite target in training camp. Sanders was Keenum's favorite target in Game 1. Sanders should lead Denver in receptions because ... wait for it ... he is Keenum's favorite target.

Were Keenum's interceptions his fault? Too many gutsy plays being called perhaps?

Kizla: Case Keenum's interceptions were all on Case Keenum. He's not a gunslinger. He's not Aaron Rodgers. Case Keenum has to play within himself. Been trying to tell folks that. Maybe one or two will listen after seeing what happens to Keenum if he tries to do too much.

Any division rivals to watch out for?

Kizla: The Chiefs had a big first week. Is quarterback Patrick Mahomes really that good? If so, KC is winning this division.

It seems like once again the Broncos linebackers struggled with covering tight ends. This was a big problem last year and I didn't see any improvement yesterday. How can they improve on tight end coverage?

Kizla: Get new linebackers. I think Brandon Marshall and Todd Davis are righteous dudes. But I've harped on inside backer as a position of weakness on this team for a while.

In light of all the improvements from the Broncos (quarterback, wide receiver, running back and punter upgrades included), what are the major (new) weaker positions this year than 2017-2018?

Kizla: Secondary. See my earlier answer.

How'd the Broncos manage to pull this game off despite multiple interceptions by Keenum?

Kizla: The Vonster is not a man. He's a football cyborg.

Bufs, Rams and Broncos all win with fourth-quarter comebacks. What a weekend.

Kiszla: I had the great, good pleasure of covering the Buffs and Broncos victories in person. Now that required a 4:30 a.m. wake-up call on Sunday. But it was well worth the sleep deprivation.

Marquette King placed a couple of punts well yesterday. But where's big leg that going to make 60-yard punts commonplace at altitude? Haven't seen one yet.

Kiszla: Watching Marquette King in camp, what impressed me most was his ability to make the ball kick left or right toward the sideline when placing it inside the 20 yard line. You saw the kick left versus the Seahawks. Those booming 60 yarders? They are in King's leg. But he will also hit some end-over-end punts that will be head-scratchers. King is a unique individual ... and a little nutty. But it's going to be fun to watch him work.

Lets talk a bit about the Rockies! Tough series with LA. Wished we could have pulled it off on Friday with the bases loaded in the seventh and another failed effort in the ninth, but still 0.5 games up in the division. Big series against the D-Backs. What do the Rockies have to do to pull off their first division victory?

Kiszla: It all comes down to pitching. Kyle Freeland deserves to be in the Cy Young conversation. German Marquez can be lights out. But the back end of that rotation, especially Tyler Anderson, is taking on water and giving up runs at an alarming rate. Can manager Bud Black find a work around? Can the Colorado offense start winning instead of losing 9-6 games? Those two questions will reveal if the Rockies win their first division title.

Quite the contrast with the LA Dodgers, huh? They've got what was accurately called a "line change" when they're substituting players. Their bench and their bullpen seem to reflect a \$200 million payroll. But we've got some good hitters, just not as deep. Question: Do we have enough pitching to get to the playoffs? My heart says yes and my head is taking xanax.

Kiszla: I prefer two fingers of bourbon to calm the nerves at the end of another night at Coors Field when the outcome changes in the final frames and the deadline to file my column is 10:05 p.m. But I feel your anxiety. Get used to it. It's only going to get more intense from now until October. We wouldn't want playoff race to be any other way, would we?

Can three and a half effective starters — Antonio Senzatela is up and down — lead the Rockies into the playoffs?

Kiszla: Three and half men. See what I did there? Three and half starting pitchers are enough in the playoffs, but it's no more than 50-50 that Rockies have enough starting pitching to grind through the final 20 regular-season games to make the playoffs.

Kiz, I know you used to love traveling to San Diego every Broncos season. Now that it's not an option anymore, where are you looking most to visiting this year?

Kiszla: Some fans in New England will never forgive NFL commissioner Roger Goodell for Deflategate. I will never forgive Goodell for letting the Chargers leave San Diego on his watch. Road trips I'm looking forward most to at this point are the Big Apple in early October and San Francisco (although not the drive to Santa Clara) in early December.

When you're not riling up readers and watching sports, what's on your TV screen?

Kiszla: Rile up readers? Moi? Never. I do watch sports on TV. Too much sports, especially this time of year, because I'm a college football junkie. But, to tell the truth, I'm not big on TV otherwise. I love listening to music. Live (recently saw Jason Isbell at Red Rocks, Carseat Headrest at the Gothic) or streaming online (Phosphorescent in my ears as I type this).

Broncos offense has 470 reasons to feel confident about opening win

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
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Nearly as many rush attempts as passes. Eight players who had at least one offensive touch. Seven pass plays that gained at least 20 yards. One sack allowed. And a whopping 470 yards.

The offense is back in Denver.

In Sunday's 27-24 win over the Seattle Seahawks, it was like the offense woke up from a two-year nap and it should fuel optimism it will return to NFL prominence after finishing 19th, 22nd and 27th in scoring from 2015-17.

The Broncos' yardage output for the offense led by coordinator Bill Musgrave was their most since 503 yards against San Diego in 2015 (Week 17).

"Billy's the man," left guard Ron Leary said. "I said that watching the third preseason game (at Washington). I wasn't playing and I said, 'This man is the real deal the way he calls plays and keeps the defense on their toes.' Hats off to him. He's the OC for a reason."

When Musgrave meets the media Thursday, instead of taking a victory lap, he will likely say the reason for the Broncos' offensive performance was the players. Maybe he should considering how bad the offense has been lately.

Musgrave called a game that allowed quarterback Case Keenum to throw for 329 yards and three touchdowns (helping offset his three interceptions), receivers Emmanuel Sanders and Demaryius Thomas to combine for 198 yards on 16 catches (two touchdowns) and rookie running backs Royce Freeman and Phillip Lindsay to rush for 15 times for 71 yards apiece.

The 470 yards was the fourth-most of Musgrave's coordinator career, behind 626 for Oakland in a 2016 overtime win at Tampa Bay and two games for Minnesota — 496 in a 2013 win over Chicago and 489 in a 2011 loss to the Broncos.

"Bill had a great plan as far as attacking (Seattle) in the run game and pass game," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said Monday.

Joseph said the Seahawks scrapped their usual single-high safety look for quarters coverage, which divides the deep part of the field among four defensive backs. "They hadn't shown that on tape ever — in five years," Joseph said.

Two ways to beat quarters coverage: Quick passes and "levels" route concepts.

In the quick game (slants and throws into the flats), Keenum was 16-of-18 passing for 142 yards and two touchdowns on throws that traveled five or fewer yards downfield. Lindsay turned a pass caught behind the line of scrimmage into a 29-yard touchdown.

Using levels routes allowed Keenum to probe the middle of the field and make Seattle's defenders decide who to cover — the intermediate or deep crosser. On Sanders' 43-yard touchdown, receiver Courtland Sutton ran an intermediate crosser. Sanders, running a deeper crossing route, became open when free safety Earl Thomas bit on Sutton.

"I loved the way Bill called the game," Keenum said. "Being our first real (game), it was awesome to see."

For Joseph, it was awesome to see the run game gain traction at the most important time. Leading by three with 2:28 remaining, Musgrave called six straight run plays, the first three gained 17, five and 15 yards to help run the clock down to the 61-second mark.

When Seattle played its traditional strong safety in the box, Musgrave used a fullback (Andy Janovich played 13 snaps) and two-tight end personnel. The Broncos ran a combined 32 plays (out of 74) with either a fullback or second tight end and also used Thomas in motion toward the offensive line to block.

The Broncos rushed 32 times for 146 yards (4.6 average), yet another encouraging sign for the offense.

"(Musgrave) had a plan to block the extra guy in the box (on) every single play," Joseph said. "To rush for 146 vs. a loaded box is quite difficult in this league and we did it."

Kiszla vs. O'Halloran: Is Phillip Lindsay the Broncos' best running back?

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
September 11, 2018

Question: Is the Broncos' best running back Royce Freeman or Phillip Lindsay?

Kiz: Among all the rookies in the Broncos' ballyhooed 2018 class, the player that made the biggest impact during the 27-24 victory over Seattle in season-opener was ... Phillip Lindsay. Am I wrong? After watching Lindsay rush for 71 yards and catch a 29-yard touchdown pass, teammate Chris Harris Jr. said it could not be a better story. Or could it? Might Lindsay become the envy of all those fantasy-league owners that drafted Royce Freeman?

O'Halloran: I literally have about four non-family friends, but about three dozen people came out of hiding to ask me about Freeman's fantasy potential when Vance Joseph made him the starter last week. I should have suggested drafting Lindsay instead because of his big-play potential. Lindsay is the great story, but Freeman carrying the run game is more ideal for the Broncos because it allows them to use Lindsay in creative ways.

Kiz: From the instant Denver signed Lindsay as an undrafted free agent, I shouted he would make the team. But I didn't see this coming. If Freeman is the No. 1 running back on the roster, then Lindsay is No. 1A. The three interceptions thrown by Case Keenum against Seattle was a reminder that if the Broncos ask their new quarterback to do too much, it's going to be trouble. The beauty of Lindsay? He gives Denver a home-run threat on safe play calls.

O'Halloran: Exhibit A — On Lindsay's touchdown catch, he caught it behind the line of scrimmage. A low-risk throw by Keenum that produces the ultimate reward. I thought Lindsay would get more touches than Booker against Seattle, but not by a 17-4 advantage. Against Oakland, I would get Booker more involved in the run game and keep Lindsay a part of the pass game because as Kiz said, he can turn safe into spectacular.

Kiz: Was this a wonderful coming-out party, or an trend? Can Lindsay bear the load of double-digit touches per game? I saw him as Danny Woodhead 2.0, and figured 300 yards rushing and 300 more receiving would qualify as a big rookie year for Lindsay. You predicted a 1,000-yard rushing season for Freeman. Is it too early to adjust our expectations? I'm ready to believe Lindsay's contributions as a runner and receiver might produce a total of 1,000 yards from scrimmage.

O'Halloran: I'll stick with Freeman getting at least 1,000 yards because if Sunday's game is a trend, the Broncos will have plenty of fourth-quarter carries to distribute. I looked up Woodhead's statistics. He had two years of 1,000-plus all-purpose yards. I would bet the "under" on Lindsay because of the Broncos' receiver/tight end depth. The Broncos would be smart not to overtax Lindsay (10 touches? Yes; 17 touches? Not every week).

Broncos Day After: 10 takeaways from Denver's 27-24 win over Seattle

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
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Seizing the opportunity

1. The Broncos' defense started their six-sack, three-takeaway opener with a sack of Seattle quarterback Russell Wilson in 3.88 seconds. Safety Darian Stewart was assigned to cover tight end Nick Vannett. But when Vannett stayed in as part of a seven-man protection, Stewart rushed, beat Vannett and split the sack with Bradley Chubb.

Closing time

2. The time in seconds for the Broncos' final five sacks: 2.75 (Von Miller), 2.96 (Miller), 4.69 (Shaquill Barrett), 3.32 (Miller) and 3.57 (Chris Harris on a slot blitz). The Broncos rushed five or more players on nine of Wilson's 42 drop-backs (21.4 percent). Miller took advantage of Seahawks right tackle Germain Ifedi's tendency to lung at his opponent. Not a good move against an athletic rusher like Miller.

Busting out

3. How does an offense gain 470 yards? Big plays. Using the commonly adopted standard of an explosive play being any rush that gains at least 12 yards and any pass that goes for at least 16 yards, the Broncos had 10 against Seattle. Rushes by Phillip Lindsay (19) and Royce Freeman (15 and 17 yards) and catches by Emmanuel Sanders (43 and 31 yards), Courtland Sutton (20 and 25), Demaryius Thomas (23), Jake Butt (22) and Lindsay (29).

Solid protection

4. Seattle rushed four men on 41 of Case Keenum's 47 drop-backs. They had six five-man rushes. The sack was by defensive end Frank Clark in 2.84 seconds. Clark stunted inside and collided head-on with center Matt Paradis, who appeared to be flat-footed. Coach Vance Joseph said Keenum should have thrown into the flat before pressure arrived.

Missed tackles

5. We booked the Broncos for seven missed tackles — all in the first half: Two apiece for Chubb and safety Justin Simmons and one each Stewart and cornerbacks Bradley Roby and Adam Jones. Chubb, Simmons and Stewart all missed tackles on tight end Will Dissly's 66-yard catch.

Turnover issues

6. The Broncos committed three turnovers and got away with three others. Keenum's third pass of the game was behind Thomas, deflected by safety Earl Thomas and nearly intercepted by safety Bradley McDougald (who had two later). Later in the first quarter, Freeman fumbled after a three-yard gain. But Seahawks coach Pete Carroll's red flag toss wasn't noticed in time by the official. And two plays before taking a 20-17 lead, Keenum tried to throw quick left to Sutton, but defensive end Dion Jordan (after dodging left tackle Garrett Bolles' cut block) deflected it and nearly intercepted.

Seeing the field

7. Among offensive skill players, the leaders in playing time were Sanders (64 snaps), tight end Jeff Heuerman (60), Thomas (53), Sutton (44), Butt (36), Freeman (29) and Lindsay (26). On defense, Simmons, Chris Harris and Stewart played all 57 snaps, followed by Roby (54), Chubb (54), Miller (50) and linebacker Brandon Marshall (50). Interesting was rookie linebacker Josey Jewell playing seven snaps.

In the secondary

8. What might have happened on Tyler Lockett's 61-yard touchdown catch, which gave Seattle a 24-20 lead with 14:46 remaining. Harris was tracking Lockett on a post route with outside leverage, perhaps guarding against a move that would take Lockett to the corner. Simmons appeared to be also thinking about Lockett switching to a corner route. When he didn't, Harris looked like he passed Lockett off to Simmons, who was out of position and got turned around.

Low risk, high reward

9. A short throw produced a large profit. Starting from his 2-yard line, Keenum threw quick (1.26 seconds) to Thomas, who caught it behind the line of scrimmage. Butt and Heuerman were lined up with Thomas in a trips look and took off blocking at the throw, allowing Thomas to gain 23 yards.

Blueprint for Raiders?

10. Chubb was successfully challenged in coverage by Seattle, providing a blueprint for Oakland in Week 2. On the Seahawks' first touchdown, Chubb was engaged with tight end Will Dissly. When Dissly released into a route, Chubb's eyes were still in the backfield (15-yard touchdown). Later, Chubb had decent coverage on Dissly, who caught Wilson's pass 14 yards downfield. Chubb missed the tackle and Dissly had a 66-yard gain when Stewart and Simmons also missed tackles.

Broncos recap: Five things we learned from win over Seattle

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
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Five things we learned about the Broncos in Sunday's 27-24 win over Seattle:

1. The Broncos don't need to blitz to generate pressure.

Per the Denver Post's game charting, the Broncos rushed five or more players on nine of Russell Wilson's 42 dropbacks (21.4 percent). Three of their six sacks came with a four-man pass rush.

But the key was when the Broncos did opt to pressure, which leaves their coverage players vulnerable. They knew how to get to Wilson. They had one sack with a five-man rush and two with a six-man rush.

"They make our job a lot easier," safety Darian Stewart said of the pass rush. "Those guys, they ate (Sunday). We probably have the best pass rush in the league and those boys had a day."

Stewart (half-sack) capitalized on Seattle's first play when the Seahawks kept his coverage assignment into block. Cornerback Chris Harris had a sack when he blitzed from the slot unblocked.

2. Adam Jones is the No. 3 cornerback.

Two weeks after signing with the Broncos, Jones played 38 of 74 snaps against Seattle. Cornerback Tramaine Brock, the former No. 3, played only two snaps and rookie Isaac Yiadom was inactive.

When the Broncos signed Jones, it was a sign they didn't think Yiadom was ready and Brock was more of a No. 4 guy.

Jones had an interception on the game's final play, but was active throughout. On first-and-goal from the 5 to open the second quarter, Jones dove over Stewart (who had set the edge against left tackle Duane Brown) to stop Rashaad Penny for a two-yard loss.

Two plays later, Jones drew an offensive pass interference penalty from Brandon Marshall, turning a seven-yard touchdown into a third-and-goal from the 17 and eventual field goal.

3. Bradley Chubb will continue to be challenged in coverage.

As a run defender and pass rusher, Bradley Chubb looked the part of the fifth overall pick. Chubb played 54 of 57 snaps, posted a half-sack (combining with Stewart on Seattle's first snap) and a quarterback pressure and was credited with three tackles.

As a linebacker, though, Chubb was successfully challenged by Seattle, providing a blueprint for Oakland in Week 2.

On the Seahawks' first touchdown, Chubb was engaged with tight end Will Dissly. When Dissly released into a route, Chubb's eyes were still in the backfield. By the time he tried to recover, it was too late and Dissly had a 15-yard TD.

Later in the first quarter, Chubb had relatively decent coverage on Dissly, who ran an over route and caught Wilson's pass 14 yards down field. Chubb missed the tackle and Dissly had a 66-yard gain when Stewart and Justin Simmons also missed tackles.

4. The Broncos' offensive showed good balance.

A key statistic in deciding whether an offense is truly has a run-pass balance is looking at first- and second-down play-calling (not including two-minute drill). Third down is a passing down so that will skew the statistics.

The Broncos against Seattle (not including plays negated by penalty):

First down – 32 plays ... 17 rushes and 15 passes.

Second down – 23 plays ... 12 rushes and 11 passes.

Add it up, and the Broncos rushed 29 times in 55 plays in this situation.

5. Third-down defense? Good. Third-down offense? Needs work.

Seattle's offense went only 2 of 12 on third down.

The Broncos' defense allowed only two conversions – a third-and-7 (20-yard touchdown to Brandon Marshall against Bradley Roby) and a third-and-11 (15-yard pass to Marshall against Brock in coverage).

Seattle needed seven or more yards on third down in eight situations.

The Broncos' offense went 4 of 14 on third down. Their conversions came on third-and-14, -2, -3 and -10. They also gained a first down via third-down Seattle penalty.

Broncos waive Isaiah McKenzie and River Cracraft, reinstate Carlos Henderson

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
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The Broncos waived receiver Isaiah McKenzie on Monday. He was released Sept. 1 but re-signed to the active roster when he cleared waivers. The move leaves one open roster spot.

McKenzie was inactive for Sunday's win over Seattle. The Broncos dressed Tim Patrick as the fifth receiver and used cornerback Adam Jones on punt returns.

The open roster spot could be used on a veteran whose salary will not be guaranteed for the season like it had if the player was on the Week 1 roster.

The Broncos reinstated receiver Carlos Henderson (one-game suspension) to the practice squad and waived receiver River Cracraft from the practice squad.

Just like good teams do, Broncos to focus this week on fixing mistakes, not triumph

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 11, 2018

They are flawed but also strikingly more talented.

Bradley Chubb, Jared Veldheer, Courtland Sutton, Phillip Lindsay, Jake Butt, Adam Jones, Royce Freeman – and, oh yes, Case Keenum -- are all talent upgrades for the 2018 Broncos.

From a pure talent standpoint, there may have been a drop-off with the loss of cornerback Aqib Talib. But ultimately the Broncos felt there are better ways to spend \$11 million than on a 32-year-old cornerback.

Mix in holdovers like Von Miller, Emmanuel Sanders, Derek Wolfe, Chris Harris and Matt Paradis and talent overcame mistakes Sunday when the Broncos defeated the Seattle Seahawks, 27-24, in the season opener at Broncos Stadium at Mile High.

It is perhaps an early sign of a burgeoning playoff contender that with the suspect Oakland Raiders up next, the Broncos will spend the week talking more about their mistakes than their accomplishments.

“You can’t give a good football team three turnovers,” Broncos head coach Vance Joseph said at his day-after-game press conference Monday, referring to Keenum’s three interceptions. “In Pete Carroll’s (time) he’s been 24-3 with three-plus turnovers. Last year, I think teams that had three-plus turnovers lost 90 percent of the time. ... So, you can’t do that.

“But that being said, I told our team about 10 minutes ago that stat is a team stat. That can’t be a Case stat. We gave them three, but we took three of them away. So, at the end of the day it’s even for our team and that’s what we look at.”

Turnovers were one problem. Giving up the big play was another. The Broncos allowed a 66-yard catch-and-run to rookie tight end Will Dissly and a 51-yard touchdown to receiver Tyler Lockett.

Those two plays netted 117 yards. There were also 24-yard gains on a hurdling run by Seattle running back Chris Carson and another 24-yard catch-and-run by Dissly.

The Denver D otherwise allowed a mere 141 yards on Seattle’s other 51 plays.

“It’s good to win,” Joseph said. “Our standards can’t be measured by who we play. It’s got to be by how we play.

“So, I told my guys, I’m excited about the win, but we can play better. We have higher standards than that, especially defensively, not giving up four explosive plays. Yes, we’re satisfied to win but we understand it’s a long year, it’s only week one and we’re going to play good teams on the road, so we can’t play that way and expect to win.”

Two pass-rushers, two contracts, two very different outcomes

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

September 11, 2018

When the NFL schedule came out, it looked as though Week 2 would feature two of league's best defenders, at the glamour position of pass-rusher, on the field on the same day.

And then it didn't.

On Sunday, when the Raiders come to Denver, only Von Miller will be there. While it once looked that former defensive player of the year Khalil Mack would challenge Case Keenum and the Broncos' offensive line, Mack is in Chicago now after a stunning Sept. 1 trade.

"Things change sometimes," Miller said. "That's the National Football League maybe. I'm glad to see Khalil get what he deserves."

Miller opened his eighth season this past Sunday with three sacks, two forced fumbles, a fumble recovery and seven tackles in Denver's victory over the Seattle Seahawks

Mack made his Chicago Bears debut Sunday night against the Green Bay Packers with a sack, an interception return for a touchdown, a forced fumble and a fumble recovery to go with his three tackles.

All because two franchises faced the same decision: whether to agree to a historic contract to keep an elite pass-rusher. Or not.

In the weeks and months after the Broncos won Super Bowl 50 to close out the 2015 season, largely because Miller had his best career day in his biggest career game -- 2.5 sacks and two forced fumbles (one of which was recovered for a touchdown) in the Broncos' 24-10 win over the Carolina Panthers -- Denver placed the franchise-player tag on Miller. But, having just completed his fifth season, he wanted a long-term deal, and he skipped the Broncos' offseason program.

This year the Raiders had engaged a fifth-year option on Mack, who finished his fourth season in 2017. But he wanted a long-term deal, and skipped the Raiders' offseason work to show how much.

The Broncos' impasse with Miller ended in July 2016 with a six-year, \$114.5 million deal, that at the time was the biggest contract for any defensive player in the league. Mack's impasse with the Raiders ended in a trade -- Mack, a second-round draft pick in 2020 and a 2020 conditional fifth-rounder to the Bears in exchange for the Bears' first-round picks in 2019 and 2020, a sixth-rounder in 2019 and a third-rounder in 2020.

Mack quickly signed a six-year, \$141 million contract extension with the Bears, the biggest contract for any defensive player in the league.

Two different outcomes of the same dilemma.

"You can't sign everybody; every player wants to negotiate as much as they can and I understand that, I've been there," Broncos president of football operations/general manager John Elway, who has been on both sides of the negotiating table as a marquee player in the league as well as a team's top football decision-maker, has repeatedly said. "But in this job you make decisions you think are in your best interest both now and two, three, four years down the road, and not every decision is going to be popular."

And really, if you're grading ugliness of a holdout, Miller's might have actually reached a higher degree of public angst than Mack's did with the Raiders.

Despite Miller's almost-constant public assurances in the spring of 2016 that he expected negotiations to be "peaceful" and that he "trusted," things got emotional on both sides. The team was frustrated at the time with the inability to get a deal done before the end of the offseason program in mid-June -- Miller skipped all of the team's conditioning and on-field work -- while Miller told many close to him he was blindsided when some of the specifics of the contract offer were made public in June.

Miller did make the post-Super Bowl trip to the White House with his teammates and also attended the ceremony at which the players received their Super Bowl rings. But he made no secret of his anger, even cropping Elway out of a picture taken at the White House and posting it on social media.

Miller had also posted on social media during that time there was "no chance" he would play the 2016 season under the franchise tag. But the two sides kept talking, the Broncos pumped up the guaranteed money in their offer and the deal got done.

Jon Gruden, in the first season of his second stint as Raiders head coach, has publicly said Mack's price was "too steep" and it forced Oakland's hand.

"It's part of the business," Raiders quarterback Derek Carr said. "It's one of those sucky things that happen."

For their part, the Broncos haven't been to the postseason since their Super Bowl win, going 9-7 in 2016 before last season's 5-11. Miller has maintained his status as one of the game's elite players, and the Broncos believe he's poised for one of his best seasons with the improvements they've tried to make around him, including rookie Bradley Chubb, who is the team's first top-five pick in a draft since Miller in '11.

The Raiders' story -- with Gruden's return on a 10-year deal in just its first season -- is still to be told.

But Miller, for one, believes it's all in the business of business.

"It changes a little bit with him going to Chicago," Miller said. "But that's what you want to see though. I love to see Khalil go and get what he deserves. He's been a great defensive player. Been one of the best, if not the best defensive player out for a little bit now. It's great to see him get his due, I'm happy for him. ... Me? I'm a Denver Bronco and I've said I don't want Super Bowl 50 to be the only one for me. I want more."

Von Miller's three sacks just the beginning? That's what Broncos think

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

September 11, 2018

One game, one win, one more game ball for his mantel thanks to one more "How did he do that?" performance.

Denver Broncos linebacker Von Miller was at his dancing, game-wrecking, sack-artist best Sunday in perhaps his most complete effort since he took over Super Bowl 50 to close out the 2015 season. With those three sacks, two forced fumbles and a fumble recovery in a 27-24 Broncos victory over the Seattle Seahawks, Miller offered a rather heady reminder of what Denver's potential on defense could be. Coach Vance Joseph presented him with a game ball for his efforts.

"When he got the first [sack] I was like, 'OK, he's so special.' He got the second one, I was like, 'OK, he needs to slow down, I need to get one,' and then he got the third one I was like, 'All right, this is his game and nobody can take that from him,'" Broncos rookie outside linebacker Bradley Chubb said. "He's just a great player."

Personnel executives around the league believed Miller might have had his best all-around season as a linebacker in 2017 despite finishing with 10 sacks, his lowest total since a 2013 in which he missed seven games. But one part of the Broncos' on-field misery in last season's 5-11 finish was the almost-constant attention Miller got from opposing blockers each week.

The Broncos couldn't provide another pass-rush element from elsewhere on the defense to force offenses to do something else. The Broncos also rarely played with a lead last season -- they led just 26 percent of the time and had six games in which they didn't lead at all -- so they rarely were able to set Miller loose against an offense trying to catch up by throwing the ball.

"I don't think that much about that," Miller said. "All I got to do is rush."

That's what he did in his eighth regular-season opener with the Broncos since becoming John Elway's first draft pick in 2011. Sunday was Miller's fifth career three-sack game and the first time he's had three sacks in a season opener.

The three sacks also gave him 86.5 in 105 career games, putting him at No. 50 in NFL history.

"I think it's great to be 29 [years old] and in the top 50," Miller said. "It's a true blessing."

But beyond the numbers, Miller is poised for a huge season if the Broncos can take the formula of a Week 1 win into autumn and beyond. The Broncos have other rushers in the formation now, most notably Chubb, the team's first top-five draft pick since Miller.

The Broncos also have a healthy Shane Ray -- who missed much of last season after three surgical procedures on his wrist -- and Shaquil Barrett in the mix. Barrett had one of the team's other three sacks

on Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson on Sunday, while Chubb split a sack with safety Darian Stewart. Cornerback Chris Harris Jr. had the team's other sack.

"When that pass rush is working, there's not much [an offense] can do," Broncos linebacker Todd Davis said. "Also with us playing with the lead, teams can't run the ball. You're going to have to sit back and pass ... it's going to be a long day for you."

All three of Miller's sacks Sunday came when the Broncos held the lead. That included a three-play span in the second quarter when Miller sacked Wilson twice, knocking the Seahawks back and eventually resulting in a missed 51-yard field goal by Sebastian Janikowski.

Miller's third sack came midway through the fourth quarter, right after the Broncos had gone up 27-24.

"I just take it one day at a time," Miller said. "You know me, I never move faster than I have to and never slower than I need to. We've got a great team, a great win today, played great defense; that's how you want to start a season."

Miller's play fueled a day when the Broncos held the Seahawks to 306 total yards, including 64 rushing. Even Broncos quarterback Case Keenum, who usually spends the time when the defense is on the field reviewing photos of the Broncos' previous possession on a tablet, felt something was up as the game wore on -- a feeling he hopes to have many more times as the season unfolds.

"I'm more so 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 doing whatever his sack dance is," Keenum said. "That's impressive to watch -- I'm glad I'm on the sidelines [now] when he's on the field, that's for sure."

Who was that?!? Unheralded ballers who shined in Week 1

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN
September 11, 2018

We all know the NFL stars who generate SportsCenter highlights on a regular basis. However, every week we see some performances from men we may not know who makes us say, 'Who was that?'

It could be the undrafted rookie receiver who catches a long touchdown, the backup QB who piles up the stats or a journeyman linebacker who makes a big play to seal a win.

This is for them. Take a look at Week 1's unheralded ballers, starting with some FitzMagic and two fourth-quarter kickoff return touchdowns:

Ryan Fitzpatrick, QB, Tampa Bay Buccaneers
21-of-28 for a career-high 417 yards, four TDs and no interceptions in 48-40 win over Saints

Why it matters: Maybe Dirk Koetter isn't bluffing. Koetter said last week that there was no guarantee that Jameis Winston would return to his starting QB job after his three-game suspension is completed. Fitzpatrick looked like FitzMagic, showing smooth deep-ball chemistry with DeSean Jackson and Mike Evans (combined for 12 catches, 293 yards, 3 TDs).

Jakeem Grant, WR, Miami Dolphins/Darius Jennings, WR, Tennessee Titans
Each had a fourth-quarter kickoff-return TD in Dolphins' 27-20 win

Why it matters: This is the first time that two teams have had a kick return TD in the same game since Week 15 of the 2008 season. They happened in the same quarter. There were no kickoff return TDs until Week 6 last season and only seven all year. This could be a sign that the new kickoff return rules will result in more touchdowns. In the Dolphins' case, Grant's spark is particularly encouraging.

Darron Lee, LB, New York Jets
Two interceptions, including a pick-six, and all over the field in a 48-17 win over the Detroit Lions

Why it matters: It has been a while since Jets fans have had something to cheer about, but they had many good sights Monday night. Lee, a 2016 first-round pick, has largely been a disappointment in his first two NFL seasons, with the "bust" word being sprinkled around by some. Lee, along with the Jets' defense, had a banner day and could be a sign of a change in 2018.

Phillip Lindsay, RB, Denver Broncos
102 total yards, TD on 17 touches in 27-24 win over Washington

Why it matters: Lindsay became the third undrafted player since 1967 to gain 100-plus yards from scrimmage and score a touchdown in his pro debut. All of a sudden the Broncos could be working with

something special with their pair of rookie backs -- third-round pick Royce Freeman and Lindsay -- taking center stage in their offense.

Quinton Dunbar, CB, Washington

One interception, three pass breakups in 24-6 win over the Cardinals

Why it matters: One reason the Redskins felt comfortable cutting Orlando Scandrick stemmed from Dunbar's development and their confidence he could start opposite Josh Norman. The fourth-year converted receiver proved that decision correct Sunday, providing lockdown coverage in man and zone.

Will Dissly, TE, Seattle Seahawks

Three catches, 105 yards, TD in 27-24 loss to the Broncos

Why it matters: The rookie fourth-round pick was expected to be primarily a blocking tight end, but he looked like he can do much more as he broke multiple tackles during a 66-yard reception. Russell Wilson could use a reliable tight end in the mold of Jimmy Graham, but even Graham has never had a NFL catch that gained that many yards.

ESPN NFL Nation reporters John Keim and Brady Henderson contributed to this story.

Upon further review: Top takeaways from Broncos' win vs. Seahawks

By Nicki Jhabvala
The Athletic
September 11, 2018

The last time Denver recorded at least 470 net yards, Peyton Manning came off the bench as a backup and the Broncos stood within three games of Super Bowl 50. They defeated the Chargers 27-20 that week, the last of their 2015 regular season, thanks to a late touchdown run by Ronnie Hillman, and they would go on to secure their third Lombardi Trophy.

Things were good that year.

Things changed quick the year after, and the year after that.

Sunday, after a long two seasons of “swings and misses,” as John Elway would call them, the Broncos showed glimpses of an offense on the rise and a defense still menacing.

Denver's 27-24 season-opening win over the Seahawks wasn't always pretty. But it set a benchmark for the remaining 15 games and beyond.

Some takeaways:

Big plays and inconsistency

It had been nearly two years since the Broncos had three touchdown passes in a game. Despite a couple drops and a penalty in the first series, the Case Keenum-led Broncos regrouped to get on the board early.

By the end of the first half, Keenum was on track to record more than 460 passing yards and, though he fell well short, he finished the game with seven passing plays of 20 yards or more. Two of those were for touchdowns — a 29-yard completion to rookie running back Phillip Lindsay and a 43-yarder to Emmanuel Sanders.

More significant perhaps: The Broncos, owners of 47 three-and-out drives last year, were the only team through Sunday to have none in Week 1.

But with the scores, the big plays, the involvement of not just veterans, but also rookies, came the three turnovers that offered eerie reminders of the last two years. Keenum was signed in large part because of his ability to protect the football; he recorded only seven interceptions in the regular season last year, but has had five in his last nine quarters of play, dating back to Minnesota's divisional playoff win over the Saints.

Two of his interceptions Sunday led to touchdowns for Seattle on their ensuing drives. The other cost the Broncos a field-goal opportunity.

“It’s good to win, but we do have standards, and our standards can’t be measured by who we play,” coach Vance Joseph said Monday. “It’s got to be by how we play. So, I told my guys today, ‘Hey, I’m excited about the win, but we can play better.’ We have higher standards than that, especially defensively, not giving up four explosive plays. Yes, we’re satisfied to win but we understand it’s a long year. It’s only Week One and we’re going to play good teams down the road. We can’t play that way and expect to win every game by giving the ball away three times and giving up five explosive plays. It’s can’t happen.”

Monster Miller masks defenses miscues

Late last season Miller expressed personal frustration by the team’s losing ways. He wanted to win. He always wants to win. But in the prime of his career and after an offseason in which he transformed his body to be able to do more for longer, the Broncos’ struggles were costing him too.

Not the case Sunday. His sack hat trick, two forced fumbles and a fumble recovery were reminiscent of 2015, when he wreaked havoc throughout the season and especially in the postseason to earn Super Bowl MVP honors.

“We had a great plan, and we knew it was going to take all four guys rushing together to contain Russell Wilson,” Joseph said. “It was really more of the plan than it was those guys not chipping Von. Because they chipped Von a lot. I mean, he was chipped probably 75 percent of his rushes and if he wasn’t chipped, he beat the kid clean and made some sacks.”

Miller moved into 48th place on the NFL’s career sack list with 86.5 and was given the game ball by Joseph. And on the whole, the Broncos’ defense followed his lead, with six total sacks, 11 quarterback hits and two interceptions.

This defense is built to rush the passer and that it did.

But some of the issues of old stuck with the defense too.

Denver gave up four passing plays of 20 yards or more to Seattle. Two of were touchdown passes. The other two were completions to tight end Will Dissly, of 24 yards and 66 yards.

Tight ends have been the Broncos’ Achilles’ heel the last couple of seasons as opposing offenses have found ways to carve up the defense up the middle.

Last year former Cowboys tight end Jason Witten had 97 yards and a touchdown against Denver in Week 2. The Giants’ Evan Engram followed with 82 yards and a touchdown. Hunter Henry totaled 73 yards in a Chargers shutout win. Kansas City’s Travis Kelce had a field day with 133 yards and a touchdown in Week 8. And New England’s trio of tight ends combined for 123 yards and a touchdown in Week 10.

Sunday, Dissly amassed 105 receiving yards and a touchdown, becoming the first tight end in league history to have at least 100 yards and a receiving touchdown in his debut, per NFL Network.

“They just got us in a couple of zone coverages. Like I said, with a mobile quarterback like (Wilson), you’ve got to be good with your eyes,” Broncos safety and starting dime linebacker Will Parks said. “At the end of the day, nine times out of 10 he’s going to roll out to throw the ball. Sometimes you can get caught trying to read your keys and the next thing you know, you have a man and he rolls out to the other side. That’s just the nature of the game and teams coming up with a plan. They’re pros too, just like we are.”

They're going to have their gadget plays and trick plays. We need to do a better job at that at the end of the day."

The miscommunication and errors the Broncos hoped to resolve this year also resurfaced sparingly.

Take Dissly's 66-yard catch at the close of the first quarter: Three Broncos whiffed on tackles.

Take Seattle's fourth-quarter touchdown: Wilson found receiver Tyler Lockett wide open in the middle of the defensive backfield for a 51-yard score. Though it's hard to know who was at fault without knowing the defensive call, it appeared cornerback Chris Harris Jr. expected help from the safety over the top and never received it.

Cornerback Adam Jones, who signed less than two weeks before the game, played the majority of the snaps at nickel corner and occasionally his inexperience in Denver's system showed.

"I had to talk a lot out there because he doesn't really know all the defense yet," Harris said. "I got a lot of work out there. I'm just coordinating and trying to make sure everyone is in the right position playing the right defense in the right coverage. He did an excellent job to fill in and only be here for I think two weeks."

Notable, however, was the discrepancy in play time between Tramaine Brock, the player signed to be the Broncos' third corner, and Jones, the veteran who signed late in preseason for depth and returning duties.

Jones played 38 defensive snaps at corner compared to only two for Brock. Joseph said Jones was their nickel corner and Brock their dime corner and because they played more nickel, Jones saw more time.

But the 34-year-old veteran played two of his finest seasons with Joseph as his defensive backs coach in Cincinnati, and when Denver signed him late last month, it was always a possibility his role would increase.

"We'll see. He came in and had a good week and we thought the matchups this week fit him better," Joseph said. "... I was very pleased with his assignment check and his eye-placement and his technique. I mean, he challenged those guys. A couple times, Russell wanted to go back to (WR Brandon) Marshall but couldn't because Adam was all over him. He played well.

"One thing I know about him is he's competitive and he's tough, so he was going to compete and he was going to tackle and, as a returner, he was going to do a good job for us. He had two balls he should've caught — the one on the 10-yard line, he's got to catch that ball, and the last punt of the game, he has to catch that ball. But the first one, you could see what he can do with the ball in his hands. And he doesn't have his legs yet. Honestly he's not in great shape yet, and he'll tell you that. But moving forward, he was a great guy to sign by John because he's helping our team in a large way."

About Lindsay

The first touchdown went to the local kid, Phillip Lindsay. The undrafted back who wasn't even invited to the combine after setting a slew of records at the University of Colorado, gave the Broncos a needed spark on offense and special teams, starting with his 29-yard touchdown reception in the first quarter.

For much of his football career, Lindsay has become accustomed to being doubted for his size (5-foot-8, 190 pounds). But he's often defied his frame, barreling through tackles and leaping over linebackers to pick up yardage and points.

He did that and more Sunday, and turned in a key special-teams stop on a Broncos punt late in the third quarter.

"Each game is different. You said it: He was hot," Joseph said. "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 finished tied with Royce Freeman for a game-high 71 rushing yards. And even though Lindsay is listed third on the depth chart at back, he played the second-most offensive snaps (26) behind Freeman (29). Devontae Booker, listed as the No. 1 back in training camp, played 19 snaps.

Prior to Sunday's game, Joseph appointed Freeman the starting back but said there would be packages for each of the three backs, which would alter their play-time based on their opponent. But since he signed with the Broncos after the draft, Lindsay has given the Broncos more and more reason to keep him in.

"I think we're all surprised, because you just never know about young guys as far as coming into this league and playing confident, playing with toughness and playing with the IQ to play in this league. And he's done all three," Joseph said. "He's tough, he's smart, he's a playmaker and it doesn't seem too big for him. I've been really impressed with him from Day One. From Day One of rookie camp he's come in with swagger and confidence, and it hasn't changed."

O-line improvement

Three interceptions raised concerns of repeating issues for the Broncos. But what was different for Case Keenum, in comparison to Trevor Siemian and even Brock Osweiler last year, was the amount of time he had to throw on the three turnovers.

Throughout the game, really, Keenum had time to throw. According to Pro Football Focus, only six of his 40 dropbacks were under pressure. All three of his interceptions and the one batted pass were thrown with a clean pocket.

The Broncos' starting front five of left tackle Garrett Bolles, left guard Ron Leary, center Matt Paradis, right guard Connor McGovern and right tackle Jared Veldheer played all 74 offensive snaps and Keenum was sacked only once, on a third-and-11 in the third quarter. Frank Clark pushed back Paradis to get to Keenum and down he went.

The evidence of the line's improvement was clear throughout, with the Broncos' 470 net yards and 146 rushing yards, but especially with zero penalties from the tackles — the two positions that caused problems last year. Bolles was flagged a league-high 10 times for offensive holding last year, and former right tackles Menelik Watson and Donald Stephenson combined to allow 11 sacks.

"Offensive line-wise, I've been really, really pleased from preseason to now of how well they've played in the run game and pass game," Joseph said. "And that's the key. If we're going to win games and keep Case clean and help Case play better and better each week, we got to run the football and protect Case. So far, so good."

Broncos' Denver7 takeaways from season-opening victory

By Troy Renck

KMGH

September 11, 2018

The most promising sign in Sunday's win? The Broncos would have lost this game last year. Denver turned the ball over three times. The Broncos trailed late. Both spelled doom in 2017.

However facing a 24-20 deficit, Case Keenum overcame an uneven performance to lead a game-winning drive. One play symbolized the difference between Keenum and the three-headed, fangless monster last season. On third down, Keenum stared into a fierce rush, unleashed a 22-yard dart to Jake Butt and absorbed a big hit for a roughing-the-passer penalty. He followed with a touchdown pass to Demaryius Thomas, securing his first-ever season-opening victory.

It was one win, demanding perspective. Yet, there were encouraging signs, including the 470 yards of offense, the most since Peyton Manning retired. My Denver7 takeaways from the Broncos' seventh-consecutive season-opening victory, the longest active streak in the NFL:

1) Von is on

Defensive coordinator Joe Woods learned a hard lesson last season. His first priority is freeing up Von Miller. Miller lined up on the weakside, creating havoc with fewer run game and coverage responsibilities. Von can wreck game plans. Maximizing his potential every week remains paramount after his three-sack, two-forced-fumbles performance.

2) Phil it up

Phillip Lindsay brings intensity, a relentless motor and way more talent than most realize. He finished with 15 carries for 71 yards, same as starter Royce Freeman. Everything you need to know about Lindsay crystallized in the fourth quarter. When the Broncos needed yards, they trusted him.

3) Rolls Royce

Royce Freeman shows the ability to turn 3 yards into 5. That can't be overstated on first down as a way to open the playbook. Freeman and Lindsay showed competence in pass protection. The running back splits were as follows: Freeman 29 of 74 plays, Lindsay 28, Devontae Booker 19.

4) New Fly Zone

The No Fly Zone took a huge hit with the departures of T.J. Ward and Aqib Talib. The New Fly Zone showed promise, though improvement is needed. Justin Simmons remains a rising star -- one with hops. He showed off his 40-inch vertical on an interception. Adam Jones played 38 of 57 plays as the Broncos primary nickelback. Tramaine Brock played two snaps. Yeah, they believe in Jones.

5) Chubb is big deal

Bradley Chubb appeared in 54 of 57 defensive snaps. He netted a half sack in his first NFL play. And more than anything, his versatility allows the Broncos to use Miller differently. Shane Ray (18) and Shaquil Barrett (4) combined for 22 snaps.

6) Special teams improvement

No more hiding your face when the special teams trot into the game. Marquette King was a weapon, pinning Seattle back multiple times. There were no coverage breakdowns, Brandon McManus was nails, and the roster decisions paid off. Why is linebacker Joe Jones on this team instead of Zaire Anderson? He showed why with his athleticism and discipline in big special teams plays on Sunday.

7) Keenum won without playing well

Keenum admitted the clear conclusion: This team can be good if he takes care of the ball. If he throws one interception, the Broncos win by two scores. He needs to manage his footwork, resist the temptation to force the issue. The Broncos showed they believed him by letting him win the game in the fourth quarter. No floaties on his arms, and fear of leaving him in the deep end. He responded with a huge drive. That provides something to build on with the undermanned Raiders arriving on Sunday.

Issues with mobile tickets cause some fans to miss part of Broncos home opener

By Jason Gruenauer

KMGH

September 11, 2018

Some Broncos fans say the team's new mobile-only ticketing policy caused long waits at stadium gates and for some to miss part of Sunday's season opener.

"You should have it ready. You should know it's going to work," Broncos fan Julie Schafer said.

Schafer says her and her family got in line at the Broncos Stadium at Mile High at 1:30 p.m. for a 2:30 p.m. kickoff. They found hundreds of people waiting outside the gate, and only a few able to get in.

"It appeared the people at the gate, the attendants, were having trouble actually scanning peoples phones," she said.

Another fan told Denver7 that dozens of fans had trouble loading their mobile tickets at a different entrance gate. She says it took an hour to get into the stadium.

"We saw people pass out and I had my mom with me, and I was worried about her," Schafer said about the hot, sunny day.

The Broncos rolled out mobile-only ticketing during the preseason. The team reported no major issues at that time. Sunday was the first regular season game where the process was in place.

UPDATE: A team spokesperson for the Broncos tells Contact7 that there was an update to the Ticketmaster App that was pushed out before kickoff that required fans to re-log into their app. They say that may have contributed to some congestion. That spokesperson also said that the season opener is also usually the first game for season ticket holders, since a lot of them don't go to preseason games.

One fan tweeted that they missed the entire first quarter. Another said they missed half of the first. Schafer says she missed pregame and the first few minutes of the game. Those posts were a small minority of the thousands in attendance.

"It's disappointing. The Broncos make enough money. They should be able to get us into the game on time," she said.

Denver is one of only six NFL teams to shift to a mobile-only ticketing policy this season.

The team and the mobile ticketing system will be put to the test again next weekend against the Raiders at Mile High.

Broncos' O-line revamp shows good early returns

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
September 11, 2018

Revamping the offensive line has become an annual rite of spring in Denver.

This time, it appears to be paying off.

Rediscovering a balance that was elusive almost all last season, the Broncos rushed for 146 yards — all but four of those from rookies Phillip Lindsay and Royce Freeman — and passed for 329 yards in their 27-24 win over Seattle. The Broncos' 470 yards of offense were their most since Peyton Manning retired after the 2015 season.

It all started up front, where all five O-linemen played all 74 snaps and drew zero penalty flags.

"Offensive line was incredible," said quarterback Case Keenum, who was sacked just once. "It was awesome to watch those guys. There were some plays where I had so much time in the pocket. I'm going to be so excited to watch the film and see those guys play."

The Broncos allowed a whopping 52 sacks last season, an average of more than three a game, prompting them to make several changes in the offseason.

Coach Vance Joseph replaced O-line coach Jeff Davidson with two coaches, one (Chris Strausser) to focus on the tackles and another (Sean Kugler) to tutor the centers and guards.

General manager John Elway jettisoned oft-injured Menelik Watson despite a nearly \$7 million salary cap hit and traded for ninth-year right tackle Jared Veldheer.

They moved guard Ron Leary back to his natural left side, making room for Connor McGovern, their strongest lineman, on the right side and giving a big assist to second-year left tackle Garrett Bolles.

And their anchor — center Matt Paradis — participated in the entire offseason program for the first time since college after undergoing double hip surgery two summers ago.

The tackles didn't commit a single penalty, something that was a common occurrence last season.

"Jared played really well and Bolles did some good things. He blocked his guy. He's got a couple of mental things he's got to clean up, but as far as tackles, we played really well," Joseph said. "We had one sack and the one sack was on the quick game and the ball should have probably been in the flat.

"So, offensive line-wise, I've been really, really pleased from preseason until now how they've played in the run game and the pass game," Joseph said. "And that's the key. If we're going to win games and keep Case clean and help Case play better and better each week we've got to run the football and protect Case.

"So far, so good with those guys playing so well for us."

One thing the Broncos are doing to help Bolles, an athletic but raw tackle who only played one season of major college football at Utah, is not setting up so deep. That allows him to better use his athleticism to counter edge rushers, who don't have as much of a running start, either.

"He's a long, athletic tackle, so we're coaching him to set quicker and not give as much ground, to use his quickness on guys," Joseph said. "If you're facing a great rusher and you give him space, he can bull (rush you), he can get around you. So, we're getting Garrett on guys quicker, so he can use his feet and his great quickness to stay in front of guys and that's preventing him from being so soft in the pocket like he was last year.

"So, that's more about Chris Strausser and Sean Kugler coaching him differently this year. And having Leary next to him, obviously the mental part of the game, it helps having a veteran next to you. So, I've been pleased with the entire offensive line. They're playing good right now and hopefully we can continue to play good there."

Bolles said playing next to Leary is a godsend and getting instruction from the two-coach system has helped him take a big jump from his flag-filled rookie season.

"I'm excited to see where this goes because we're right on track and we're headed in a good direction," Bolles said.

That said, he's not about to start celebrating after just one game, no matter how clean.

"I mean, it's a clean game but it's only Game 1. We've got 15 other games we've got to go through," Bolles said. "There's some things we have to fix, but a fast start in a season is always a good thing. We made a baseline where we're at and we know where we need to go.

"I have a great group of dudes. The O-line room is special. This team is special and we're going to go in the right direction as long as we put in the work and the effort, which we are."

Notes: The Broncos waived WR/KR Isaiah McKenzie on Monday but didn't make a corresponding move, leaving their active roster at 52 players. They did make room on their practice squad for WR Carlos Henderson by releasing WR River Cracraft. Henderson had been suspended for the first week of the season following a marijuana arrest over the winter.

Super Bowl trophies out, locker room shuffle in. Changes to Broncos go beyond the quarterback.

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
September 11, 2018

Right there? That table topped with luxury car advertisements and a jumbo-sized Connect 4 board game? That was where the Broncos last season housed their three Super Bowl trophies — right smack in the middle of the locker room at Broncos HQ, for everyone on the roster to see, 24/7.

And over there? That's the corner where the defense isolated itself, segregated from the offense it held in such low regard. The offense did its thing on the other end, all by its quiet lonesome.

To redirect their win-loss record, the Broncos first had to redecorate their interior. Gone is the worst idea since putting an NFL team back in Oakland, the trifecta of Lombardi trophies that served as a daily reminder of what the Broncos have won in the past without showing the hard work it took to get there.

And the other shuffling of furniture was a small thing that paid off big in a 27-24 come-from-behind win against the Seahawks on Sunday: instead of grouping lockers by position — linebackers with linebackers, running backs with running backs — the roster is intermingled in each edge of the locker room. Pac-12 grads Kevin Hogan (offense) and Will Parks (defense) dress next door. Marquette King dances to his own beat while sharing air with chilled-out DaeSean Hamilton. Idaho ranch hand Matt Paradis kicks it alongside Southern gentleman Bradley Chubb. Case, the quarterback? Keenum's over there in DeMarcus Ware's old spot, next to Von Miller. Solid dudes, those three.

The rearrangement was Vance Joseph's idea: banish the cliques that severed the locker room and turned two-game losing streaks into eight-game dumpster fires. Cultivate relationships. Invest in your neighbor.

It's one game, so hold off on those airline tickets for Atlanta in early February. (Southwest has non-stops for only \$187.96 if... too soon, too soon.) But there's something to be said for what was said after the Broncos escaped Russell Wilson and the 'Hawks with a gutsy win in Week 1.

The offense held itself accountable.

"I made mistakes out there, too," peaking wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders said.

The defense held itself accountable.

"We'll go to the corrections tape tomorrow," intercepting safety Justin Simmons said.

Vance Joseph held all accountable.

How 'bout that?

It's a biggie, and "VJ" sounded like a politician who's ready to toss around some capital after he was reelected: "It's good to win, but we do have standards. Our standards can't be measured by who we play. It's got to be by how we play. I told the guys I'm excited about the win, but we can play better. We have higher standards than that, especially defensively, not giving up four explosive plays."

After a pause, Joseph doubled down on accountability: "That can't happen."

Go, VJ! But the stat that matters for this Broncos season is one which nobody can control: number of injuries. If the top-shelf talent on the roster stays healthy the Broncos are gifted enough to win any game on the schedule. If they start losing guys one by one the Broncos aren't deep enough to survive.

"Injury-wise, guys, we are lucky," Joseph said Monday. "We got out of the game with nothing."

Success here starts at the top, where Joseph is making subtle changes to his own approach, and trickles into a locker room where no one's a stranger. So far, and with the Raiders coming to Mile High next Sunday, that's all anyone could ask for.

Case Keenum, Von Miller and Co. show support at fourth annual Taste of the Broncos presented by King Soopers

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

September 11, 2018

On Sunday afternoon, the orange-clad Broncos faithful roared as the Seattle Seahawks tried to attempt a late-game comeback.

A day after the Broncos held on to start the season 1-0, Von Miller and Case Keenum were back where 76,000-plus members of Broncos Country turned a tight game into a win.

On Monday, though, the two players were at Broncos Stadium at Mile High to return the favor to the Denver community. They joined more than 40 of their teammates at the fourth annual Taste of the Broncos presented by King Soopers, which benefits the Food Bank of the Rockies and Denver Broncos Charities.

“[We’ll take] any chance we get to come back and give back a little bit,” Keenum said. “You guys saw what it was like on Sunday in that stadium right there. It’s incredible. That’s why we’re here. We’re the Denver Broncos. We’re part of the community and to have them come and show the support like they did just the entire game, [it’s nice] to come back and be able to eat really good food. It’s a really good opportunity.”

Keenum, who spent time at ChoLon’s booth interacting with fans and preparing Philly cheesesteak wontons, then turned back for another sample.

“It was killer, man,” Keenum said. “It was unbelievable. I’m going to go back for more.”

Linebacker Todd Davis was another player who enjoyed the samples that ranged from ribs to ice cream to grilled octopus.

“There’s a lot of great food here to try,” Davis said, “and getting to interact with the fans after a big win, it’s fun for us.”

Cornerback Chris Harris Jr., Ring of Famer Billy Thompson and President of Football Operations/GM John Elway kicked off those interactions during a VIP session at the beginning of the event. The VIP ticket holders were able to sample various appetizers and see the Broncos’ locker room.

They also got the chance to visit with Harris and hear Elway’s thoughts on a variety of topics that ranged from Sunday’s season-opening win to what food he makes best.

“I’m a good barbecuer,” Elway said. “I get the Elway steaks, put the rub on that and then go home and cook it out in the backyard.

“I’m a ribeye guy. I love ribeye. I like the taste of the steak, so the ribeye’s my favorite.”

There were plenty of options on the Sports Legends Mall for those who prefer something other than steak, but Monday's event was about more than the free samples, live music and good weather.

"Case hit it right on the head," Miller said. "It's extremely important to support the community that supports us. Taste of the Broncos, the fourth annual one, it's been [a good fundraiser] for us. There's a lot of great food, as well. Great event with great people, and plus you get to spend it with your teammates."

And after a 27-24 win over Seattle, the event must be even better. Right, Von?

"Everything's always better after a win."

Next-Day Notebook: Even after Week 1 win, Broncos focused on meeting higher standard

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
September 11, 2018

It's far more enjoyable to correct mistakes after a win rather than a loss.

Thirteen teams with 1-0 records are rediscovering that as they wake up Monday morning and turn their focus toward next week.

That's especially good news for Denver, which earned a 27-24 victory over Seattle on Sunday but has plenty to fix ahead of a Week 2 game against the Oakland Raiders.

On offense, quarterback Case Keenum and the offense must find a way to protect the ball after turning it over three times on Sunday.

Defensively, the Broncos will aim to shore up their tackling to prevent any other plays like the 66-yard Will Dissly catch and run that prompted a Seattle score.

Those plays left a blemish on an otherwise strong performance that included three takeaways, six sacks and more offensive yards than they'd totaled since Week 17 of 2015.

But as Head Coach Vance Joseph explained Monday, the team's self-evaluation isn't limited to a "W" or an "L."

"It's good to win, but we do have standards," Joseph said. "And our standards can't be measured by who we play. It's got to be by how we play. I told our guys, 'I'm excited about the win, but we can play better.' We have higher standards than that. Especially defensively, not giving up four explosive plays. Yes, we're satisfied to win, but we understand it's a long year.

"It's only Week 1, and we're going to play good teams down the road. So we can't play that way and expect to win every game by giving the ball away three times and giving up five explosive plays. It can't happen."

For an organization that's started the last two seasons fast — 7-3 in 2016 and 4-1 in 2017 — that improvement will be paramount to its hope of maintaining success throughout the season.

KEEPING UP WITH THE JONES:

When Seattle quarterback Russell Wilson tossed up a last-gasp throw on Sunday, the Broncos' newest cornerback came down with the ball.

And Adam Jones did far more Sunday than record a final-minute interception.

As Joseph said Monday, Jones was a key part of the Broncos' efforts to neutralize the Seattle passing game.

"I thought he performed well," Joseph said.

"Obviously he wasn't here in training camp with us. He was only here about a week and a half with us and played against Arizona a little bit. But I was very pleased on his assignment check and his eye placement and his technique. He challenged those guys a couple times where Russell wanted to go back to [Seahawks receiver Brandon] Marshall, and he couldn't because Adam was all over him. He played well.

"One thing I know about him: He's competitive and he's tough. He was going to compete and he was going to tackle."

On special teams, Jones also flashed his potential impact. He returned the first punt he caught 24 yards to the Denver 44-yard line, but a holding call wiped out the play. Jones was sure-handed on his other return, which came in the third quarter.

Jones did miss a couple of plays, though. Joseph wanted to see the veteran returner catch a first-quarter punt that bounced near the 10-yard line and was downed at the Denver 2-yard line and a fourth-quarter punt that backed the Broncos up to their own 13-yard line.

Joseph has reason to believe the 12-year veteran should improve as the season progresses.

"As a returner, he's going to do a good job for us," Joseph said. "Now, he had two balls he should've caught. The one on the 10-yard line, he's got to catch that ball and the last punt of the ball, he's got to catch that ball. But the first one, you see what he can do with the ball in his hands. And he doesn't have his legs yet. Honestly, he's not in great shape right now. He'll tell you that. But moving forward, he was a great guy to sign by John [Elway]. He's helping our team in a large way."

A LOT ON THE LINE:

One week into the season, the Broncos' offensive line looks sharp.

In the team's game against Seattle, Denver allowed just one sack — and Joseph said Monday that one miscue came on a play that called for a quick throw.

Joseph seemed particularly pleased with his offensive tackles Jared Veldheer and Garrett Bolles. Veldheer played "really well" according to Joseph, and Bolles made strides after leading the league in holding penalties as a rookie.

Bolles' visible improvement comes, in part, from a change in the way the Broncos are coaching him.

"I think, first, we're coaching Garrett differently," Joseph said. "He's a long, athletic tackle. We're coaching him to set quicker and not give as much ground, to use his quickness on guys. If you're facing a great rusher and you give him space, he can bull [rush] you or he can run around you. We're getting Garrett on guys quicker so he can use his feet and his great quickness to stay in front of guys. It's preventing him [from] being so soft in the pocket like he was last year."

Joseph knows Bolles and the line must continue to develop if the Broncos are to find sustained success.

“Offensive line-wise, I’ve been really, really pleased with preseason til now how they’ve played in the run game and the pass game,” Joseph said. “And that’s the key. If we’re going to win ... and help Case play better and better each week, we’ve got to run the football and protect Case. So far, so good. Those guys [are] playing well for us.”

Broncos waive Isaiah McKenzie, make pair of practice-squad moves

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

September 11, 2018

The Broncos waived wide receiver Isaiah McKenzie and released wide receiver River Cracraft from the practice squad on Monday, the team announced.

Wide receiver and 2017 third-round pick Carlos Henderson will take Cracraft's spot on the practice squad. Henderson was reinstated from the Practice Squad/Suspended list on Monday.

Henderson spent training camp on the team's Reserve/Did Not Report list, but he will now have a chance to work with the Broncos.

Head Coach Vance Joseph said in early September he hopes to see Henderson display maturity during the upcoming season.

"I think for Carlos, it's more off the field," Joseph said. "I want to see Carlos grow up. I want to see Carlos do NFL things—have great meetings, have great practices, have great days in the weight room. Just do those things first for us. Obviously, the football player Carlos, he's talented, so that part I don't worry about. I want him to grow up and become a pro. If he does that, he'll be fine."

Denver did not make a corresponding roster move after waiving McKenzie.

The Broncos are able to add another player to their active roster before Sunday's game against the Raiders.

Colin Kaepernick selling '#IMWITHKAP' jerseys, with some proceeds going to his foundation

By AJ Neuharth-Keusch

USA Today

September 11, 2018

Colin Kaepernick's new football jersey may not have an NFL team's name on it, but it certainly carries a message.

Kaepernick on Monday tweeted a picture of the jersey, which is available for pre-sale on his website. The jersey is all black with white letters and numbers and features "#IMWITHKAP" embroidered across the front. Kaepernick remains a free agent after last playing in the NFL in 2016.

No. 7, which Kaepernick wore during his six seasons with the San Francisco 49ers, is also printed on the jersey, along with his name. As Kaepernick tweeted, 20 percent of the proceeds from jersey sales will go to his Know Your Rights foundation, which was designed to "raise awareness on self-empowerment and interacting with law enforcement."

The limited-edition jerseys come in youth and adult sizes and sell for \$99.99 and \$174.99, respectively. The jersey release comes just days after Nike unveiled Kaepernick as the face of its new advertisement campaign.

Von Miller wrecks Seahawks on three-sack day

By Kevin Patra

NFL.com

September 11, 2018

During the offseason, Von Miller watched fellow defensive players get large sacks of money, making his \$19 million per season look like a bargain.

On Sunday, Miller went out and reminded us he's still a Defensive Player of the Year candidate. The sack master took down Russell Wilson three times, spearheading the Broncos' 27-24 victory over the Seattle Seahawks.

"When he got the first one, I was like, 'OK, he's something special,'" rookie linebacker Bradley Chubb said of watching Miller, via The Athletic's Nicki Jhabvala. "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 stat line Sunday was chalk full: seven total tackles, three sacks, four QB hits, three tackles for loss, two forced fumbles and one fumble recovery. According to the Broncos' official website, the last time Miller posted at least two sacks and two forced fumbles was Super Bowl 50, when he was named MVP.

With Case Keenum leading an up-and-down offensive performance, which included three interceptions, the Broncos needed their defense to step up and put the clamps on Wilson. Miller stood tall.

The QB-wrecker sacked Wilson twice in the span of three plays in the second quarter, one a strip-sack. He then sealed the Broncos' victory with a third late in the fourth. The sack boosted Miller's career total to 86.5, vaulting him past NFL Network's Willie McGinest and into the top 50 all-time. Miller's Houdini-like strip of Seahawks running back Chris Carson might have been his most impressive move of the day.

"I had ole'ed outside, and technically that's not a good move," Miller said smiling when discussing the strip. "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."

Miller's dominance Sunday reminded us that it's still surprising he's been held out from winning a DPOY award. He won't keep up the 48-sack pace he's currently on (we assume), but Miller's strong start to the season put the league on notice.

The N.F.L.'s New Tackling Rule: The Good, the Bad and the Confusing

By Bill Pennington
New York Times
September 11, 2018

Pro football fans on Sunday were greeted by a new N.F.L.

On the first full day of games in the 2018 season, there were surprises: Some of the most routine tackles, for example, are now penalties.

There were improvements: A reckless hit brought an immediate ejection.

And there was confusion: A new rule designed to curb the dangerous use of a player's helmet was applied irregularly and did not prevent a scary injury.

It's only one day. It will probably get better and you will likely get used to it.

You will also have no choice, because the N.F.L. is not turning back.

The new rules that went into effect in this season's opening week are the first of perhaps many steps as the N.F.L. desperately tries to moderate the most hazardous collisions in an intentionally violent sport.

In five years, what might have raised eyebrows on Sunday will instead be viewed as customary. (It doesn't mean these rulings won't still fuel arguments.)

Sunday, fans got their first regular season look at the most talked about new rule in a decade, which makes it a 15-yard penalty for a player to initiate contact with an opponent by lowering his head. It is an effort to outlaw using the helmet as a weapon. Most notably, as the league repeated for weeks, the rule would apply to any player, including a running back or wide receiver, lowering his head to ward off a tackler or to gain a few extra yards.

But in New England's game with Houston, Patriots wide receiver Cordarrelle Patterson caught a pass and turned up field where he was met by Texans cornerback Kevin Johnson. Patterson lowered his helmet and delivered a direct blow to Johnson's helmet.

The impact caused Johnson's shoulders to slump and his legs went limp as he crumbled to the turf like a boxer absorbing a knockout blow. Johnson was later determined to have a concussion, his second in recent weeks. Three days before Sunday's game, Johnson was medically cleared to play after a concussion in the preseason.

It seemed to be a textbook example of the kind of hit the new rule was meant to penalize — Johnson appeared to be positioning himself for a shoulder-first tackle until Patterson lowered his head and struck him with his helmet.

No penalty was called.

But throughout the league there were several penalties called on defensive players for helmet-to-helmet contact. Since the N.F.L. had rules in place before this season prohibiting hits to the head, each penalty may not have technically been a result of the new helmet use rule, but it surely appeared they were related.

Watching game after game Sunday, it seemed very clear that the officials had got the message from league headquarters that there was to be little tolerance for hits to the head, however they occurred.

In the first quarter of the Cincinnati-Indianapolis game, Colts quarterback Andrew Luck scrambled, and as he was tackled to the ground, the Bengals' Shawn Williams drove his helmet into Luck's helmet. Multiple penalty flags littered the field.

It was the kind of play that could have been a penalty before this season. It could even have led to an ejection, although that did not happen often.

This time, Williams was swiftly ordered off the field for the rest of the day. He will probably be disciplined additionally by the N.F.L.

So, if all the preseason talk about players not being allowed to lower their heads yielded a definitive statement like Williams's ejection, then that is a good thing.

Which may have been the N.F.L.'s intent.

In a telephone interview last week, Dean Blandino, a Fox Sports rules analyst who until last year oversaw officiating for the N.F.L., said the new helmet rule was "all part of a culture change" within the league.

"I think the N.F.L. wanted to take a stance," Blandino said.

There is another stance the league is taking. It wants to remind every N.F.L. player that quarterbacks are more important than all the other players on the field. And the N.F.L. is going to use penalty flags to continue to make that point.

This season, one of the little-recognized changes in the rules was what the N.F.L. calls a "point of emphasis." These are directives from the league to game officials about existing rules that it wants them to enforce more stringently.

Among the rules designed specifically to protect the quarterback, there is a clause about defenders not using all, or part, of their body weight to land on the quarterback if he's tackled as he's throwing the football or just after he has thrown a pass.

The exact wording of the point of emphasis was a reminder that "the defender is responsible for avoiding landing on the quarterback when taking him to the ground."

It may be a good rule, especially considering that Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who missed nine games with a broken collarbone last season, was injured again by a hit in the pocket Sunday night (Rodgers returned and led the Packers to victory over the Bears). But it's asking a lot of defensive linemen. Most

300-pound men running at top speed and about to make a tackle are not as nimble as contortionists as they topple to the ground afterward.

But because of the new point of emphasis, Myles Garrett of the Cleveland Browns was penalized Sunday for falling on top of Pittsburgh's Ben Roethlisberger as he tackled him. Same thing happened to Minnesota's Sheldon Richardson because he couldn't avoid a prone Jimmy Garoppolo a millisecond after shoving him to the ground. Cincinnati's Carlos Dunlap received the same punishment after he sacked Luck, caused a fumble and did an athletic little flip forward to get off Luck as he hit the ground.

But Dunlap did sack Luck again two plays later by flinging him to the ground. No penalty, and the Bengals eventually won the game.

Yes, a new N.F.L., but change is hard.

Correction: September 9, 2018

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misidentified the Cincinnati Bengals player who was ejected for a hit on Andrew Luck. It was Shawn Williams, not Darius Phillips.

The NFL's Quarterback Musical Chairs

By Andrew Beaton
Wall Street Journal
September 11, 2018

After last season, the Kansas City Chiefs did something that NFL teams don't typically do. They traded away a quarterback, Alex Smith, who had just made a Pro Bowl, put together one of the most productive seasons in the league and taken the team to the playoffs.

The Washington Redskins also did something unusual also involving Alex Smith. They were on the receiving end of the trade for him from the Chiefs, even when their quarterback of the last several years, Kirk Cousins, had been quite good.

One reason the NFL looks wildly different at the start of this season is that nearly half the league's teams are starting a different quarterback than they did during the opening week last season. And after one week, most of them are pretty happy they made the change.

This is not normal. And more than anything else, it explains what unfolded in the season's first week. Nothing is more important in the NFL than finding the right quarterback and teams that have that quarterback don't often let them go. So typically the turnover at quarterback is mainly limited to the teams with bad ones.

But 15 teams are beginning this season with a different quarterback under center than they began last season with. That's a bigger year-to-year turnover than anytime in the last decade, according to Stats LLC.

The turnover falls into several different buckets. There are the injured players who are back, like the Colts' Andrew Luck; young quarterbacks who have been given the reins, like the Jets' Sam Darnold; and then there's the surprising number of starters who played an unusual game of quarterback musical chairs.

And the best place to begin understanding all of that movement begins in Kansas City. The Chiefs traded up for their quarterback of the future in the 2017 draft when they took Patrick Mahomes with the No. 10 pick. But they still had Smith, who began last season torching defenses and looking like a bona fide MVP candidate. He finished the season with the highest passer rating in the league, which made it just a little bit awkward when they already had a different quarterback in the wings they wanted to start the next season.

So the Chiefs traded Smith to the Redskins, setting off a domino effect across the league. By trading for Smith, Washington said goodbye to their own quarterback: Kirk Cousins. But Washington was not getting rid of a quarterback who was bad. They were getting rid of a quarterback who's pretty good.

That meant Cousins entered free agency as a rare, in-his-prime, franchise-caliber quarterback. He cashed in with the Vikings, signing a lucrative contract that was stunning not because of the total dollar amount, but because it was an essentially unprecedented NFL megadeal that was fully guaranteed.

The fallout didn't end in Minnesota. Because the Vikings got Cousins, their stable of quarterbacks from a season ago—when they made the NFC Championship game—were free to head elsewhere. Case Keenum,

their quarterback for most of the year, went to Denver. Sam Bradford, their starting quarterback who went down early and lost his job to Keenum, signed in Arizona.

This series of moves completely changed the landscape of this season. High-level quarterbacks don't usually gallivant around the league like this. Then all of these ones did.

It only took one week to see the effects. The Redskins were plenty happy with what they got out of Smith. He completed 21-of-30 passes with two touchdowns in a 24-6 win against Arizona, which was a little less pleased with what it got out of Bradford.

But the Chiefs shouldn't be too concerned about shipping Smith out of town. That's because their hunch about how good Mahomes could be turned into a demonstration of how good Mahomes is. He threw for 256 yards and four touchdowns in a win over the Chargers.

Cousins, in Minnesota, looked pretty good too. The Vikings beat the 49ers 24-16 while he threw for 244 yards and two touchdowns.

The person in this group who may have changed his franchise's fortunes more than any, though, is the one with the least pedigree. Keenum was once an undrafted free agent who bounced around from the Texans to the Rams and last season Minnesota, where he was supposed to be a backup and possibly a third-stringer. Then he played well and took the Vikings close to the Super Bowl.

Minnesota saw Cousins as an upgrade and that was Denver's gain. Quarterback has been a strange position for the Broncos. They found a lottery ticket when an aging Peyton Manning came their way and won a Super Bowl, but since then it hasn't been pretty. Paxton Lynch, their first round pick from a couple of years ago, struggled mightily—he was cut before this season—and they locked up Keenum. Suddenly, a team that was tough to watch pass the ball a season ago did it successfully against the Seahawks on Sunday. Keenum threw for three touchdowns, albeit with three interceptions, with 329 yards in a 27-24 win against Seattle.

Even the teams that have changes for other reasons saw humongous effects. While the Colts lost to the Bengals, Andrew Luck's return to health demonstrated that Indianapolis can once again find itself in the playoff hunt. The Bears, in their first full season starting Mitchell Trubisky, nearly upset the Packers on Sunday night.

Last season, the 49ers were winless and out of contention by the time they traded for Jimmy Garoppolo. But in his five starts, they went 5-0—giving them hope for 2018 and beyond. That's still the case. Except San Francisco lost on Sunday when it ran into another team trotting out a new quarterback this year. And that team has even higher expectations: Minnesota and Cousins.

Broncos activate Carlos Henderson, waive Isaiah McKenzie

By Charean Williams
Pro Football Talk
September 11, 2018

The Broncos activated receiver Carlos Henderson from the practice squad/suspended list. They waived receiver Isaiah McKenzie in a corresponding move.

Denver currently has 52 players on its 53-player roster.

Henderson served a one-game suspension for violation of the league's substance abuse policy. Police in Louisiana arrested Henderson on a marijuana possession charge in January.

A third-round pick in 2017, Henderson missed his rookie season after injuring his thumb.

McKenzie was inactive for the Broncos' season opener Sunday.

He played 11 games last season, mostly as a returner. McKenzie averaged 8.7 yards on 21 punt returns and 16.7 yards and three kickoff returns.

The Broncos also announced they have released receiver River Cracraft from their practice squad.

John Mara: Players don't want 18-game season

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
September 11, 2018

The NFL wants to expand the regular season from 16 games to 18. The NFL Players Association doesn't.

Curiously, Giants co-owner John Mara recently made the point on behalf of the players, via Steve Serby of the New York Post, by way of Peter King of Football Morning in America.

"We were negotiating the CBA in 2011," Mara told Serby. "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."

That's fine, but the NFL still wants 18 games, especially with legalized gambling on the way. Jones recently said so himself, and the undercurrent for more games that count among others in the league continues.

So why would Mara talk so openly about the players not wanting 18 games? Unless he's one of the few who doesn't want 18, there's no reason to speak publicly against something that others clearly covet.

And they definitely do. No matter what Mara says, the league wants 18 games. Maybe the players still don't, but the owners still do.

Brian Orakpo: Rules changes have put defensive players in tough spot

By Charean Williams

Pro Football Talk

September 11, 2018

Titans linebacker Brian Orakpo is in his 10th season. He said he plays differently now than in the past, with the change in rules having made it difficult for defensive players.

These days, Orakpo isn't always sure what's a penalty and what's not.

"You used to err on more aggressive, but the one time you err on more aggressive you get called, and it just ruins that possession and that is an automatic first down, tack another 15 and you not only put the team in a bind, you put the defense in a bind because now you have to play some more plays," Orakpo said, via Paul Kuharsky of paulkuharsky.com. "It's just a tough scenario, man. The NFL is getting tougher and tougher to judge each and every year. I wonder how long this league is going to last, honestly."

The Titans were frustrated after Sunday's game not because of calls that went against them but for flags not thrown against the Dolphins. They left questioning whether hits that injured quarterback Marcus Mariota and tackle Taylor Lewan were legal, though penalties were not called.

Orakpo said defensive players are in a no-win situation.

"You hit a quarterback too low, I know you are trying to protect the legs, but if you go too low they call a flag, tack on 15 yards, first down," Orakpo said. "You hit a guy real high . . . tack on 15, first down. It's just hard. It's extremely hard. I totally understand what the refs are doing, the NFL, the bind they are in for player safety. I'm all for player safety. . . . It's just a tough situation we're in right now."