

Kickin' it with Kiz: Case Keenum interceptions against Raiders

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
September 15, 2018

Broncos quarterback Case Keenum was awful against Seattle! It's time for Chad Kelly!

Christian, quick with the hook

Kiz: We're already cranking up the calliope music? Please stop. The staff here at Kickin' It Headquarters is still queasy from a two-year ride on the quarterback carousel. Repeat after me: Keenum is not Tom Brady. Keenum is not paid like a top 10 QB, so roll back those out-sized expectations and you'll be happier, Broncos Country. But I get it. If Keenum goes all Paxton Lynch on us and throws three picks against the Raiders, the home crowd will be tempted to chant: "Kelly, Kelly, Kelly!"

Wish we could chant for your replacement, Kiz.
Mike, agent of change

Kiz: I think Kelly would make an excellent sports columnist. When I grow up, I want to be a back-up quarterback, paid big bucks to stand on the sideline in a baseball cap.

I am curious what game you were watching in Nebraska, as the Cornhuskers manhandled Colorado, and if not for turnovers, dropped passes and a critical penalty, NU would have won the game, even with a new coaching staff that didn't have the benefit of playing a game before Colorado came to town. I cannot wait to be in the stands next year in Boulder and watch Nebraska dominate the Buffaloes.

Royce, itching for rematch

Kiz: I get it. Nebraska had 99 problems and the Buffs weren't one. Rationalize much?

I'm a fan of Rockies shortstop Trevor Story. But he owns a Tom Brady jersey? I dunno.

Renee, representing the 307

Kiz: Story understands. Dress for your next job. If he wants to be the GOAT, there are worse role models than Brady.

Do you know the significance of Sept. 9, 1978? The Missouri Tigers beat Joe Montana and Notre Dame 3-0 in South Bend, but I missed the game because you were good enough to drive me to Chicago at the crack of dawn to catch a plane back to Columbia, Mo., for the birth of my daughter. Did I ever thank you for that?

Mike, proud father

Kiz: Too tell the truth, what I remember most about that Saturday in South Bend was Notre Dame coach Dan Devine, 53 years old at the time, standing on a bench in the locker room, wearing only a towel to conduct his post-game press conference. The image scarred me for life. But I was glad to give you a ride to the airport. As every dad knows, fatherhood is a far greater thrill than any football game.

And today's parting shot makes me wonder if I should apologize for starting so many arguments at the breakfast table.

I read your column every day, Kiz, and it probably comes as no surprise, most of the time I don't agree with what you are saying. But, once in a while, you do something good. After the Broncos beat Seattle, you wrote a very nice article on Von Miller. He is a very good player and active in giving attention and money to kids who need glasses but can't afford to pay for them.

Betty Jo, 20-20 visionary

"Great plan" required by Broncos against Oakland TE Jared Cook

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
September 15, 2018

During the second half last week against Oakland Raiders tight end Jared Cook, the Los Angeles Rams provided a blueprint the Broncos should avoid Sunday.

L.A. didn't really cover Cook.

Facing a soft zone, Cook ran short routes for gains of seven and eight yards, part of a nine-catch, 180-yard tour de force in an otherwise dreary 33-13 loss to the Rams.

If the Broncos account for Cook, they should be 2-0.

If they let Cook dominate, their struggle-covering-tight-ends tradition will continue and they will be 1-1.

"We need to have a great plan to get him contained," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said. "We can't walk in here (team headquarters) on Monday and say we didn't. If we don't contain him, it's going to be a long day for us."

Seattle tight end Will Dissly made it a long first half for the Broncos last week, catching a 15-yard touchdown and a 66-yard completion.

Dissly is a rookie. Cook, 31, will be making his 135th regular-season appearance and is cagey enough to get open with a variety of moves.

"Great player," said safety Will Parks, who is a candidate to cover Cook. "You have to play technically sound because he had 180 yards and (Rams) guys had bad eyes and bad technique."

Broncos defensive backs coach Marcus Robertson, who works with the safeties, was in the Tennessee organization nine years ago when the Titans drafted Cook in the third round.

"We drafted him as a mismatch tight end so I definitely know how good he is and he's gotten better," Robertson said. "He's somebody we'll definitely have to deal with."

Cook has six years of at least 40 catches playing for Tennessee, St. Louis, Green Bay and the Raiders. Last week, he set a career high for yards (only his seventh 100-yard game) and tied a personal best in catches (first nine-catch game since 2011).

On his nine receptions, Cook never began in motion, but the Raiders were creative in moving him around the formation.

Cook caught three passes starting from the inside right receiver (in a trips look), two apiece from the left slot and left tight end (standing up) and one each from right tight end (three-point stance) and wide right.

Cook's long catch went for 45 yards and came from the left slot. He used a stutter move against linebacker Cory Littleton. Cook worked over safety John Johnson, beating him with a shallow cross (11 yards), a double move to the corner (28 yards) and later ran over Johnson during a 14-yard catch.

One wrinkle the Raiders presented was having three receivers lined up to one side and Cook by himself on the opposite side. The Rams naturally had to pay extra attention to the receiver side.

"When I looked at the film, he should have had more yards," Raiders coach Jon Gruden said. "If you're lucky enough to have the wild card (player) that you can win with, you can put him in all kinds of plays to help him be a dominant player."

Dissly beat linebacker Bradley Chubb on both of his big plays and Cook presents the same kind of conundrum: Assign a defensive back or linebacker to cover him?

The case for inside linebackers Todd Davis or Brandon Marshall: It would allow the Broncos to stay in their base or nickel package (five defensive backs) and keep their best cover men on the Raiders' receivers.

The case for a safety or cornerback: A more athletic player like Parks or starting safety Justin Simmons would be able to track Cook.

A potential drawback would be having one less linebacker to play the run game if the Broncos use a dime package (six defensive backs).

"We can stop the run if we're in dime," Robertson said. "There's no issue there. But we're going to try and create the best matchup possible for us."

Last year, the Broncos allowed Dallas' Jason Witten to catch 10 passes for 97 yards and Kansas City's Travis Kelce to roll up 133 yards on seven catches. Compared to the rest of the NFL last season, the Broncos' defense gave up the third most yards to tight ends (1,023), was the worst in yards per catch (12.9) and allowed the ninth-most catches (79).

Cook will present the first major tight end test of this year.

"I can't tell you what we're going to do," Davis said of the Broncos' game plan. "But I think we'll be solid."

Raiders expected to prioritize Amari Cooper in Denver

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
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The Broncos began AFC West play Sunday at 2:25 p.m. against the Oakland Raiders. Here is a Week 2 whip-around:

Pressing question. How early and how often will the Raiders throw to receiver Amari Cooper?

It happens throughout an NFL season. A key receiver doesn't get many opportunities one week and the coaching staff prioritizes him the next game.

Cooper had only one catch (three targets) in last week's loss to the Los Angeles Rams. It was only the eighth time in 47 games he had fewer than two catches.

"If we had more first downs in the second half and had more time of possession, perhaps we would've seen more of Cooper," Raiders coach Jon Gruden said. "But you look at the film, we had him wide open deep (on one play). We didn't go there. He was open a couple of times and for whatever reason, we didn't go that route. Yeah, we want to get him going. That's easier said than done."

The re-signing of speedy receiver Martavis Bryant may open things up for Cooper.

In six career games against the Broncos, Cooper has 17 catches for 160 yards and two touchdowns.

Spotlight players. The Raiders wasted no time acquiring defensive tackle reinforcements after they produced one sack in last week's loss to the Los Angeles Rams.

Enter Johnathan Hankins and Clinton McDonald.

A five-year veteran, Hankins spent four years with the New York Giants and last year with Indianapolis. He has 12 sacks in 67 career games.

McDonald was with the Broncos in training camp until his release. He can provide an interior pass rush, including 8 1/2 sacks the last two years with Tampa Bay.

"(McDonald) fits what we do," Raiders defensive coordinator Paul Guenther said. "He's a good team player, he's serious about his job and he loves football. Hankins, I followed his career and he's a big guy (320 pounds) in there. He's athletic for a big guy."

Rookie Maurice Hurst and fifth-year veteran Justin Ellis will also play.

Watch for ... Broncos quarterback Case Keenum to play a cleaner game.

Keenum threw three interceptions against Seattle, leading to 14 Seahawks points. He also threw three touchdowns.

“We’re just scratching the surface,” offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave said. “Has Case gotten enough turns at these concepts to know what to do when it’s not there? Probably not. It’s learning on the fly. A couple of the looks in the game (last) Sunday, he had never seen before because it was just the first offseason we’ve ever had running these concepts.

“What we need to do a good job of as coaches is not giving them too much so we can get enough repetitive turns and not have 50,000 plays — maybe 50 — so we can get enough turns to where they know what to do when it’s not there.”

Injury report. Every Broncos player practiced fully on Friday.

“We’re lucky, obviously, (to playing) Week 2 in the season and to have everyone healthy and ready to go,” coach Vance Joseph said.

An oral history of unlikely Broncos running back Phillip Lindsay

By Kyle Fredrickson
The Denver Post
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The hometown kid actually made it.

Phillip Lindsay's dream began long ago when he was tossing a football with his siblings on the blacktop of their Denver neighborhood. Maybe you were in the bleachers when he became a Denver South High School legend. Maybe you watched him carry the rock over and over and over again as a Buffalo to revive a sleeping college football program. Or maybe you just decided to pick him up for your NFL fantasy league.

Any way you slice it, Lindsay's prominent role as a Broncos' running back, pass catcher and do-it-all special teamer reminds us why we love sports. A torn ACL. No NFL Scouting Combine invite. Then a draft snub. Lindsay defied expectations at every turn, and on the second touch of his NFL debut last Sunday, he ran into the same end zone he envisioned so many times as a kid. The type of script made for the Hollywood screen.

Appreciate his improbable journey with an oral history of Phillip Lindsay's rise to the Broncos.

Phillip was born on July 24, 1994, to parents Troy and Diane Lindsay. Phillip, 24, is one of five Lindsay children, all of whom who earned full-ride college scholarships for athletics. Two older sisters: Sparkle, 33, and Cheri, 29. Two younger brothers: Zach, 21, and Marcus, 19.

Troy: "Phillip never crawled on his knees. He did the crab-walk all over the place real fast. Right then you're like, 'This is something different here.'"

Diane: "I had named him the Tasmanian Devil when he was little because he would run all over the place. And he also had a great imagination. He would always have to dress up no matter what, whether it was Cowboys or Robin Hood or Batman. He would change clothes 100 times per day."

Troy: "His sisters punked the little boy."

Cheri: "I was the one doing the picking on. He was a little bit of crybaby."

Sparkle: "He watched me play college basketball quite a bit. I was always out at the court and he was always with me. He ate, drank and slept sports like all the rest of us did. His work ethic came from watching his sisters never stop. And from there, he took it by storm."

Troy: "Phillip started playing football when he was 8 years old and he played with the 9-and-10 year olds. Back then, they made him be a little lineman and he actually ended up being their player of the year. At about 12, he scored five touchdowns and most of them were on kickoffs."

Cheri: "People were like, 'Oh, we need to see his birth certificate. He must be older than everybody.'"

Sparkle: "He did everything: running back, receiver, kickoff return and defense. And Phillip was dunking a basketball at 14 years old."

Troy: "I've always coached Phillip. When he left me in high school, he went to my brother Tony. He needed his uncle to say, 'I don't give a [expletive] what your dad says, you're going to do this.'"

Troy: "His senior year, in his first game, he blew his knee out."

Sparkle: "He scored a touchdown and didn't even know his ACL was torn."

Cheri: "He gets the surgery and bending and straightening just wasn't happening. There were times I went home, my dad would sit on his back and we'd just kind of push that knee up to his butt. He'd be screaming. We were all crying, probably, because we knew how bad it hurt him."

Troy: "He was already offered to go to Colorado. But (coach John) Embree got fired and we didn't know what the heck was going to happen with Phillip. When (CU coach Mike) MacIntyre came in town, pretty much every high school coach in Colorado told him, 'Hey, if you don't keep that kid on scholarship, you'd be a fool.' "

MacIntyre: "The first time I ever met him, he couldn't even bend his knee and weighed about 150 pounds. I just saw his energy inside of him that you see now and I said, 'I'm going to take this guy no matter what. But I don't know if he'll ever play for us.'"

Sparkle: "Phil said, 'Do you think everything is going to be OK?' I said, 'I know it.'"

Marcus: "He never lost faith."

Lindsay set the career mark for all-purpose yardage (5,926) through four seasons at CU and led the Buffaloes back to their first bowl game in a decade. Lindsay's teammates included quarterback Sefo Liufau, center Alex Kelley, running back Christian Powell and linebacker Derek McCartney. David Plati has led the Buffs' sports information department since 1984.

Liufau: "When he first came in, I saw this guy in crutches with a knee brace on. We didn't really know if he was going to be play, but every day I saw him rehabbing and working. He redshirted my freshman year, but boy did he give hell to that starting defense. He's not scared of anybody."

Kelley: "It's the middle of the season and he's playing on the scout team against the starting defense. Phil tried to run over Josh Tupou, our starting nose tackle, and they started chirping at each other. Josh is a super big guy and Phil got right in his face ready to fight."

Powell: "He stood his ground."

Liufau: "We played Oregon in 2015 and early in the game against (defensive tackle) DeForest Buckner, something happened, and he asked Phil, 'Do you know who I am?' Then Phil just starts popping off, 'I don't care who you are! Come through the hole again!'"

McCartney: "Before our junior year (the 2016 Pac-12 South championship season), we were struggling as a team. ... There was a time that summer when people weren't showing up on time, people weren't

coming to workouts, people weren't doing the right thing all the time in terms of football. We had like a giant intervention with the team.

"It wasn't until Phillip got up and said something that it resonated well. He starts screaming, he was so passionate about what he was saying, and he's calling people out by name and telling them exactly what they needed to do to be better. It was the first time I remember Phil really stepping up into to a vocal role. It showed everyone that Phil was for real."

Liufau: "He ran for more than 200 yards against Arizona State. After, he actually brought the whole O-Line with him to the interview after and explained those guys were the reason he was so successful and how he couldn't have done it without them."

Plati: "If I had to rate all the players I've worked with over 35-plus years, I don't think I've ever had anyone as humble as Phillip."

Despite record-setting college production, Lindsay did not receive an invitation to the NFL's Scouting Combine. But many scouts, including those from the Broncos, attended Lindsay's CU Pro Day in March. One month later, the Lindsays gathered at their family home to watch three-day NFL draft on television.

Cheri: "We were trying to fill the time with stuff like dominoes, cards or getting out of the house a little bit. The phone calls and the text messages that were coming in weren't that call. It was really frustrating."

Troy: "We were all just sitting there kind of waiting to see if we were going to hear his name."

Zach: "All these other running backs get drafted and my brother wanted to challenge them. He wanted to go against them."

Troy: "Those were heartbreaking times for him. But he just said, 'Dad, to hell with it. I'm going to make this anyway.' And I figured he would." Right after the draft, everybody called, but by then it was like, 'Nah, he's staying with the Broncos.' He's a homeboy, anyway."

Zach: "It was the best thing that could have happened to him. Because when my brother gets mad or feels betrayed, he's gonna go crazy. They just opened up a monster."

Lindsay signed with the Broncos in April. Among those who witnessed his NFL rise include: Coach Vance Joseph, special teams coordinator Tom McMahon, quarterback Chad Kelly, receiver Courtland Sutton, safety Will Parks and defensive tackle Shelby Harris.

McMahon: "Our first introduction was at our local pro day. I fell in love with him that day."

Kelly: "I didn't know who he was and Phil comes up to me with his iPad. He's already rocking and rolling. I start asking him some questions, I've been here for a couple weeks, and he's like, 'Yeah, I already know what to do on 50, 60, 70, swing, diagonal and flat.'"

Parks: "Every time you looked up in OTAs, he had the ball in his hands running like 40 yards for a touchdown. You already had a sense he was going to make this roster."

Harris: "I remember during training camp there was a team period. A linebacker blitzed up the middle, we're watching it on film, and Phil just stuck his little body all up in there and was willing to stone the blitz. You see bigger backs that don't do that. Right then it was like, 'This kid has heart.' We call him Pit-bull. He refuses to say no."

Sutton: "There was a play in practice where he was running a go-route. I remember thinking, 'We're going to let a running back do this? This is one of ours.' He goes out there, lines up and he just smokes a linebacker and makes a heckuva catch on the sideline. I thought maybe he was lucky. But then he did it again. I was like, 'OK, this dude can actually make plays.'"

Joseph: "What he's done hasn't been just because he's a local kid, he has earned his right to be here."

Kelly: "I even have friends back home who are drafting him in fantasy. Even my Uncle Jim was texting me after the first preseason game: 'Man, I love No. 2. He's a helluva player.'"

Lindsay locked up a roster spot and made his NFL debut wearing the same number of his childhood hero — No. 30, running back Terrell Davis. Troy and Diane attended last Sunday's game eight rows up in the southwest corner of Mile High. Phillip's siblings watched on television.

Troy: "Phillip had talked to Terrell Davis before and he actually had his number in his phone. He said, 'Dad, I'm going to call him and ask this man for permission to wear No. 30. I respect him and it's out of respect.'"

Davis: "I didn't expect him to reach out to me. It was like, wow, you just don't see that. Nowadays you have a lot of young players who don't understand the history of the game. A lot of them don't care to understand. We talked on the phone and he told me about his mindset. He explained to me how he had my biography growing up, and how he lived his life and used it as a reference when he went through struggles. That made me feel good.

"It's appropriate for him to have the jersey. I was like, 'Make it yours, brother.'"

Troy: "Every morning before a game, Philip will call me. He knows I get up early, so he'll call about 6 and we'll talk about it. I'll ask him how he's feeling. He'll let me know if he's nervous or what's going on with him. He has a little crystal that he's gotta have. He'll also say, 'Tell mom I love her.'"

Diane: "This is something he's dreamed about forever and ever as a young child."

Zach: "It's a nerve-racking feeling, because you want him to do good."

Marcus: "I wasn't sure how much he was going to play or not, and the next thing I know, I see that he's in the game. Then I see him catch the ball."

Cheri: "I looked up and I was like, 'Oh, he has a lot of space.'"

Zach: "It was funny, because that Friday my brother said there was going to be a play where he went one-on-one with (rookie linebacker Shaquem) Griffin. He said, 'This kid isn't going to be able to hold me.' Sure enough. Damn. He said it."

Cheri: "My neighbors actually came downstairs and asked if everything was OK because I was screaming like a banshee."

Troy: "Phillip is this tough guy, but he's still a mamma's baby. He'll lay down at home and she'll rub all that hair of his. Then me and him will just talk about everything. Anywhere from money to girls to whatever, we're a real close family all the way around."

Zach: "We talk every day on the phone. We really get into Call of Duty as a family, my brothers and sisters, and play online."

Marcus: "All the football stuff is cool, but seeing him happy is the best thing ever."

Cheri: "You have to prove to him he can't do something. Or he's just gonna try to do it."

Troy: "Phillip has kind of a magic to him."

Popular In the Community

Broncos tracker: Defense prepares to face Oakland Raiders

By Kyle Fredrickson
The Denver Post
September 15, 2018

Denver rookies reflect

Josey Jewell and Tim Patrick were two of eight Broncos players who played in their first NFL regular season game last week.

Jewell played seven snaps at linebacker and a team-high 29 special teams plays.

“Just giving the guys a break and just rotating in there when they were tired and there are certain packages I’m in,” said Jewell, referring to the starting inside linebackers Brandon Marshall and Todd Davis.

Patrick had a chance for a big play, but left his feet too early to catch quarterback Case Keenum’s pass over the middle. He played nine offensive and 22 special teams snaps.

“The game was a little bit fast and I mistimed my jump,” Patrick said.

Overall, Patrick said: “There were small things I didn’t do out there. I usually check the defense but I was more focused on my assignments instead of the whole picture of the play. That will come with relaxing and the game slowing down.”

— Ryan O’Halloran

9:30 — Have rule changes hurt Broncos’ tackling effort?

Caught up with Broncos defensive backs coach Marcus Robertson after practice on Thursday. Among the topics covered was tackling. The Broncos missed seven tackles in the first half of last week’s win over Seattle.

I asked Robertson, who played 12 NFL seasons, if it’s natural for tackling to be sloppy because of the practice rules and managing the starters during the preseason.

“The game is a little bit different (now),” he said. “When I played, we had two-a-day practices in pads so we were always tackling and had pads on. If you had a day in shorts and shoulder pads, that was a good day. I’m quite sure the tackling has been a little sloppy across the league. But it doesn’t matter — when the ball comes to us, we have to get the ball down.”

— Ryan O’Halloran

For Von Miller, it's not just the sack but the strip

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 15, 2018

Von Miller has become the “Peanut” Tillman of pass rushers.

Tillman was a Chicago Bears cornerback for 12 of his 13 playing seasons who from 2003-2015 recorded an astounding 44 forced fumbles. Tillman’s technique was the “Peanut Punch” at the ball.

Miller just grabs it. He forced 22 fumbles in seven seasons, then had two more in the opener of season 8 last Sunday against Seattle. Then there were arguably the two most significant forced fumbles in NFL history – his two strip sacks of Cam Newton that led to two touchdowns in Super Bowl 50.

Where did Miller learn his ball-stripping technique?

“I don’t know,” he said with a laugh. “I mean, especially in my position, if I can’t be effective rushing the passer, if I’m not rushing the passer, then it immediately goes to ‘How can I be effective on this play?’

And they run the ball away so many times, so it’s like, when the ball is close to me, I’ve got to find a way to make some type of play. I was just fortunate to make that play on Sunday.”

He was referring to his third quarter play when Seattle running back Chris Carson had just picked up a first down and was running for more when Miller reached in with two hands and pulled the ball away from the ball carrier.

Broncos vs. Raiders: What we're watching, key matchups and game predictions

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

September 15, 2018

Two months ago, the Broncos-Raiders rivalry appeared to be not only renewed, but more intriguing than it had been in years. Jon Gruden returned to the sidelines, Oakland's defense featured Khalil Mack and its offense was stacked with weapons for Derek Carr, including Marshawn Lynch, Amari Cooper, Jordy Nelson and Jared Cook.

Much has changed over the last few weeks.

The trade of Mack, Oakland's best player and a long-time nemesis for the Broncos, changed the dynamic between the teams and may have altered the AFC West race.

"I mean, honestly, I was shocked," Broncos linebacker Von Miller told Oakland media. "I always felt like Khalil and Aaron Donald were untradeable guys. J.J. Watt, I thought guys like that were untradeable. Then they traded him. A guy like Khalil, he only comes around once every lifetime. You want to keep guys like that."

The loss of Mack for the Raiders (0-1) and the arrival of Case Keenum and an impressive rookie class to Denver (1-0) seemingly gives the Broncos the edge — on paper. But ask around the Broncos' locker room and it's clear this game carries as much significance as years past.

"This is a big one," linebacker Shaquil Barrett said. "Winning our division is what we want to do. That's how we guarantee a spot in the playoffs, and it all starts right now this week. Being at home, it's so much of an advantage to be home and do that."

Matchups to watch

Broncos' secondary vs. Raiders WRs Amari Cooper, Jordy Nelson and Martavis Bryant

The Broncos secondary isn't the one the Raiders became accustomed to facing the past few years. Aqib Talib is gone, leaving Chris Harris Jr. as the true No. 1 corner, Bradley Roby the No. 2, and Adam Jones and Tramaine Brock in a rotation for No. 3.

In the Broncos' opener against Seattle, Jones played 38 snaps at corner, compared to Brock's two. Jones was the nickel corner and Brock the dime, and the Broncos played more nickel than dime. But the split was telling, and with Vance Joseph's prior experience with Jones in Cincinnati, it's likely Jones could see more and more time with the defense.

The Broncos' defense held Seattle to 242 net passing yards and had two interceptions — one each from Jones and safety Justin Simmons. But they face a deeper receiving corps from the Raiders.

Cooper had only one catch for 9 yards in the Raiders' opening loss to the Rams, Nelson added 23 yards. But Bryant re-signed Wednesday and could see extensive time.

“He’s a guy that’s proven,” Gruden said. “He can go up and get the deep ball in contested situations. He can run away from you. He can make you miss. He can make big plays down the field, that’s an obvious. We’re hoping that we can bottle up where he is now. He’s in a great place. He’s healthy. He’s ready to go. He has a great state of mind. We’ll see what happens.”

Broncos OLB Von Miller vs. Raiders RT Donald Penn

If the Broncos do what they did in Week 1, Penn could see a lot of Miller on Sunday. Against the Seahawks, the Broncos kept Miller mostly on the right side for the favorable matchup with Germain Ifedi. Miller came away with a monster night: three sacks, two forced fumbles, one fumble recovery.

In his 12 career games against the Raiders, Miller has totaled seven tackles, 17 quarterback hits, five forced fumbles and one fumble recovery. The Broncos’ defense is built to rush the passer and, in Week 1, they used multiple pressure packages that led to six sacks of Russell Wilson.

This year, the Raiders added first-round pick Kolton Miller to the left side and moved Penn to the right. Although there was some skepticism about Kolton Miller’s projected efficiency as a starter, he allowed only two hurries in 47 pass-blocking snaps against the Rams, per Pro Football Focus.

“It’s a huge challenge. (Penn’s) a strong guy, a big guy and one of the better tackles in the league for I don’t know how long,” Von Miller said. “The Oakland Raiders have the best offensive line in football, in my opinion. I’m sure you all would say Dallas Cowboys, this team or that team, but to me the Oakland Raiders have the best offensive line in football. And they made it a whole lot better with the Kolton Miller pick and moving Donald Penn to the right side. Really all five guys are really Pro Bowl solid, offensive lineman.”

Broncos’ linebackers and safeties vs. Raiders TE Jared Cook

The Broncos’ struggles to contain opposing tight ends are well-documented and have yet to be resolved. Last week, Will Dissly pasted 105 yards and a receiving touchdown on Denver. Dissly has played the position all of two years.

Last year, 30 percent of the Broncos’ receiving yards allowed were to tight ends (the 1,023 yards were the third-most in the league) and 426 of those yards were after the catch (the most in the NFL).

Next up is Jared Cook, the Raiders’ 6-foot-5 tight end who recorded a franchise record 180 yards on Monday.

Defensive coordinator Joe Woods said the Broncos will “do a little bit of everything” against Cook to try to slow him down. He also hopes the Broncos’ tackling improves; they had seven missed tackles, including at least four on a 66-yard catch-and-run by Dissly last weekend.

“The tight end is going to be a challenge this week,” Joseph said. “He is a physical mismatch for most safeties, and definitely for backers. We have to have a plan to bracket him and to play a safety over top of him like he’s a receiver. Hopefully we can rush the passer, speed the quarterback up and kind of help us cover these guys.”

Broncos WR Emmanuel Sanders vs. Raiders CB Gareon Conley

Emmanuel Sanders caught 10-of-11 targets for 135 yards and a touchdown last week, earning his 16th career game with at least 100 yards. Since the start of OTAs and continuing into training camp and preseason, Sanders has developed the strongest connection among the Broncos' deep receiving corps with Keenum.

The bulk of his receiving yards last week, including the 43-yard touchdown, came with him lined up on the left, but he also caught all four targets in the slot, for 23 yards.

The Raiders managed to hold the Rams to only 60 passing yards, four completions and 0-for-3 on third downs in the first half. But it fell apart in the second, as the Rams finished with 233 passing yards. Should the Raiders' diminished pressure up front hinder the secondary, the Broncos could be looking at more big-play opportunities in the passing game.

Prediction

Broncos 31, Raiders 21. The Raiders traded away Mack, had a rogue skunk at their stadium and collapsed in the second half against the Rams to take a loss in their season opener. All in all, it's been a heck of a week for Oakland, and playing again on less than a week's rest in Denver's altitude won't make it any better.

While the Raiders boast the league's oldest roster and are, in the words of their head coach, in rebuilding mode, the Broncos bolstered their pass rush with the addition of Bradley Chubb, improved their run game by relying on youth and improved their quarterback spot by signing a free agent who Gruden believes will be the best acquisition of the year. The Broncos have the offensive tools to exploit Oakland's defense. If the Broncos can eliminate the turnovers — and win the turnover battle — the game should be theirs.

— Nicki Jhabvala

The opposing view

Predictions from the staff at The Athletic Bay Area

Broncos 24, Raiders 21

What to watch for: Derek Carr, by Sunday, will probably be tired of hearing about how open Amari Cooper was against the Rams. Of course, I wrote about it that night, he's since been able to watch film and see it and his coach has pointed it out publicly and you know he's hounded Carr about it privately. So, will Carr course correct? Will he overcorrect and try to force it? The Raiders need Cooper involved, but not at the risk of becoming predictable. Odds are Carr won't do that, but there will need to be some balance of the whole take-what-they-give-you mantra and leaning on your best offensive playmaker.

— Jimmy Durkin

Raiders 28, Broncos 24

What to watch for: How jittery Carr looked against the Rams' pass rush doesn't seem to bode well for him being secure against Von Miller. But this is where we get to see what Jon Gruden can do. Some of it is Carr being able to stomach the pressure, but a lot of it will be the scheming and play-calling of Gruden, who

didn't make any noteworthy adjustments in the second half of the opener. If Gruden can call a better game, it could give Carr confidence and the Broncos might be upset bait. Russell Wilson threw for 298 yards and three touchdowns against the Broncos defense. Seahawks tight end Will Dissly — who??? — had 105 receiving yards. Jared Cook could feast again, or the attention he draws could open up the outside. That's on Gruden to exploit. Case Keenum is a lot easier to deal with for the Raiders defense, and there is no Todd Gurley on the Broncos. If the Raiders can keep their nerve in Denver, which is tough, they should be able to make a game of it and possibly steal it.

— Marcus Thompson II

Broncos 27, Raiders 24

What to watch for: The Raiders play better for longer in their second game, but come up short as their defense isn't quite ready to make the big stop yet. Derek Carr and Amari Cooper hook up for a touchdown and Martavis Bryant has an "ooh" moment as Jon Gruden will make sure to have the White Tiger do some tricks now that he is on stage. I would pick the outright upset if I had a little more faith in the run game with Marshawn Lynch and Jalen Richard and the new tackles. Who knows, maybe this is Doug Martin's coming out party?

— Vic Tafur

Broncos 27, Raiders 17

What to watch for: Case Keenum and Derek Carr both threw three interceptions last week — Keenum's team won and Carr's team lost, which tells us that Denver can win even without a great game from its QB and the Raiders, at this point, cannot. Mostly because the Broncos have Von Miller and the Raiders have no defensive equivalent. Also, the Raiders are on a rough short week after the late-night Monday game, while this is the Broncos' second straight at home. This is set up for the fresher, stronger team to win relatively easily.

— Tim Kawakami

How one coach has been a key piece to the Broncos' new-look offense

By Nicki Jhabvala
The Athletic
September 15, 2018

When the Broncos began to pick apart their 2017 roster and remake both the coaching staff and player personnel, one of the most overlooked acquisitions, perhaps, was to their running backs room.

They released their 1,000-yard rusher in C.J. Anderson, later parted with seventh-round pick De'Angelo Henderson, and moved forward with an undrafted rookie in Phillip Lindsay and a third-round pick in Royce Freeman.

But the Broncos also changed the leadership in the room.

Among the coaching cuts in January was Eric Stutesville, Denver's longtime running backs coach and one-time interim head coach who was beloved by the various backs that came through Dove Valley. Anderson described Stutesville as both a coach and father figure for spurring his development on and off the field. Others felt the same.

To replace him, the Broncos hired Curtis Modkins, a 10-year NFL coaching veteran who worked as an offensive coordinator in Buffalo (2010-12) and San Francisco (2016) and most recently worked on John Fox's staff in Chicago, as the Bears' running backs coach.

A former running back himself, Modkins was handed almost a total rebuild at the position, with third-year back Devontae Booker the lone holdover from the 2017 season. The Broncos have the youngest rushing corps in the league, but the group has already been one of the most productive on the roster and Modkins has played a key role.

"He's been great," Freeman said. "He's been really good about teaching us what we need to do to succeed out there. He's coached a lot, and coached a lot of good backs. He's definitely emphasized a lot of things that he's seen and we can pick his brain about what can give us a little edge out there."

Added coach Vance Joseph: "He's been a great teacher. He's been a coordinator twice in this league. He's very demanding. He's a very, very smart guy. Even for (offensive coordinator) Billy (Musgrave) in game-planning, he's totally involved."

Modkins has been entrusted with the backs' continued development, much like every other positional coach in the NFL. But he's also been a primary decision-maker in the Broncos' offense and in the game-day rotation of the running backs.

Against Oakland on Sunday, the Broncos may rely on Modkins and his young group of backs even more. The Raiders defense took a hit when Khalil Mack was traded away, and the first impression of the altered group was less than inspiring Monday. After a second-half collapse to the Rams, the Raiders gave up 140 rushing yards for an average of 5.38 per carry (second-highest in the league).

Modkins' plan is twofold.

"We have certain things that we think certain guys do well," he said. "But also when the game comes, there's a feel that you get from watching the game on how they're seeing things and who's in the flow of it. So sometimes it's about riding out the guy in a groove. Sometimes the packages are predetermined."

Last weekend, Freeman became the first Broncos rookie to start an opener since Hall of Famer Terrell Davis got the nod in 1995. But it was Lindsay who generated the most attention.

A University of Colorado record-holder, Lindsay scored the Broncos' first touchdown of the season — a 29-yard catch-and-run — and combined with Freeman to produce 173 offensive yards. Each had 71 yards on the ground, with Freeman gaining the bulk of his in the fourth quarter.

Booker, the No. 2 back on the depth chart, ended up with the fewest snaps (19) among them. But the rotation and play time could change week by week.

"Mod did a great job on using the guys the right away," Joseph said. "Obviously, going with the hot hand with 30 (Lindsay) on Sunday, but coming back with Royce in the four-minute offense to finish the game, using Book on third downs and to catch the ball for us. He did a fabulous job of using our guys as far as the game flow and with the plan. That's hard to do."

In his decade of working with NFL running backs, Modkins has coached three different 1,000-yard rushers: C.J. Spiller with Buffalo in 2012, Reggie Bush with Detroit in 2013 and Jordan Howard with Chicago last season. When he was the 49ers' coordinator in 2016, San Francisco ranked fourth in the league in rushing offense (126.2). When he was the Bills' coordinator, Buffalo featured a 3,000-yard passer, a 1,000-yard rusher and a 1,000-yard receiver for the first time in 10 seasons (2012).

His play-calling experience and years of coaching running backs has provided the Broncos' staff another reliable voice. But there's also inherent pressure that comes with leading a positional remake. After a 5-11 campaign, Joseph's staff faces high stakes in trying to right the ship, and ensuring a balanced offensive attack is a big piece of the puzzle.

"Everybody knows that if you're going to run the ball, it's more effective," Lindsay said. "The offense runs more smoothly. It feels good for us to be able to run the ball."

New-look Raiders present Broncos' young backs a prime opportunity

By Tyler Polumbus
The Athletic
September 15, 2018

It's Raiders week, baby! OK, maybe the rivalry isn't what it used to be, but I'm Denver born and bred and this game still makes my blood boil.

The Raiders opened with a 33-13 loss to the Los Angeles Rams on Monday, but I believe Oakland is capable of pulling off a few upsets this year.

The offense is led by Derek Carr, who was once viewed as one of the most promising young quarterbacks in the league. His last year or so has been up and down, but he went 20-of-24 in passing and led a sharp-looking uptempo offense in the first half against the Rams.

The second half is when things took a turn. Carr tossed two interceptions for a total of three on the night and the Raiders' offense sputtered.

But the Raiders showed more in one half against the Rams than they did the previous season. Those first two quarters proved coach Jon Gruden has his guys playing fast and efficiently.

Running back Marshawn Lynch only had 11 carries for 41 yards, but he did go "Beast Mode" on a 10-yard touchdown run, rumbling through a host of defenders. Gruden described the run as "vintage Marshawn Lynch" and I expect him to receive a much heavier workload against the Broncos.

Defensively the Raiders have been historically weak against the run for close to two full seasons. But against the Rams, the Raiders showed two sides to their run defense. In the first half they looked solid in containing Rams running back Todd Gurley (he had only 19 rushing yards on four carries), but the dam busted in the second half as Gurley finished with 108 of his team's 140 rushing yards (5.4 per carry). The Broncos should be licking their chops at the opportunities to run the football this weekend. Royce Freeman, Phillip Lindsay and Devontae Booker should have big games.

Keys to a Broncos victory:

1. Solve their defensive problems against tight ends.

It is no secret that the Broncos have long had issues defending opposing tight ends in the passing game. The problem persisted last week against the Seahawks. Will Dissly, who is known as a blocking tight end, had 105 receiving yards and a touchdown against the Broncos.

This week they face the challenge of trying to contain Raiders tight end Jared Cook. Cook had a monster week against the Rams, recording nine catches for 180 yards, a franchise record for a tight end. Cook is 6-foot-5, 254 pounds and presents a significant matchup problem for the Broncos. Look for safety Justin Simmons to come down in the box often and go one-on-one against Cook.

2. Win the turnover battle.

It is not every day that a team is able to overcome three interceptions and find a victory, but somehow the Broncos did it last Sunday. That is not sustainable though. The quickest way to let an inferior Raiders team in the game is to hand them the football a couple of times.

The turnover ratio is the single most important stat in football. Consider that, dating back to 2012, the Broncos have won a franchise-record 32 consecutive games when winning the turnover battle, which is the longest active streak in the NFL.

Keenum had three picks against the Seahawks, but the defense kept it even with three takeaways. The Broncos have to protect the football and let the Raiders be on the short end of the stick in the turnover ratio.

3. Run the football — a lot.

After one week, the Raiders' run defense ranks 25th (140 yards allowed) in the NFL and the Broncos' rushing offense ranks seventh (146 yards). The Broncos should keep the ball on the ground all day, especially on first down.

Normally I like to see a healthy balance of run and pass on first down. But if the Broncos can do as the Rams did and average more than 5 yards per carry, Keenum will be well set up to protect the football. Keenum can throw quick passes off three steps for the majority of the game if they dominate first down on the ground.

Broncos must slow Jared Cook's roll to improve to 2-0

By Troy Renck

KMGH

September 15, 2018

The Broncos sacked Russell Wilson six times. They held Seattle to 64 yards rushing. Yet, no one woke up outside of Denver on Monday talking about the Broncos possessing an elite defense. Perhaps, the residue of 5-11 remains. Or the fact that the No Fly Zone underwent a makeover.

Think this motivates the Broncos? Good guess.

"Absolutely, we still have a chip on our shoulders. We know what last year felt like and tasted like. We want to get that taste out of our mouths," defensive captain Todd Davis told Denver7. "We are coming after people. There's a different aura and energy around this team. We are prepared and confident."

For the Broncos to excel Sunday, they need to slow Oakland tight end Jared Cook. Cook caught nine passes for 180 yards in a season-opening loss to the Los Angeles Rams. He is plaid on stripes, a walking mismatch at 6-foot-5, 254 pounds. This is a concern because no team has allowed more yards after the catch to tight ends over the last season-plus than the Broncos.

They know it. As defensive coordinator Joe Woods stepped forward for his weekly press conference, he joked, "Don't ask me about the tight ends."

The Broncos have a plan for Cook. That's a start since there were multiple times last season where Denver looked unprepared, including in a dreadful performance against the Giants' Evan Engram. Look for the Broncos to treat Cook like a receiver. It could mean bracketing him in zone coverage, and sliding help over the top in man assignments.

"You know he's going to be one of their bigger threats. When we are in man we have to have a body on a body and win our one-on-ones. And when we are in zone, we have to know where he's at at all times," safety Justin Simmons said. "He's a great player. But we are going to see tight ends like this all season. We will make sure we get it fixed."

Broncos continue to have trouble covering tight ends

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
September 15, 2018

Covering tight ends has been the Denver Broncos' bugaboo for several seasons, a trend that continued when they allowed Seattle's Will Dissly to become the first tight end in league history to top 100 yards receiving and score a touchdown in his NFL debut.

Up next: Jared Cook , who's coming off a career-best 180-yard performance in Oakland's opener.

Dissly did his damage on just three catches, covering 105 yards.

"I tell you what, he was one of my favorite guys in the draft. He's a good player, but we can't do that," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said. "The first catch he made, we missed four tackles. The coverage wasn't great, but we missed four tackles. The second play he made down the seam, again our eyes are bad and we're out of position."

Actually, Joseph was forgetting Dissly's first catch, a 15-yard touchdown grab in which the fourth-round draft pick out of Washington burst past rookie linebacker Bradley Chubb, the fifth overall pick in the draft.

It was Dissly's second catch when he broke four tackles before Brandon Marshall dragged him down at the 5-yard line following a zigzagging 66-yard catch and run, and it was his third grab, a 24-yarder, that put him over 100 yards.

"That's been a problem for us and we've got to fix it," Joseph said. "We've got to coach better and we've got to play better."

The Raiders (0-1) visit the Broncos (1-0) on Sunday and Cook is getting as much attention from Denver's coaching staff and defenders as Marshawn Lynch, Amari Cooper, Martavis Bryant, Jordy Nelson and Derek Carr.

"The tight end is going to be a challenge this week," Joseph said. "He is a physical mismatch for most safeties and definitely for backers. We have to play to bracket him and to play a safety over top of him like he's a receiver. Hopefully we can rush the passer, speed the quarterback up, and kind of help us cover these guys."

That's what they did last week when they sacked the mobile Russell Wilson six times, their most since Nov. 27, 2016, in an overtime loss to Kansas City.

Von Miller , who had three sacks last week, has always rated the Raiders as the best O-line in the league, one he insists is even better now that Donald Penn moved to right tackle to make room for rookie left tackle Kolton Miller.

"Donald Penn can play any position on the line (and) 77 is a beast. He was the best tackle in this year's draft," Miller said. "I've always said the Raiders have the best offensive line in football. They made it a whole lot better with the Miller kid."

Last season, tight ends averaged 64 yards a game against Denver, and the Broncos were especially burned by Jason Witten (97 yards, TD), Evan Engram (82 yards, TD), Hunter Henry (73 yards), Travis Kelce (133 yards, TD) and Rob Gronkowski (74 yards).

Throw in Nick Vannett's 11-yard catch and Seahawks tight ends had 116 yards and a TD last week.

"The tight ends, we haven't fixed that yet," Joseph said.

He knows a quick fix is necessary Sunday to contain Cook.

"He's 6-6, he has great ball skills, he runs a 4.5 (40-yard dash)," Joseph said. "We have to have a great plan to get him contained. We can't walk in here on Monday and say we didn't contain him. If we don't contain him, it's going to be a long day for us."

NFL keeps open pipeline for game officials

By Barry Wilner
Associated Press
September 15, 2018

One NFL fan is enraged by a penalty flag he sees fly on TV. He turns to the woman next to him and asks, "Where do they get these guys?"

Replay then proves the call was correct, and the fan just shrugs as the woman replies: "Guess they know what they are doing" about the officials.

Those officials come from a pipeline established by the NFL that seeks to identify people with the right skill set, temperament and judgment to handle a thankless job week after week.

Often, the league puts a high premium on experience, even when some officials no longer seem to have the agility to keep up with the incredible speed of the game. Among current referees alone, Walt Coleman is in his 30th year as an NFL official, Walt Anderson has begun his 23rd, and Tony Corrente is in his 24th. Overall, there are 19 officials in the 20th or more season of their NFL career, and another 33 with at least 15 years on the job.

That doesn't mean the older guys can't handle that job. As explained by recently retired referee Gene Steratore, now with CBS as an analyst, "The officials learn from all the time they spend on the field about angles and getting the best view on a play."

He points to the new rule banning any hit initiated with the lowering of the head and use of the helmet, whether by a defender or offensive player. Noting it is a "necessary rule change to protect the safety of the players," Steratore understands there's an adjustment period for those players and the officials before reaching a full understanding of what should draw a flag.

"Sure there's a learning curve for them," he says, "but then a trigger will show right before that contact, and it will become clear if it is a penalty. I think that will come in a fast period of time."

It did. One such penalty was called in Week 1, on Kansas City safety Ron Parker.

The NFL, which has seven new officials this season, has a distinct pipeline for talent. It's not entirely unlike the flow for players in that many referees, umpires, linesman and judges come from the college ranks. But the in-depth process can begin well before the highest-college levels.

"We look at officials at the high school level," says Al Riveron, the NFL's officiating director. "After a few years in high school, they might move to the lower college ranks and then to the Power 5 conferences. We have a staff of 72 scouts and supervisors and our full-time officials who look at you. We first home in on their skills, and we are thinking long term of we have an interest in you. At some point, you could be ready (for the pros)."

To aid in the process, the league created the Officiating Development Program. Candidates must receive medical clearance, pass a background check, take a psychological assessment and complete an in-person interview with a panel of NFL staffers.

If they are accepted into the program, they study position-specific film with veteran NFL officials and current officiating supervisors. They get familiar with NFL rules that often are different from colleges. For example, clock stoppages to move the chains on first downs, or one foot in bounds on receptions.

Then the prospective officials attend an NFL preseason officiating clinic, participate in minicamps and training camps, and some work a NFL preseason game. They could get some experience in the Senior Bowl, East-West Shrine Game or NFLPA bowl game, as well.

When they are assessed for potential employment, the categories are:

—Ready for the highest level. The official gets a spot on an NFL crew when an opening comes.

—Great work, but room to improve. The league likes what it sees in the official, but determines he or she is not quite ready for the NFL. That officials remains in the program.

—Not the right fit, The league does not see this official working in the NFL.

There are 39 officials in the program this year.

The NFL always is looking for outlets through which to develop game officials. The CFL and Arena League have been options, and they could have another when the Alliance of American Footballs starts up the week after the Super Bowl.

"We're keeping a big eye on the Alliance," Riveron says enthusiastically. "The more officials get to see live snaps, the greater that is."

Are Jon Gruden's Raiders ... gulp ... likable?

By Paul Klee

Colorado Springs Gazette

September 15, 2018

The last thing this Broncos-Raiders rivalry needs is "R8RH8R" T-shirts at Mile High on Sunday. It's screaming for a hug and a Hallmark card from aisle 4 at King Soopers: Get well soon, buddy!

"Short week, no sleep and a wild skunk running around our building," Raiders coach Jon Gruden said.

Maybe we should have guessed Oakland would go full Raiders with Chucky's return to the Bay. Trading star pass-rusher Khalil Mack to the Chicago Bears? That was merely the tip of the iceberg in the path of this silver-and-black floatie tube. This is a team that's being sued for millions of dollars ... by its own city council.

Don't fret over Gruden's coaching acumen after a 10-year layover. Any fella who's smart enough to score \$100 million to perform a job he hasn't done in a decade owns my unwavering respect. When you really think about the finances of the great heist, Gruden's the smartest dude since the first professional fisherman.

Plus, I'm way more worried with his life decisions after leaving a cushy TV gig on "Monday Night Football" to run skunks out of his locker room. Did he see the varmint that stunk up the joint?

"You don't have to see a skunk, do you?" Gruden said to laughs on a conference call with Colorado media.

Have Jon Gruden's Oakland Raiders become likable?

Please allow me to be the first to extend a heartfelt thank you and an olive branch to the Oakland Raiders for two things: moving the franchise out of St. Louis West in 2020 and for hiring Gruden away from TV. Leave it to a man who shined in the entertainment biz to spice up one of pro sports' last great rivalries.

"I do remember looking at them (the Broncos) as a model of what we wanted to become," Gruden said of his first go-round with the Raiders, from 1998-2001, which came at the height of John Elway, Terrell Davis and Steve Atwater's Super Bowl powers.

Gruden's record against the Broncos: 1-9. How is Broncos Country supposed to hate that guy?

"That was the greatest win of my career as the Raiders coach, because I knew how far we'd come in just a few years," he said.

There's no doubt in my mind Gruden will get the Raiders back on track — in roughly two years when the franchise wisely ditches its current dump and takes dead aim at the Las Vegas desert. Trading Mack at the 11th hour was a bat signal to the rest of the AFC West: just spin (the narrative), baby. The winning comes later.

"We've had 10 head coaches since I was traded (to the Bucs in 2002). That's unbelievable," Gruden said.

"We've had no continuity. None. We're building our team and we're trying to win at the same time. But we're going to try to build the Oakland Raiders into a great championship football team. It might not

happen this week. It might not happen this month. But we have a great attitude, really good veteran leadership, we like our draft picks and we're making progress."

Something smells skunky about a rivalry Broncos Country loves with so much hate.

They actually like each other.

Gone are Aqib Talib and his jeweler, Michael Crabtree. The Broncos will face Talib and his new dogs with the Los Angeles Rams in Week 6. Crabtree and the Baltimore Ravens are next Sunday. But these rivals made Sunday at Broncos Stadium sound like two college buddies getting together over a lovely Chianti to chat about that one time back in the day. Here, check out some of the niceties tossed around before the 116th meeting between the Broncos and Raiders. Everybody raise a glass for a toast.

"I think the free agent acquisition in pro football this year is going to be (Broncos quarterback) Case Keenum," Gruden said.

And now a smooch from the Rocky Mountains.

"You watch the first half of that game and (Raiders quarterback Derek Carr) was almost flawless," Vance Joseph said.

Kumbaya, my Lord.

"The Raiders are a great organization. They gave me my start. So I've got nothing bad to say about them," said Raiders draft pick and current Broncos lineman Shelby Harris, who proceeded to say something bad about them. "But it really is the feel of the Broncos organization (that's different). It just feels like a winning organization."

That's better. Now we're getting closer.

Truth is, Mack was one of the first silver-and-black actors in a long time who could ably perform the villain role in which Tim Brown, Marcus Allen and the late Al Davis thrived. Mack stole Von Miller's 2016 Defensive Player of the Year award by a single vote and once sacked Brock Osweiler five times. Worthy adversary, that guy. Keenum should be overjoyed that Mack's gone.

Nope, he was complimentary, too. Keenum recalled that one time he was a student in Gruden's "QB Camp" on ESPN.

"I'm pretty sure he had watched every rep I had ever played in college," Keenum said.

"It was a lot of fun," he added.

Who slid the Broncos-Rivalry hate-fest into the Twilight Zone?

It's almost like Gruden's Raiders are ... likable.

OK, sufferable.

OK, not the worst people on the planet.

Like "Los Angeles" Chargers, the second Gruden era is going to take some getting used to.

Miller, Mack are 1-2 in AP edge rusher rankings

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
September 15, 2018

With his league-rattling trade from the Oakland Raiders to the Chicago Bears, Khalil Mack cashed in with a new six-year, \$141 million extension that makes him the highest-paid defensive player in NFL history.

He's still second fiddle to Von Miller, though.

Miller was voted the league's best edge rusher in the latest Associated Press position rankings, earning seven first-place votes in balloting of 10 AP football writers. The three other first-place votes went to Mack.

The star Broncos linebacker "is simply the best, as the Seahawks were reminded in the season opener," said AP's Dave Campbell, based in Minneapolis.

Miller, who had four quarterback hits, three sacks, two forced fumbles and a fumble recovery in wrecking Seattle's game plan in Denver's 27-24 season-opening win, scored 97 points in the 10-points-to-one system. That's four more than Mack and one point better than Tom Brady, who edged out Aaron Rodgers 96-93 in the quarterback rankings last week.

"The NFL's sack master finds a way to get to the quarterback, even when he's double-teamed," said New York-based Dennis Waszak Jr., who also ranked Miller No. 1. "He's quick, strong, versatile and sometimes unstoppable."

Added New York-based Barry Wilner, "Yes, he might also get the nod as the best outside linebacker in the game. That's how versatile and talented Miller is. He makes the Orange Crush go."

The AP ranks linebackers in Week 8. Next week, it's running backs.

Although "no one can match the former Super Bowl MVP when it comes to rushing off the edge with speed," Bay Area-based Josh Dubow said, "Mack is the highest-paid defensive player for a reason," so he ranked Mack ahead of Miller.

"Just look at his dominant stats from his four years in Oakland," Dubow said, "Or his first game in Chicago."

Mack made an immediate impact in his Bears debut, dominating the Packers last Sunday night until a gimpy Rodgers, who was carted off with a knee injury in the first half, returned after halftime to rally Green Bay from a 20-point deficit for a 24-23 win.

"Mack is the type of game-wrecking talent that teams only dream of having. Unless you're the Oakland Raiders, who decided they needed to part ways with him," Waszak said. "Mack paid off immediately for the Bears by forcing two turnovers in the span of six plays in Chicago's opener at Green Bay."

Mack had a 27-yard pick-6 and strip-sacked backup QB DeShone Kizer in the red zone.

"Hugely questionable decision for the Raiders to get rid of him in his prime," said Washington-based Howard Fendrich, who ranked Mack the best pass rusher in the game. "The Bears got themselves a superstar."

"His tour de force in the season opener at Green Bay, without any training camp or preseason, shows why Mack could be worth every penny Chicago is paying him," Wilner said.

Philadelphia-based Rob Maaddi said that what separates Miller is "his Super Bowl MVP award" for strip-sacking Cam Newton twice in Denver's win over Carolina in Super Bowl 50.

What Mack has that Miller doesn't is a Defensive Player of the Year award, something Teresa Walker of Nashville thinks could change this year if last week was any indication of the year Miller could have playing alongside rookie Bradley Chubb, the fifth overall pick in the draft.

"Miller gets the nod over Khalil Mack thanks to a season opener that was simply amazing," Walker said. "If Miller keeps this up, he should join Mack as a Defensive Player of the Year."

Last year, Miller was the hands-down winner in outside linebacker rankings and Mack the runaway winner in defensive end balloting. This year, the AP put pass rushers together in the edge rusher category.

The Los Angeles Chargers' Joey Bosa was a distant third, followed by Arizona's Chandler Jones, who led the league with 17 sacks last season and whom Dallas-based Schuyler Dixon calls "one of the most consistent threats in the game."

"Bosa's absence was felt in a Week 1 loss to K.C.," said New York-based Simmi Buttar, noting Bosa has 23 sacks in 28 career games. Bosa also will miss Sunday's game at Buffalo because of a bone bruise in his left foot.

Houston's J.J. Watt at No. 5 and the Jaguars' Calais Campbell at No. 6 usually rush more from the interior. The Vikings' Everson Griffen was seventh, followed by the Saints' Cameron Jordan, the Chargers' Melvin Ingram, and the Browns' Myles Garrett, the top overall pick in last year's draft.

Also receiving votes: DeMarcus Lawrence of the Cowboys, Justin Houston of the Chiefs, Terrell Suggs of the Ravens, Vic Beasley of the Falcons, Cameron Wake of the Dolphins, Ryan Kerrigan of Washington and Carlos Dunlap of the Bengals. T.J. Watt of the Steelers and Yannick Ngakoue of the Jaguars each received one vote.

Broncos' linebackers, safeties prepare for physical matchup with Raiders tight end Jared Cook

By Zach Pereles

DenverBroncos.com

September 15, 2018

Defensive Coordinator Joe Woods knew the questions about defending Jared Cook were coming before he even stepped to the podium to address the media Thursday after practice.

That's typically what happens when the opposing tight end had a huge game — as Cook did when he recorded nine catches for 180 yards vs. the Rams, tied for the most receiving yards in the league — the previous week.

“He's definitely a problem,” said Woods, adding that Cook is just one of several skilled players the Denver defense will face. “We're going to have our hands full for sure.”

In Oakland's 33-13 loss to the Rams, the Raiders often worked to isolate Cook, who stands 6-foot-5 and weighs 254 pounds, on Los Angeles safety John Johnson III, who is just 6-feet tall and 209 pounds. Though Cook won that matchup several times, Johnson III also came away with a crucial interception in the end zone.

Given Johnson III's mixed results against Cook, Woods plans on using a variety of strategies to limit Oakland's top tight end.

“He has size, he can run, and he has great hands,” Woods said. “He's basically like a receiver playing tight end. He's hard to match up, whoever you put on him — a linebacker, a safety, a corner — just because of all those attributes. We're going to do a little bit of everything against him, so hopefully it's successful.”

It will be especially important for the Broncos to show they have progressed from last week's struggles against tight ends. In Week 1, Seahawks tight end Will Dissly recorded 105 yards and a touchdown on just three catches. Dissly opened the scoring with a wide-open 15-yard reception off play action in the first quarter. Two Seattle possessions later, Dissly broke multiple tackles on a 66-yard catch-and-run that set up a field goal.

“[Dissly]'s a good player, but we can't do that,” Head Coach Vance Joseph said Monday. “We missed four tackles. The coverage wasn't great, but we missed four tackles. The [next] play he made down the seam, again, our eyes are bad and we're out of position. That's been a problem for us and we've got to fix it. We've got to coach better, and we've got to play better, and that's the facts.”

If those issues aren't fixed, Joseph said, it will make defending Oakland a very difficult task.

“He's going to be a true challenge,” Joseph said Wednesday. “He has great ball skills. He runs a 4.5 [40-yard dash]. We have to have a great plan to get him contained. We can't walk in here on Monday and say we didn't contain him. If we don't contain him, it's going to be a long day for us.”

The Broncos have historically done a solid job against Cook. In five previous meetings, Cook has recorded just 10 catches for 96 yards and no touchdowns against Denver. Still, because of his size and his well-rounded skill set, Cook is a threat on any downfield passing play. And given Jon Gruden's affinity for versatile tight ends, Cook figures to be a big part of Sunday's game plan.

"He's a mismatch and a great receiving tight end," Gruden said Wednesday. "I look at the film and he should've had more yards. If you give certain coverages, certain matchups like this game sometimes presents — if you're lucky enough to have the wild card that can win — you can put in all kinds of plays to help him be a dominant player. That's what we try to do with Jared on a weekly basis. I'm really impressed with his football aptitude, his competitiveness and his versatility. He can do a lot of different things."

Rookie outside linebacker Bradley Chubb, who was covering Dissly on the 66-yard gain, knows the importance of limiting Cook's production on Sunday. It starts with building a solid game plan throughout the week and then executing it on the field.

"[We need to] know what he can do and try not to let them do it," Chubb said Wednesday. "Whether it's me guarding or a [defensive back] guarding him, dropping the coverage and stuff like that, we've just got to make sure we contain him and not let him get too big on us."

Chubb may be just one of several Broncos to defend Cook on Sunday. Dealing with the 31-year-old won't be a one-man task.

"Our job is to go out there and shut him down," safety Will Parks said Wednesday. "[We'll] try to see where his tendencies are. ... Our job is to go out there and strap down, so that's what we've got to do."

Broncos encourage fans to arrive early, stay hydrated at Sunday's game vs. Oakland

By STAFF

DenverBroncos.com

September 15, 2018

The Denver Broncos (1-0) encourage all fans to arrive early and stay hydrated as the team opens AFC West play against the Oakland Raiders (0-1) on Sunday at Broncos Stadium at Mile High (2:25 p.m. MDT kickoff).

With high temperatures forecasted for Sunday, the Broncos have installed hydration stations throughout the parking lots and surrounding stadium areas. The free hydration stations will be set up Sunday morning and can be found at the following locations:

- North side of the stadium outside of Gate 4 and next to the Mile High Monument
- South side of the stadium on Noble Energy Sports Legends Mall and within Ring of Fame Plaza
- West side of the stadium at Counties Gateway Plaza
- East side pass-through between the light rail station/I-25 and the stadium

With more than 65 water fountains inside the stadium, fans should be advised that only factory sealed or empty plastic/refillable water bottles will be allowed into the stadium gates. Food and beverages will also be available for purchase throughout the stadium in concession stands and through roving concessionaires.

Broncos Injury Report: Denver completely healthy for #OAKvsDEN

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
September 15, 2018

The Broncos will be completely healthy for their Week 2 game against the Oakland Raiders, Head Coach Vance Joseph said Friday.

“We’re lucky obviously [in] Week 2 of the season to have everyone healthy and ready to go,” Joseph said.

All 53 players on the active roster were full participants in Friday’s practice, including Derek Wolfe, who was limited in Thursday’s practice with an abdomen injury.

UPDATE (2:15 p.m. MT): On the official injury report, no Broncos were listed with a game status, which indicates that everyone on the roster will be available to play Sunday.

The Raiders, however, weren't so lucky. Defensive tackle P.J. Hall (ankle) did not practice all week and is out for the game. Wide receiver Dwayne Harris (foot), guard Gabe Jackson (pectoral) and running back DeAndre Washington (knee) were limited in practice each day and are questionable for the Week 2 matchup.

Colin Kaepernick: How the NFL will fight his collusion claim

By Michael McCann
Sports Illustrated
September 15, 2018

Colin Kaepernick recently scored an important legal ruling when arbitrator Stephen Burbank rejected the NFL's request for summary judgment. The rejection meant that Burbank believes there is a genuine issue of material fact and that it warrants a trial-like hearing later this year. Stated more bluntly, there is something there as it relates to Kaepernick's collusion grievance.

But "is" it enough for Kaepernick to win? We don't know because a protective order shields the evidence. Yet we can forecast five likely arguments by the NFL's legal team:

First, collusion is very hard to prove. Under Article 17 of the collective bargaining agreement, collusion requires a finding that two or more teams, or the league and at least one team, conspired to deprive Kaepernick of a contract offer or the chance to negotiate with a team. To that end, there must be evidence of collusion—whether it's from a video, recording, text, email or witness statement. Mere conjecture isn't enough.

There are also scenarios where it would seem like "the fix was in" against Kaepernick and yet they wouldn't signify collusion. Let's say the Buffalo Bills publicly admit that they regard Kaepernick as a much better quarterback than Nathan Peterman. The Bills then explain that they would rather have Peterman play because he stands for the national anthem. You might then say, "Well this must be collusion! A team has admitted to playing someone inferior to Kaepernick only because of the anthem." You would be wrong. The scenario I described only mentions one team, and a team can't collude with itself.

Try another hypothetical. Let's say that Robert Kraft testifies that when he flew on Air Force One on March 19, 2017, he urged President Donald Trump to denounce Kaepernick. The next day Trump did so in a political speech. Collusion? Not for purposes of Article 17. Trump is a third party and thus outside the collective bargaining relationship.

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From Chateau Ste. Michelle

One more hypothetical. Imagine that during the Air Force One flight, Trump urged Kraft to tell other owners to not offer Kaepernick a contract. Absent evidence that Kraft followed Trump's advice, that too would not constitute collusion—an ignored suggestion is nothing more.

Second, teams employing quarterbacks who are inferior to the 30-year-old Kaepernick doesn't prove collusion. In the last season in which he played (2016), Kaepernick registered a 90.7 QB rating—a higher rating than those of Carson Wentz, Eli Manning and Joe Flacco. In fact, Kaepernick's QB rating was 17th best in the NFL, meaning he was roughly a middle-of-the-pack starter. Fast forward to today. The aforementioned Peterman has a QB rating of zero after a game in which he threw for just 24 yards and

two interceptions. The Tennessee Titans are employing Blaine Gabbert, a 28-year-old journeyman quarterback whose career numbers are outpaced by those of his former teammate, Kaepernick. And look around the league at other backup quarterbacks. By objective metrics, Kaepernick is a much better player than many of them.

Here's the problem for Kaepernick: while those may be interesting points about football, they aren't proof of collusion. Each team can decide it doesn't want Kaepernick because they don't like his style of play, politics, personality or the social movement he stands for—even if a team is dead certain that Kaepernick would help them win more games. Professional malpractice? Possibly. Collusion? No, because each team would be acting on its own.

Third, Kaepernick faces a high burden of persuasion. Under Article 17, Kaepernick must convince Burbank by a "clear preponderance of the evidence" that collusion occurred. If it's a close call for Burbank and he leans toward Kaepernick, he would still be inclined to rule for the NFL. Why? Because leaning in the direction of Kaepernick isn't enough. Burbank needs to be thoroughly convinced of the NFL's wrongdoing.

Fourth, "smoking guns" are rare. Although not much is known about Kaepernick's evidence since the grievance is under a protective order, we have yet to hear rumors of evidence that would conclusively prove collusion. There are recordings of NFL owners expressing concern about Trump and his hostility toward the NFL, but those owners weren't heard devising a plan to exclude Kaepernick. Some owners and team executives have made bewildering comments about Kaepernick—such as John Elway admitting the Broncos were very interested in Kaepernick before he began his kneeling, but not at all interested after—yet those lead to inferences rather than conclusions. Kaepernick's name was suspiciously removed from Madden 18 and Madden 19, but that appears to have been the decision of EA Sports rather than the NFL.

Fifth, if Kaepernick has turned down any offers since March 2017, the NFL's legal defense would be enhanced. There have been unsubstantiated rumors that Kaepernick declined an offer or at least signaled disinterest from an interested team or two. Kaepernick, so the story goes, views himself as a starter and won't accept backup status. Again, unsubstantiated. Still, if those reports are even somewhat accurate, the NFL would be better positioned to tell Burbank that Kaepernick's absence from the league is at least partly his own choice. However, such a defense would hardly prove definitive: Kaepernick only needs to show two teams colluding against him to prevail—he doesn't need a league-wide conspiracy.

Week Two injury report roundup

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
September 15, 2018

Week Two of the 2018 NFL season kicked off on Thursday with a win by the Bengals and it continues with 14 more games on Sunday, which means that the 28 teams in those games submitted their final injury reports of the week on Friday.

Questionable players are uncertain to play, doubtful players are unlikely to play and out should be self-explanatory. Players who are on active rosters and don't appear below should be considered healthy enough to play barring any announcements on Saturday. The teams playing on Monday night won't release their injury reports until Saturday and are not listed here.

With that housekeeping out of the way, here are all the injury reports for Sunday.

Dolphins at Jets

LS John Denney (shoulder), DE William Hayes (finger) and WR DeVante Parker (finger) are listed as questionable for the Dolphins.

Jets S Marcus Maye (foot) is set to miss his second straight game. LB Josh Martin (concussion) is definitely out and S Doug Middleton (finger) is deemed questionable to play in the AFC East clash.

Browns at Saints

DE Emmanuel Ogbah (ankle) will be out of the lineup for the Browns. LB Christian Kirksey (shoulder, ankle) is listed as questionable.

DT Tyeler Davison (foot) is the only Saints player with an injury designation. He has been ruled out.

Chargers at Bills

The Chargers ruled out T Joe Barksdale (knee), DE Joey Bosa (foot) and CB Craig Mager (hamstring). WR Travis Benjamin (foot) is considered questionable.

CB Taron Johnson (shoulder) and DE Shaq Lawson (hamstring) will miss the game for the Bills. WR Ray-Ray McCloud (knee) is listed as questionable.

Chiefs at Steelers

The Chiefs are set to play without S Eric Berry (heel) again this week after listing him as doubtful. LB Ben Niemann (hamstring) has been ruled out.

Steelers QB Ben Roethlisberger (elbow) is listed as questionable after returning to practice on Friday. CB Artie Burns (toe), DT Cameron Heyward (knee) and TE Vance McDonald (foot) are also questionable for

Pittsburgh. DE Tyson Alualu (shoulder), G David DeCastro (hand) and CB Joe Haden (hamstring) are likely out after being listed as doubtful.

Colts at Washington

The Colts ruled out Denico Autry (ankle), T Anthony Castonzo (hamstring), T Denzelle Good (knee, wrist) and CB Chris Milton (concussion). S Clayton Geathers (knee), RB Marlon Mack (hamstring) and DT Grover Stewart (shoulder) drew questionable tags.

Washington S Troy Apke (hamstring) is out this weekend. WR Maurice Harris (concussion), T Morgan Moses (knee) and WR Paul Richardson (shoulder) were listed as questionable.

Eagles at Buccaneers

Eagles RB Darren Sproles (hamstring) got hurt in practice this week and will miss the game. WR Alshon Jeffery (shoulder) and QB Carson Wentz (knee) remain out. WR Shelton Gibson (knee) is listed as questionable.

CB Brent Grimes (groin) and DT Vita Vea (calf) remain out for the Buccaneers. WR DeSean Jackson (shoulder, concussion) and DE Jason Pierre-Paul (knee) were listed as questionable after returning to practice for the final two days of the week.

Panthers at Falcons

The Panthers will take on their NFC South rivals without WR Damiere Byrd (knee), TE Greg Olsen (foot), WR Curtis Samuel (medical illness) and G Trai Turner (concussion).

The Falcons won't have RB Devonta Freeman (knee), WR Russell Gage (knee) or G Ben Garland (calf). CB Isaiah Oliver (ankle) is listed as questionable.

Texans at Titans

CB Kayvon Webster (Achilles) is the only Texans player ruled out ahead of Sunday's game. CB Johnson Bademosi (knee), LB Jadeveon Clowney (back, elbow), WR Sammie Coates (hamstring), WR Keke Coutee (hamstring), DE Christian Covington (thigh, knee), LB Duke Ejirofor (hamstring), WR Will Fuller (hamstring), and WR DeAndre Hopkins (foot) are all listed as questionable.

QB Marcus Mariota (right elbow) is questionable for the Titans and head coach Mike Vrabel said on Friday that he expects Mariota and Blaine Gabbert to play this weekend. T Jack Conklin (knee), T Taylor Lewan (concussion) and S Kendrick Lewis (foot) are definitely out. T Dennis Kelly (illness), LB Harold Landry (ankle), LB Derrick Morgan (knee) and TE Luke Stocker (calf) join Mariota with questionable tags.

Vikings at Packers

C Pat Elflein (ankle, shoulder) is out again for the Vikings, but they are otherwise healthy.

The Packers will wait to make a call on QB Aaron Rodgers (knee), who is listed as questionable along with WR Davante Adams (shoulder) and LB Oren Burks (shoulder). S Josh Jones (ankle) has been ruled out.

Cardinals at Rams

Cardinals DE Markus Golden (knee) may make his 2018 debut after being listed as questionable. DT Olsen Pierre (toe) and T Andre Smith (elbow) have been ruled out while TE Jermaine Gresham (Achilles) and LB Haason Reddick (ankle) are also listed as questionable.

The Rams ruled out WR Mike Thomas (hip) and listed LB Mark Barron (ankle) as doubtful to play.

Lions at 49ers

DE Ezekiel Ansah (shoulder) said Friday that he's "optimistic" about his chances of playing after joining RB LeGarrette Blount (shoulder) in the questionable column for the Lions. T Andrew Donnal (knee) and G T.J. Lang (back) have been ruled out, however.

The 49ers will play without G Joshua Garnett (toe), WR Marquise Goodwin (quadricep) and C Erik Magnuson (hamstring). They'll wait to make calls on S Adrian Colbert (hamstring), G Mike Person (foot) and LB Malcolm Smith (hamstring) after listing them as questionable.

Patriots at Jaguars

The Patriots listed four players — RB Rex Burkhead (concussion), T Marcus Cannon (calf), CB Keion Crossen (hamstring), RB Sony Michel (knee) — as questionable for their trip to Jacksonville.

The Jaguars have just one questionable player, but RB Leonard Fournette (hamstring) is an important one and he did not practice at all this week.

Raiders at Broncos

DT P.J. Hall (ankle) will be missing from the Raiders defensive line. WR Dwayne Harris (foot), G Gabe Jackson (pectoral) and RB DeAndre Washington (knee) are listed as questionable.

The Broncos have no players with injury designations this weekend.

Giants at Cowboys

LB Olivier Vernon (ankle) will miss a second straight Giants game. LB Tae Davis (hamstring) may play after being listed as questionable.

The Cowboys ruled out C Travis Frederick (illness), DT Datone Jones (knee) and S Xavier Woods (hamstring). DE Randy Gregory (concussion) is expected to miss the game after being listed as doubtful.

NFL Network audience down from Week Two of 2017

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
September 15, 2018

As the viewing-window-by-viewing-window TV ratings become the NFL's version of the Clarence Beeks crop report, the folks who are charged with making the crop report look as good as possible sometimes have to get creative.

For NFL Network, the challenge was this: With the audience for the Week Two Thursday night game down from 8.08 million for last year's Texans-Bengals game to 7 million for this year's Ravens-Bengals game, how could the 13.3-percent reduction be spun as a positive?

The answer was this: Compare Tuesday night's actual numbers not to the same window from 2017 but to the average audience of the full seven-game NFLN-only Thursday night package. Under that metric, Thursday night's game represented a 15-percent increase in total audience.

That's fine, but here's the reality. If/when an apples-to-apples comparison shows growth, the apples-to-apples comparison will be touted. When it doesn't, they'll move on to some other way to spin the numbers in the hopes that the media will repeat the claim without scratching the surface.