

Broncos Analysis: Stirring comeback over Raiders produces another 2-0 start

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
September 17, 2018

This was the Broncos' chance to put last year behind them, to finish a come-from-behind win, to be led down the field by their new quarterback and to show their Week 1 win over Seattle wasn't a fluke.

In the huddle, the offensive players were confident when they returned to the field with 1:58 remaining Sunday against Oakland trailing by 2 points. No timeouts? Big deal. And one play into the drive, bad field position (their own 10-yard line)? No worry.

"We knew we were going to win," left tackle Garrett Bolles said. "That was just our attitude."

On the bench, the defensive players had a collective belief the 2018 Broncos in this situation would fare differently than the 2017 Broncos.

"You could trust them that they were going to make the plays," defensive end Adam Gotsis said.

Bolles' attitude and Gotsis' trust were rewarded when the Broncos moved 62 yards on 10 plays to set up Brandon McManus' 36-yard field goal with six seconds left for a stirring 20-19 win over the Raiders.

The Broncos trailed 12-0 at halftime and 19-7 late in the third quarter. Even though their offense was ignited after halftime, it appeared too little, too late until they neared midfield with 54 seconds remaining.

Quarterback Case Keenum converted a third-and-3 with a four-yard pass to tight end Jeff Heuerman. Clock stopped at 26 seconds.

Two plays later, Keenum threw a four-yard pass to receiver Tim Patrick. His first NFL reception complete, Patrick then went to work. Instead of heading to the sideline, he turned up field, broke tackle attempts by Gareon Conley and Leon Hall to gain 26 yards to the Raiders' 18 with 10 seconds left.

McManus drilled the game-winning field goal on the next play.

"I knew he was going to make it," coach Vance Joseph said.

If this Broncos season turns into something cool, Joseph will be sure to remember this comeback, which was only the 10th in team history from at least a 12-point deficit at halftime and the first in six years.

The Broncos improved to 2-0 for the sixth consecutive year, the league's longest current streak. They beat Oakland for the 11th time in 15 games. They saw another monster performance from rookie running back Phillip Lindsay (107 yards on 14 carries). They cracked but didn't splinter apart defensively, forcing early field goals and a punt with two minutes remaining. And Shaquil Barrett's first-half blocked extra point proved vital.

For so long, a positive result looked unlikely. The offense was that bad in the first half. The defense was having that many problems accounting for receiver Amari Cooper and tight end Jared Cook and at their collective wit's end against throw-quickly quarterback Derek Carr, who completed 17 consecutive passes at one point.

"At halftime, it wasn't good," Joseph said.

The head coach is being kind. The offense was in the midst of a stinker. Their first half possessions were punt, punt, punt, interception, punt and clock ran out. Playing in the hottest home game in franchise history (92 degrees), the Broncos were melting.

What was good, though, was the locker room mindset. Players said Joseph didn't throw a fit as a way of urging better performance. Joseph knows his roster and, therefore, knew a speech wasn't needed. Instead, the coaches and players used the 13 minutes to re-set the offensive game plan (Joseph and play-caller Bill Musgrave decided to be more aggressive) and re-group their defensive wind (on the field for 20 minutes, 32 seconds).

"It was like any other halftime; everything was typical and normal," said right tackle Billy Turner, who replaced Jared Veldheer (concussion). "We came in and went through the adjustments and geared up for the second half."

Said Bolles: "We're the type of team that, when we're down and things aren't going our way, it's 'Let's fix it.' That's just how we are."

The Broncos awoke after halftime, cutting the lead to 12-7 on Royce Freeman's 1-yard run. But the back-and-forth scoring did them no good — McManus' 39-yard field goal answered Seth Roberts' 20-yard touchdown catch. Keenum's fourth-down touchdown dive cut Oakland's lead to 19-17 with 5:58 remaining.

Oakland made two first downs but punted it back to the Broncos. After a holding call on Bolles, Keenum and Co. went to work.

"The whole line just played their guts out and (we) got some plays down the field," Keenum said. "It was fun to watch."

Keenum threw 21 yards to Emmanuel Sanders on second-and-20. Two plays later, he threw 14 yards to tight end Jake Butt. Three plays later, four yards to Heuerman, who got out of bounds. And then the pass to Patrick. Only then did a Broncos win seem realistic. On the win probability scale, it was probably the first time it inched above 50 percent.

"The offense made it easier for me (with) that last play," McManus said.

And, for at least the next six days, life is a little easier for the Broncos. They started 2-0 and 3-1 last year before their season imploded.

"Last year is last year," Joseph said. "That's over. This year, our team is different."

Broncos report card and game balls from Week 2 against the Oakland Raiders

By Ryan O'Halloran
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Offense — B

Twenty second-half points helped them raise their grade, which was an 'F' in the first half. ... The Broncos gained 385 yards, were 8 of 18 on third down and scored on all four of their second-half possessions. ... Quarterback Case Keenum had a bad first-half interception, but rebounded to throw for 222 yards and rush for 16 yards, including a touchdown. ... Should the Broncos make Phillip Lindsay the starting running back? All he did was gain 107 yards on 14 carries, including a 53-yard dash. ... Three receivers caught at least four passes. ... Fill-in right tackle Billy Turner held his own after replacing Jared Veldheer (concussion).

Defense — B

One sack and no takeaways, but most of the other statistics were solid for the Broncos. ... Oakland averaged only 3.4 yards per carry. ... The Raiders exposed the Broncos' coverage issues by targeting receivers not covered by Chris Harris. ... The Raiders went 3 of 10 on third down. ... Nose tackle Domata Peko was a dominant force against the run (five tackles). ... Two penalties proved costly — linebacker Todd Davis' holding penalty negated a turnover and cornerback Adam Jones' holding came on third-and-2. Special teams — A

Shaquil Barrett's blocked point-after attempt proved vital because it meant a win in regulation for the Broncos instead of a field goal to force overtime. ... Brandon McManus hit field goals of 39 yards and, with six seconds remaining, 36 yards. ... McManus was 5 for 5 on kickoff touchbacks. ... Punter Marquette King averaged a solid 44.3 yards net.

Coaching — B

The Broncos' coaching staff rebounded from a poor first half. ... Offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave started taking more shots downfield that loosened up the Raiders' defense for running plays. The offensive staff also trusted receiver Tim Patrick in the final minute and he produced a 26-yard catch. ... Coach Vance Joseph went 1 of 2 on challenges and managed his timeouts well down the stretch. ... Defensive coordinator Joe Woods called a third-down pressure that forced Derek Carr to throw quickly and short of the first-down marker.

Game Balls

Phillip Lindsay: Officially a rookie sensation, Lindsay carried 14 times for 107 yards, including a 53-yard gain that represented the lone first-half offensive highlight.

Domata Peko: The big man in the middle had five tackles and was a big reason why Oakland averaged only 3.4 yards per carry and didn't have a rush of longer than 11 yards.

Tim Patrick: He jumped too soon to collect a Case Keenum pass last week against Seattle, but he had his bearings in the final minute when he turned a catch into a 26-yard gain to set up Brandon McManus' winning field goal on Sunday.

Broncos tackle Billy Turner leans on experience while replacing injured Jared Veldheer

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
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The Broncos' excellent injury health took a hit during Sunday's second half when right tackle Jared Veldheer left the game and was placed in the NFL's concussion protocol. Veteran Billy Turner replaced Veldheer and was a part of an offensive line group that helped the Broncos to a come-from-behind victory over Oakland.

"When you're in that role, you never know when you'll have to jump into the game," Turner said. "You have to be ready and make sure you're going through all of the adjustments on the sidelines with the o-line and the coaches know what to expect."

Turner said his experience starting 14 games helped him make a quick transition mid-game. But so did working against all-pro Von Miller in practice.

"To be honest, when you practice against the best pass rusher in the league, it tends to make things easier for when you do get thrown into the fire in the middle of the game," Turner said.

Broncos Briefs: First career catch allows Tim Patrick to make major impact

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
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Offense — B

Recapping the nine offensive snaps he played against Seattle in Week 1, Broncos first-year receiver Tim Patrick sat at his locker last Wednesday and promised a better performance against Oakland.

"There were small things I didn't do out there," Patrick said of his NFL debut. "I was focused on my assignments instead of the whole picture. That will come with relaxing and the game slowing down."

Patrick's time came late in the Broncos' 20-19 win over the Raiders.

The Broncos trailed by two points and were out of timeouts when Patrick turned quarterback Case Keenum's pass into a 26-yard gain with 10 seconds remaining. Brandon McManus kicked the game-winning 36-yard field goal on the next play.

It was quite the first career reception for Patrick, who started training camp on the roster bubble but shined to earn a spot.

"So happy," Patrick said. "I'm a Denver Bronco, man. I can't be more happy than that and to help us win a divisional game against the Raiders? You can't even dream about something like that."

Patrick had a four-yard touchdown catch in the third quarter overturned by replay.

"Coach (Vance Joseph) talked about impacting the game one way or another and I feel like an impact player (Sunday)," Patrick said.

Hottest home game. The game-time temperature of 92 degrees was the hottest in Broncos' home history.

The previous mark was 91 degrees on three occasions — vs. San Diego in September 1993, Buffalo in September 1995 and Seattle in September 2010.

It was the fourth-warmest game overall in Broncos history. The record remains 103 at Arizona in September 2001, followed by 99 at Baltimore (September 1983) and 94 at the Los Angeles Raiders (September 1990).

Injury report. Right tackle Jared Veldheer was placed in the league's concussion protocol and was unable to finish the game. Billy Turner replaced him.

Receiver Demaryius Thomas was shaken up with what appeared to be a midsection injury but returned later in the drive.

Cornerback Chris Harris and safety Justin Simmons collided on Seth Roberts' 20-yard touchdown in the third quarter. Harris and Simmons were evaluated for concussions, but cleared to return to the game.

Footnotes. Thomas and inside linebacker Brandon Marshall observed the national anthem from in the tunnel behind the Broncos' bench. ... The Broncos helped raise \$115,000 during Saturday's Walk To End Alzheimer's, a two-mile walk held at Denver's City Park. Members of owner Pat Bowlen's family were joined by more than 100 Broncos employees and their families. The proceeds will fund Alzheimer's research, support and care. ... Like last week, the Broncos had seven healthy inactive players. The only change was safety Shamarko Thomas, who was scratched after re-signing earlier this week. ... Former Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning was on the sideline during pregame warmups. ... The Broncos' only sack was from linebacker Von Miller, who got to Derek Carr in 3.03 seconds on a second-quarter third-and-3. Miller beat right tackle Donald Penn on the play for his fourth sack of the year. ... The Broncos were 2 of 4 in the red zone.

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

By Kyle Fredrickson
The Denver Post
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The Broncos defeated the Raiders 20-19 on Sunday. Here are the best and worst performances from the afternoon.

UP: Red zone defense. The Broncos held Oakland to a pair of first quarter field goals deep in Denver territory. Raiders running back Marshawn Lynch did score a goal-line touchdown to close the second quarter, but only after Oakland dominated time of possession before the break — 20:32 to 9:28 — to put Denver's defense in a difficult spot on a stifling day.

DOWN: Weather. The temperature at kickoff at Mile High checked in at 92 degrees. It marked the hottest regular season home game in team history. A whole bunch of sweaty folks in the stands.

UP: Phillip Lindsay. The undrafted rookie sprinted 53 yards on a first-quarter run. It ranked as the fourth-longest rush over the last 10 years in team history. Lindsay also broke the century mark rushing for the first time in his young NFL career (17 carries for 107 yards).

DOWN: Denver's third cornerback. Raiders quarterback Derek Carr picked on Tramaine Brock and Adam Jones throughout the afternoon with great success. Wide receiver Amari Cooper was the favorite target on those throws with nine receptions for 109 yards.

UP: Tight end Jake Butt. A career day for the former Michigan star with four receptions for 48 yards.

DOWN: Case Keenum's accuracy. His eighth pass attempt of the afternoon was intercepted on the Raiders' 1-yard line. Keenum's passing stat line against Oakland: 19-of-35 (54 percent) for 222 yards and one interception.

UP: Emmanuel Sanders' second half. After not being targeted during the first two quarters, the Broncos' veteran wide receiver finished with four catches for 96 yards (team high).

DOWN: Dual pass interference calls. Late in the fourth quarter, the officials called defensive and offensive pass interference on the same play after Carr's deep throw down the sideline to Amari Cooper was contested by cornerback Bradley Roby. How about just swallowing the whistle on that one?

Denver's own Phillip Lindsay runs to NFL rookie record

By Mike Chambers

The Denver Post

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Native son Phillip Lindsay, the Broncos' backup running back who is quick to thank his teammates and "Mr." John Elway at every opportunity, etched his name in NFL history Sunday by gaining 107 yards rushing in the 20-19 victory over the Raiders.

It was a proud day for the Denver native who is living a fairy tale two games into his NFL career.

Lindsay became the league's first undrafted rookie to produce at least 100 yards from scrimmage in each of his first two games. He had a team-tying-high 71 yards rushing plus 31 yards receiving in Denver's Week 1 victory over Seattle.

"Just playing football," Lindsay, who also caught a pass for a 4-yard gain Sunday, said after being told of his record. "Just playing football for my team. It's just a great opportunity to be here. I can't thank (general manager) Mr. Elway enough for letting me be a part of this organization."

Lindsay has led the Broncos in rushing in both games, yet he's listed third on the depth chart at running back behind Royce Freeman and Devontae Booker. Freeman also had 71 yards rushing in the opener but was limited to 28 yards on eight carries Sunday.

Booker has become an afterthought with only five carries for 21 yards this season.

Lindsay, who broke off a 53-yard run during Denver's first drive of the second quarter, also returns kickoffs and is a gunner on the punt team. He considers himself a "sparkplug." His coach agrees.

"He is a good football player, not only as a running back, but as a guy who covers kicks for us and as a guy who catches the football for us," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said. "He's the total package football player. He's been really impressive."

Lindsay and his family have long been Broncos fans, which means they understand the rivalry with the Raiders. Lindsay said he was privileged to share the field with Oakland running back Marshawn Lynch, whom he out-gained. Lynch had 18 carries for 65 yards.

"It means a lot. Coming from here and understanding the rivalry, just being able to win, and to be able to look up to one of my idols, Marshawn Lynch, and watch him out there, it's a surreal moment," Lindsay said.

When asked again about his new NFL record, Lindsay said: "I don't think of things like that. For me, it's a great opportunity to go out there. I'm just happy that we got the 'W' and now it's on to the next (game)."

Broncos rally to edge Raiders, 20-19 in hottest-ever home game

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 17, 2018

Boy, was it hot.

How hot was it? It was almost as hot as Case Keenum gets when his back is to the wall.

After the Broncos' quarterback and his offense turned in a lethargic, scoreless first half performance, Keenum rallied the Broncos to 20 second-half points and a 20-19 win against the Oakland Raiders here Sunday on a toasty mid-September Sunday afternoon at Broncos Stadium at Mile High.

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After the Broncos' quarterback and his offense turned in a lethargic, scoreless first half performance, Keenum rallied the Broncos to 20 second-half points and a 20-19 win against the Oakland Raiders here Sunday on a toasty mid-September Sunday afternoon at Broncos Stadium at Mile High.

The Broncos are now 2-0, having won both games at home despite trailing in the fourth quarter. They play at Baltimore against the 1-1 Ravens next week.

"It's big," said Broncos tight end Jake Butt, who had four catches for 48 yards. "I think we have the best home-field advantage in all of sports. Playing at a mile high, it's tough. When I first came here last year, it took me a few weeks to get used to this altitude. We should never lose at home. It's big for us to stay undefeated."

The Raiders are 0-2.

"A tough loss," said Raiders coach Jon Gruden, who left his cushy color commentator job for Monday Night Football for heartaches like this. "I'm really proud of our team. We had opportunities, I think, to come out of here with a win. I credit Denver."

With his Broncos down, 19-17, and getting the ball at his own 20 at the 2-minute warning, Keenum's big drive started with a holding penalty. Now it's first-and-10 and his own 10. A 21-yard completion to Emmanuel Sanders got the Broncos started in the forward direction.

Later in the drive, Keenum hit Tim Patrick with a 26-yard completion in the final seconds. With no timeouts and 18 seconds remaining when the play started, Patrick made a curious decision after catching a hook pattern by running inside. But before he could be tackled, he cut out and made it to the sidelines at the 18-yard line to stop the clock with 10 seconds remaining.

Brandon McManus went out and made a 36-yard field goal to stun the Raiders, who were up all game.

"I thought the offensive line did an incredible job on that last drive," Keenum said. "We just needed time. And we talked about it all during the offseason, we're talking about the 2 minute. We talk about it all during the week, we were talking about 2 minute. We just need time and downs, They brought the kitchen sink at us. There was pressure after pressure after pressure. The O-line just played their guts out and some guys made some plays down the field and it was fun to watch."

When Patrick cut inside, "Everybody was shook?" he said.

More like hearts stopped. Turns out, he did exactly as he had been programmed. Each week, late in the week, Broncos' coach Vance Joseph holds a "Football 101" session. It's all about game situations -- clock management, when to use timeouts, when to get out of bounds, when to save the timeouts and spike it, when to challenge, up by six, down by three. The players are quizzed on it.

As Joseph gathered the team in the victorious locker room, several players were heard saying, "Football 101, Football 101." This 20-19 win, as it turned out was textbook, Football 101. Including the Patrick play.

"Case kept saying we're going to spike it in the huddle." Patrick said. "So I knew I could get the yards. Once I turned up the field I had seen there was no one there so I bee-lined it for the sideline. First cut in, I was thinking getting yards. At that point you try to get as many yards as you reasonably can so time doesn't run off and you spike it and win the game."

The first half never got to Football 101. Favored by nearly a touchdown going into the game, the Broncos were trailing the Raiders, 12-0 at halftime.

"At halftime, it wasn't good," Joseph said. "They played good football in the first half and we didn't. In the second half, we thought, offensively, we had to get more aggressive."

Momentum switched in the Broncos' favor thanks to a dropped pass by Raiders' fullback Keith Smith. He dropped it on a fourth-and-1 play in the fourth quarter from the Broncos' 34 and the Raiders leading, 19-10. Catch the ball in the open -- and it hit Smith in his hands -- and the Raiders may have been in position to put the game away.

Instead, Keenum followed by leading the Broncos on a touchdown drive, which he finished with a fourth down quarterback sneak for a 1-yard score.

"I should have caught it," Smith told the Las Vegas Review-Journal.

The temperature at kickoff was 92 degrees, making it the hottest home game in Broncos' history. The previous record was 91 degrees, set three times, most recently in September 2010 against Seattle.

What a game for the history books. Realizing they needed to pick it up if they wanted to avoid an upset, the Broncos scored on their opening drive of the second half. A 21-yard pass from Keenum to Emmanuel Sanders got the drive started and runs by Phillip Lindsay and Royce Freeman kept it moving.

Freeman capped the drive with a 1-yard touchdown plunge.

The Raiders responded with a far-too-easy, 75-yard touchdown drive that ended with Derek Carr throwing a 20-yard touchdown pass to Seth Roberts.

It could have been much worse for the Broncos.

Through the first quarter and 3 minutes of the second, the Broncos were thoroughly outplayed. The Raiders had 7 first downs and 124 yards in total offense. The Broncos had three, three-and-outs in their first three possessions.

The Broncos were lucky to only be down 6-0, as for all of Carr's early stats – 11 of 12 for 90 yards – the Raiders' quarterback couldn't stick it in the end zone against Denver's defense. Veteran placekicker Mike Nugent accounted for the scoring, with field goals of 26 and 46 yards.

Carr finished the game an incredible 29 of 32, although for a relatively modest 288 yards and one touchdown. And he would have been 30 of 32 had Smith not dropped the ball.

The Broncos were in scoring position at the 11-minute mark of the second quarter when rookie tailback Phillip Lindsay shot through the middle, made a cut and raced 53 yards to the Oakland 22.

However, on third down from the Raiders' 18, Keenum was intercepted at the 1-yard line by Rashaan Melvin.

It was Keenum's fourth interception of the young season. The Raiders tacked on a touchdown late in the first half with Carr and tight end Jared Cook connecting on two, 20-yard plays. Oakland running back Marshawn Lynch finished off the 75-yard drive with a 1-yard, leaping touchdown.

However, in a play that wound up becoming the difference in a one-point game, Shaq Barrett blocked the extra point.

"Coach always say you never know what play is going to be the game-winning play," Barrett said. "So you have to play every play like that."

The Broncos lost right tackle Jared Veldheer to a concussion in the second half.

Lindsay finished with 107 yards rushing on 14 carries. He is the first undrafted player in NFL history to eclipse 100 yards from scrimmage (rushing and receiving) in each of his first two NFL games.

"I am just playing football," Lindsay said. "That's it. I am just playing football for our team. I don't think of things like that."

Keenum finished 19 of 35 for 222 yards. His stats, though, don't measure his acute competitiveness.

"We've got a great locker room in there," Keenum said, when asked about his knack for pulling out games late. "There are some incredible guys that never quit. Never quit. I love that about them. We have great, great chemistry going right now with those guys. ... When you put in a lot of investment in the offseason and training camp and working hard, you get to pull on that investment when the pressure turns on and the heat turns up."

It's so hot in Denver, the Broncos installed hydration stations for the 1st time ever at Mile High

By Oscar Contreras
9 News
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It's so hot in Denver that for the first time ever, the Denver Broncos had to install hydration stations for fans tailgating outside Mile High stadium.

The free hydration stations were installed Sunday morning outside Broncos Stadium at Mile High as the forecast called for a high of 93 degrees Sunday.

If you happen to still be outside of the stadium by the time you read this, the hydration stations 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

A spokesperson for the Broncos said in a statement that fans can only bring factory sealed or empty plastic/refillable water bottles into the stadium gates. Anything else will have to be discarded.

Since Monday, Denver has experienced record-breaking temperatures with five record highs tied or broken within the past week.

First Alert Weather Meteorologist Katie LaSalle says these temperatures are unseasonably hot, as normal highs should be around 79 degrees this time of year in the Denver metro area.

"So far, we have seen 55 days of 90-degree-plus heat here in Denver. That's about 10 more days than normal," LaSalle said.

The forecast calls for a gradual cooling trend to come by the middle of next week with highs returning to the low-to-mid-80s by Wednesday. A chance of showers is possible on Thursday, with highs expected to be in the 70s.

Marquette King appears to target Jon Gruden in social media post

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

September 17, 2018

It's still 2-0.

Denver Broncos punter Marquette King showed Sunday he isn't quite ready for bygones to be bygones when it comes to the Oakland Raiders and coach Jon Gruden.

Shortly after the Broncos defeated the Raiders 20-19 on a 36-yard field goal by Brandon McManus with six seconds remaining in the game, King took to social media. King posted a video on Twitter that included a Chucky doll with money stuffed into its mouth -- an apparent reference to Gruden and the 10-year contract the coach signed with the Raiders this offseason.

King was released by the Raiders on March 30 and there were rumors at the time that King's outspoken personality and his high profile on social media didn't mesh with Gruden's reconstruction of the team's roster. King agreed to a three-year, \$7 million deal with the Broncos on April 5.

At the time King said he had not spoken to Gruden before or after his release by the Raiders, adding, "I never got a chance to talk to him. I just saw him on car commercials and stuff. [Now] I get to see him two times a year."

King also said he didn't receive an "exact reason" from anyone with the Raiders about why he was released. This past week when King was asked about Gruden, he simply replied, "Who's that?"

King punted four times in Sunday's game as he finished with a 44.1 net yards per punt average (51.0 gross) and he put one punt down inside the Raiders' 20-yard line.

The Broncos will face the Raiders a second time this season on Christmas Eve, in Oakland.

King was third in the NFL in net punting last season at 42.7 yards. He originally signed with the Raiders as an undrafted free agent in 2012, and the team signed him to a five-year, \$16.5 million contract extension in 2016.

Broncos are 2-0, but high-powered opponents will be a big defensive challenge

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

September 17, 2018

Timeshares can be a blessing and a curse in fantasy football. We'd all prefer to start a Le'Veon Bell (or a James Conner) and enjoy about 30 touches in a given week. But there's nothing wrong with a good "thunder and lightning" combo now and then -- as long as it produces a pair of fantasy-relevant backs who complement each other well.

That was the case in Week 1 with the Washington Redskins, Los Angeles Chargers and Denver Broncos. Here's a breakdown of each situation, with intel from ESPN's NFL Nation reporters:

Chris Thompson: What a start for Washington's backfield. Adrian Peterson defied conventional wisdom yet again by gaining a total of 166 yards from scrimmage at age 33. But in some ways, Thompson's 11 touches for a total of 128 yards and a touchdown were even more promising.

Yes, we've seen this kind of dynamic impact from Thompson before. But we didn't know how quickly he would return to form after suffering a broken fibula last season. Even Thompson himself suggested last month that he might not truly feel back to 100 percent until November.

But as ESPN Redskins reporter John Keim wrote, Thompson said he started to feel like his old self about a week before the season opener.

"It was huge," Thompson said of his return performance. "Once that clock started and I got on the field, that was the best I had felt since my injury."

Although the Redskins' goal for Thompson is just 12 to 15 touches per game, he has proved he can do enough with that workload to make a fantasy impact, especially in PPR leagues.

Austin Ekeler: It was even more surprising to see the Chargers produce two backs with more than 100 yards from scrimmage in Week 1. But Melvin Gordon owners shouldn't worry after Ekeler gained a career-high 126 yards and a touchdown on a total of five carries and five receptions. Gordon is still a true "RB1," while ESPN Chargers writer Eric D. Williams said Ekeler is more of a "changeup guy."

But Williams does think Ekeler should get enough touches to be a fantasy consideration and wrote this week about how well they feed off each other. Gordon's desire is to be the workhorse back this season, but he's willing to share some of the spotlight.

"We've been doing it all camp, and that's what we're going to continue to do," Gordon said.

Phillip Lindsay: Finally we have the biggest surprise of all among Week 1 running backs -- the undrafted Broncos rookie who went from being owned in 2 percent of ESPN leagues last week to 58 percent after gaining 102 yards from scrimmage and a touchdown on 17 touches.

What was most unexpected was how even the rushing split was between Lindsay and fellow rookie RB Royce Freeman (they both got exactly 15 carries for 71 yards, while veteran Devontae Booker had two carries for 4 yards).

ESPN Broncos reporter Jeff Legwold said he still thinks the 6-foot, 238-pound Freeman will wind up leading the Broncos in carries and could push the 250 mark, particularly if they get more leads in games. But Legwold said the 5-foot-8, 190-pound Lindsay is going to get work as well.

"They like [Lindsay] too much, and he's simply done too well whenever they put him in," said Legwold, adding that it's too early to decipher how the backs will be used in the red zone. "They'll take the hot-hand approach in their rotation, and that will frustrate some fantasy folks. But I think Freeman is still the lead guy because he is the bigger, more physical of the two."

Broncos stumble through ugly game with rival Raiders

By Troy Renck

KMGH

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In Case Keenum's last words at the podium, he discussed "fighting."

Fighting carries several meanings. But for a team trying to distance itself from a forgettable 2017, the scope narrows. For the Broncos to remain relevant, they must punch back. Twice in the first two weeks, they found themselves trailing in the fourth quarter. Sunday, they heard boos, clumped through the first 30 minutes and were mesmerized by Derek Carr's accuracy.

Yet, when it mattered most, the Broncos played their best, overcoming a 12-point halftime deficit for the 10th time in franchise history. The small sample size makes it impossible to know if the Broncos are legitimate contenders, but one thing remains clear: they compete. They mocked adversity for the second straight Sunday -- this time in a home record 92-degree heat -- as they rallied for a gutsy 20-19 victory over the rival Oakland Raiders.

"Anytime you have a winning drive in the fourth quarter, it feels awesome," said Keenum, who completed 19 of 35 passes for 222 yards. "Wins like that, we weren't playing well, and to come out and play like we did, it was big. We had huge stops. We just kept fighting."

Keenum led a game-winning 62-yard drive in the last two minutes. He hit rookie receiver Tim Patrick with a clutch 26-yard catch and run to set up a 36-yard field goal by Brandon McManus.

"I am living the dream," said Patrick, an undrafted free agent who made the roster as a fifth receiver because of his special teams acumen in training camp. "Football is always on my mind every day. I am always dreaming of ways I can contribute. This meant a lot."

McManus nailed the field goal with six seconds remaining -- it was dangerously right -- and as the Broncos remain undefeated entering their first road game next Sunday at Baltimore.

"Every week is different. Every team has guys who can make plays," cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said. "These AFC West games are always up in the air. We just want to get that mind control back. And we started it off today."

This is what a season hanging in the balance looks like: Early fourth quarter, fourth down, crowd at full throat, and the scoreboard ridiculing the home team. The Broncos' retina-burning first half left them in need of a stop sign. Derek Carr, who finished 29 of 32 for 288 yards and one touchdown, finally looked uncomfortable. Linebacker Todd Davis chased him out of the pocket, leading to a rare misfire.

The Broncos took over and plodded 67 plays on 14 plays. Phillip Lindsay triggered the movement, pushing the ball to the 1-yard line before a sneaky (Case) Keenum Keeper. With an empty backfield and the Raiders spread out, Keenum took the shotgun snap and burrowed his way into the end zone, slicing Oakland's lead to 19-17 with 5:58 remaining. A final defensive stand set up Keenum's latest fourth quarter comeback.

Not only has Lindsay made a difference, he has made history. He represents the first undrafted free agent in the NFL to eclipse 100 yards from scrimmage in his first two games.

"It's a credit to the offensive line. They were getting a body on a body," Lindsay said as he walked out of the locker room after rushing for 107 yards on 14 carries. "I was just following their lead."

Denver delivered an awkward first half that drew jeers and brought reminders of last season's dumpster fire. There is no shame in trailing at half. However, the Raiders boxed the Broncos' ears. The numbers were jarring: Oakland posted 12 first downs and 202 yards. The Broncos countered with two first downs and 112 yards. Denver opened with three straight three-and-out drives after avoiding the indignity in 14 possessions against Seattle.

"We felt like our timing was just a tick off," Keenum insisted. "At halftime, we talked about how the floodgates were about to open."

The Raiders muted the sun-bleached crowd with an impressive opening march. Oakland moved 67 yards on seven plays, finding mismatches with receivers and casting the Broncos into confusion. Denver drew a 12-men on the field penalty and burned a time out on third-and-goal with late substitutions. The Broncos held Oakland to Mike Nugent's 26-yard field goal, leaving Denver down 3-0 with 9:33 remaining in the first.

The drive captured the opening 30 minutes. Oakland bullied its way down the field, while the Broncos responded clumsily. The Broncos finished the first quarter without a first down, collecting 23 yards.

Trailing 6-0, the Broncos offense awoke from its Ambien snooze. Lindsay proved a catalytic force, bumping outside for a 53-yard gain to the 22-yard line. It set up a tease. On third down, Keenum made a bad read and worse throw, lofting a ball short of Jake Butt that Rashaan Melvin intercepted and returned the 16-yard line. The mistake swelled in importance as the day advanced.

"It was an idiotic mistake," Keenum said.

On the fifth drive, the sellout crowd's patience expired. The Raiders sacked Keenum on third down. During last season's 5-11 collapse, Denver reached nadir milestones. The Broncos were shutout for the first time since 1992 in a loss at the Chargers.

Many issues stained last season. The inability to make halftime adjustments ranked prominently. The Broncos offense responded with a caffeinated approach on its third quarter opening drive. Denver moved 75 yards on 11 plays, leaning on Lindsay and culminating with a one-yard plunge by Royce Freeman behind fullback Andy Janovich's block. It shaved the deficit to 12-7, and reintroduced vigor from the fans.

It proved short lived. Carr continued his impression of Phil Simms in his Super Bowl XXI dissection of Denver. He completed 21 of his first 22 passes, connecting with Seth Roberts for an easy score as Chris Harris and Justin Simmons collided. Carr spent the afternoon stalking Ken Stabler's 1975 record for completion percentage in a game. He picked on third corners Adam Jones and Tramaine Brock as Amari Cooper caught 10 passes for 116 yards.

"He was good, but he had less time in the second half," nose guard Domata Peko said, who avoided a concussion after suffering a helmet-to-helmet hit in the first half on a nullified fumble recovery. "These are the kind of wins you love. We had to grind it out."

Facing a 12-point bulge, the Broncos answered. What looked emphatic, became shrugged shoulders. Courtland Sutton appeared to catch touchdown, but called was reversed on review. Brandon McManus punched in a 39-yard field goal, eventually leaving a defensive stand necessary.

"You know the special thing about this team," outside linebacker Von Miller said, "is we're all one."

In the end, the Broncos defense showed elasticity and tenacity. They gave up yards -- something Harris admitted is foreign territory -- but tempered points. Denver sits undefeated.

Sometimes you don't draw a smile on Mona Lisa. The art is left up to interpretation, and some victories are simply easier to appreciate than explain.

"It wasn't about one person. We kept plugging along. It's a testament to the hard work we put in. When you put in an a lot in the investment in the offseason and training camp, you to pull from it when the pressure is on," Keenum said. "We showed grit. We fought. It's pretty special."

Footnotes

The Broncos can insist that Lindsay is not the starter, that they are riding the hot hand. The truth remains clear. He's been their best running back through two weeks. He eclipsed 100 yards rushing in the fourth quarter. ... Shaq Barrett is no stranger to blocking kicks. He got his paw on Nugent's extra point in the first half that proved the difference in the game. "I was able to come around free. The other guys got the eyes of (the defenders), and I was free." ... In their haste to neutralize Jared Cook, the Broncos were victimized by Amari Cooper. Matched up against third corners Tramaine Brock and Adam Jones, Cooper reached 10 catches and eclipsed the 100-yard receiving mark in the third quarter. ... The Broncos lost starting right tackle Jared Veldheer to a concussion. Billy Turner replaced him. ... Chris Harris and Justin Simmons were evaluated for concussions, but returned. ... Broncos captains, based on performance, were: Derek Wolfe, Brandon McManus, Case Keenum and Matt Paradis. ... No surprises in the inactive list. It mirrored last week's list save for Isaiah McKenzie, who was cut and moved to practice squad. The seven sidelined: quarterback Kevin Hogan, cornerback Isaac Yaidom, guard Sam Jones, safety Shamarko Thomas, defensive tackle DeMarcus Walker, linebacker Alexander Johnson, tackle Elijah Wilkinson. ... Walker beat out Clinton McDonald for a final roster. The Raiders signed McDonald this week following a spate of injuries and he played. ... Denver responded to Oakland's initial scoring drive with its first three-and-out of the season. ... A Von Miller sack and strip was negated in the first quarter when Todd Davis was flagged for holding. "Todd Davis probably owes me more than a steak dinner. I've got to talk to him. Why does he owe me a dinner? Did you watch the game? I had Derek Carr. It was one of the few plays that he held the ball. We recovered the ball, then we had to go back because Todd was doing these walks with whoever it was. It's all good. That's my brother." ... Sunday marked the first time since 2007 the Broncos have produced fourth quarter rallies in their first two games. ... Punter Marquette King tweeted out a video of him staring at a Chucky doll (an apparent ode to Raiders coach Jon Gruden) with money taped to it. What it meant? That's for the viewer to decide. But clearly King had feelings for the game, despite denying them all week. ... Gruden on Carr's day, "He did well. He did what we asked him to do. I think he could have completed every pass."

Broncos' hydration stations help fans beat the heat; team honors soldier who 'shouldn't be alive'

By Russell Haythorn
KMGH
September 17, 2018

The Denver Broncos were back in action at Mile High Sunday, a showdown with their bitter rival - the Oakland Raiders.

It was one of the hottest regular season Broncos games ever. Temperatures soared to 94 degrees during the game. And in the sweltering heat, the team took a different tactic to keep fans from getting dangerously dehydrated.

The Broncos installed hydration stations outside the stadium, encouraging fans to take a break between beers and drink some water.

"We both thought, 'Wow - that's really neat that they're doing that because this heat can really take you down,'" said Broncos fan Rob Lapier. "Heat stroke, heat exhaustion – those are really serious. And the fact that they provide the cups and ice cold water, you just can't beat it. They hit the spot on by doing that."

It was a scorcher in the parking lot and on the field Sunday.

That's where the Broncos honored a special guest today. Before the game, as part of the team's military appreciation campaign, they honored an Army soldier known as 'The man who shouldn't be alive.'

"It's just unbelievable," said retired staff Sgt. Chad Joiner.

For Joiner, being on the field was one of those moments that make an indelible mark on our memory.

"It's mind-blowing to me," Joiner said.

That's a big statement coming from Joiner. The Purple Heart recipient was struck not once or twice, but eight times by IED's while serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I did four tours," Joiner said. "I did three to Iraq and one to Afghanistan."

"Chad has sacrificed so much," said Joiner's girlfriend Nichelle Tucker. "He has just survived somehow by the grace of God."

And through it all, he's remained a humble soldier.

"I would have never expected this," Joiner said. "To me - I did a job."

The honor came about after Tucker reached out directly to Peyton Manning.

"My fantastic girlfriend wrote a letter to Peyton Manning and he read it and here we are today," Joiner said. "And this is just unbelievable."

"I don't think servicemen know how to react when they're thanked because they don't think of it as something they're doing to be thanked," Tucker said. "There's no one more deserving."

"It has been amazing," Joiner said of meeting John Elway, Von Miller and Case Keenum. "It's remarkable. I'm forever grateful."

Broncos rally past Raiders 20-19 on McManus winner

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
September 17, 2018

Case Keenum already has this fourth-quarter comeback thing down pat.

Nail-biters are almost a prerequisite for a quarterback in Denver, where John Elway set the standard with 31 fourth-quarter comebacks and Peyton Manning added 11 of his league-best 43 while wearing navy and orange.

Keenum, the architect of the "Minnesota Miracle" in the playoffs last year, followed his comeback win in his Denver debut by leading the Broncos to a 20-19 come-from-behind win against Oakland on Sunday.

Brandon McManus kicked a 36-yard field goal just inside the right upright with 6 seconds left, capping a comeback from a 12-point second-half deficit.

"Anytime you have a game-winning drive in the fourth quarter, it feels pretty awesome," Keenum said. "Last week was fun. This week was a lot of fun. They're all special. And this is an incredible start, my first two games here at Mile High."

The comeback denied Jon Gruden his first win as a head coach since 2008 — and his first against Denver since 2001.

"It's a tough loss," Gruden said after falling to 1-10 against Denver. "Really proud of our team. We had opportunities I think to come out of here with a win. I credit Denver."

With no timeouts and 18 seconds left, Keenum hit Tim Patrick for a 26-yard gain to the Oakland 18. Cornerbacks Gareon Conley and Leon Hall couldn't tackle him inbounds and McManus came on to give the Broncos their first lead.

"I knew I had plenty of time to go up the field," Patrick said. "I just wanted to get as much yardage as I could while getting out of bounds at the same time."

The Raiders (0-2) lost despite Derek Carr completing 29 of 32 passes for 288 yards and a score four days after Gruden called him out for passing up throws to Amari Cooper in Oakland's opener.

Cooper caught 10 passes for 116 yards Sunday.

"I don't think Derek threw an incompleteness today," Keenum marveled. "I never saw the ball hit the ground when he was out there. That's unbelievable to play quarterback like that."

"But we just kept fighting. We've got a lot of fighters in that locker room."

The Broncos (2-0) trailed 19-7 late in the third quarter before McManus hit a 39-yarder and Keenum scored on a 1-yard keeper on fourth down with 5:58 left.

Denver's defense held and the Broncos got the ball back at their 20 with 1:58 left. A holding call pushed them back 10 yards but Keenum hit Emmanuel Sanders for 21 yards and Jake Butt for 14.

The Raiders limited the Broncos to just two first downs in the first half. Mike Nugent kicked two field goals and Marshawn Lynch's 1-yard dive late in the second quarter made it 12-0 but Shaq Barrett blocked the extra point.

"Who knew that would be huge?" Keenum asked.

"I'm mad as hell about that play," Raiders right tackle Donald Penn said. "But even without that play, we should have closed out that game. We had many opportunities to. We've got to find ways to get better."

LOCAL HERO

Denver's Philip Lindsay, an undrafted rookie from Aurora, Colorado, who wasn't even invited to the NFL combine after a stellar career at the University of Colorado, totaled 111 yards from scrimmage. That made him the first undrafted player in league history to eclipse 100 yards from scrimmage in each of his first two NFL games.

"I am here to be our spark," said Lindsay, who was just that with a 53-yard run in the first half.

PORTERHOUSE PROBLEM

Von Miller said teammate Todd Davis owes him a steak dinner for costing him his second strip sack of the season. Davis was whistled for holding, negating the strip sack and Domata Peko's fumble recovery at the Oakland 20.

"I had Derek Carr, it was one of the few plays that he held the ball," said Miller, who later had a sack that counted. "I was able to get in and get the sack. And the forced fumble. And we recovered it. But we had to go back out because Todd was doing the Viennese waltz with whoever it was out there."

HOT TAKE

It was the hottest home game in team history. It was 92 degrees at kickoff, one degree hotter than the old mark set Sept. 19, 2010, against Seattle. To accommodate fans, the Broncos set up several hydration stations throughout the parking lots and encouraged fans to drink lots of water.

INJURIES

Broncos right tackle Jared Veldheer left with a concussion in the second half.

UP NEXT

Oakland: The Raiders visit the Miami Dolphins on Sunday.

Denver: The Broncos hit the road for the first time, visiting Baltimore Sunday.

Carr's nearly flawless air display can't deliver Gruden win

By Pat Graham
Associated Press
September 17, 2018

Raiders quarterback Derek Carr had the hot hand on a sweltering afternoon, throwing strike after strike in a nearly flawless display.

The one thing he couldn't deliver: the first win in coach Jon Gruden's return to the sideline.

Despite Carr's record-setting day, the Raiders fell 20-19 to the Denver Broncos on Sunday when Brandon McManus hit a 36-yard field goal with 6 seconds remaining.

It was the only lead of the game for the Broncos (2-0).

Carr finished 29 of 32 for 288 yards and a touchdown for the Raiders (0-2). His 90.6 completion percentage is the best mark in franchise history — with a minimum of 20 attempts — topping the record of 89.5 set by Rich Gannon on Nov. 11, 2002, in Denver.

"(Carr) did what we asked him to do, protect the ball, move the football," Gruden said. "He's a great player. He's going to be an outstanding player. I look forward to the days ahead. Hopefully, there's several."

Gruden's first victory in his return to the field from the broadcast booth will come on one of those days ahead. He hasn't won since Nov. 30, 2008, when he was with Tampa Bay. His last win against Denver was with Oakland on Nov. 5, 2001, behind three TDs from Gannon.

"Tough loss," Gruden said. "We had opportunities."

At 92 degrees, the game was the warmest home contest in Broncos history. The Raiders had team personnel holding a white curtain over the bench to offer some shade.

The only thing sizzling more than the temperature was Carr's right arm.

Carr had one incomplete pass to Jordy Nelson in the first quarter and another with Nelson in the third. His last incompletion was early in the fourth with the Raiders driving. On fourth-and-1 from the Denver 33, he rolled out and threw a short pass to fullback Keith Smith, who let it fall through his hands. The Raiders punted and the Broncos marched down for a score to cut the deficit to 19-17.

"We had a great play call. We had him open. I had to throw it quick, before his eyes were fully ready, with the pressure. We just didn't connect on it," Carr said. "Again, he'll be thinking about that. I'll be thinking about that, obviously the whole plane ride home. I'll be thinking about it when I lay my head down to sleep, like I do always and probably get up and do some push-ups or something. Those are the little things we're talking about."

Wait, there's more to toss-and-turn over.

The Raiders were on the move again late in the game when Jared Cook was called for a false start. On third down, Carr completed a pass to Martavis Bryant for a 3-yard gain that could have been more had it not been for an open-field tackle by Bradley Roby. The Raiders punted and Case Keenum went to work, leading the Broncos into range for the winning field goal.

"Obviously, you want to end with the ball in your hands. You want to end taking a knee," Carr said. "You wanted to waste their timeouts and, 'Hey, let's get that first down.' I still thought we moved the ball decently and took some time off the clock to help the defense and then the last play they just brought a pressure and we had to throw it hot to Martavais (short of the first down). We were one missed tackle away from the game really being over. That's how close this game is."

The performance of Carr certainly didn't surprise Broncos pass rusher Von Miller.

"We already know how fast he throws the ball," said Miller, who had the only sack of Carr. "You can never lose faith."

A week ago, Gruden basically called out his QB for passing up throws to receiver Amari Cooper in Oakland's opener. On Sunday, Carr threw 10 passes in Cooper's direction and all 10 were hauled in for 116 yards.

"He was great. Very accurate in getting us the ball. Made a lot of plays," Cooper said. "You want to get in a groove, do everything possible to help your team win. Unfortunately, we came up short today. We have to make more plays out there if we want to win the game."

Broncos beat the heat

By Woody Paige
Colorado Springs Gazette
September 17, 2018

On the most scorching sun day for football in Denver history, here's the hot take:

Broncos 20, Raiders 19. Two and oh!

The temperature at kickoff was a franchise record 92 degrees in the stadium, and the mile high reached 94 as the Broncos drooped and dropped behind the antagonistic Raiders 19-7 in the third quarter.

Lose the first division game – in Denver, of all places – and the Broncos would be burnt Orange. The cacophony would concern the upcoming month of games in Baltimore and New Jersey and two here against the undefeated Chiefs (2-0 on the road) and the Rams.

The heat was on coach Vance Joseph, quarterback Case Keenum and the rest.

But, with Joseph doing a masterful job — yes — on the sideline, and Keenum stalking the sideline, coaxing his mates with “Once we get started, there'll be no stopping us.”

The Broncos had possession three more times in the third and fourth quarters.

While the defense shut out the Raiders for the final 25 minutes and 25 seconds, the offense scored on a field goal, a touchdown, and with six seconds showing, another field goal by Brandon McManus to pull off a climatic comeback for the first time in almost a year.

On the opening September afternoon of 2017, defensive lineman Shelby Harris blocked a field goal as the Broncos edged the Chargers by three. The Broncos haven't won by one since the first game of 2016 (21-20 over the Panthers).

“Nothing is easy in the NFL,” according to Jake Butt, who was playing his second game in the NFL. He did play like a veteran tight end with four receptions (48 yards), including a late one for a critical first down during the final drive. A few lockers down Tim Patrick, also in only his second game, was rejoicing over his 26-yard catch-and-run to the Oakland 18 to set up the field goal that was 36 yards, not 60 yards, as it could have been.

Earlier, a Patrick touchdown was overturned because his foot slid out of bounds before the other hit ground. In fact, the Broncos were victimized by three upon-further-reviews, but Joseph made a couple of challenges that corrected mistakes.

“Coach (Joseph) talked about impacting the game one way or another, and I feel like I'm an impact player today (Sunday),” said Patrick, who sat out all of last season, as did Butt, because of severe injuries. “It just shows how good our team is. We have been through adversity the past two games, and we still come out with the ‘W’”.

In both victories Keenum led fourth-quarterback rallies.

Yet, the Broncos' new quarterback was cold in the first quarter (only five completions, one interception one sack, no touchdowns). His passer rating was 16.5, and the Broncos seemed lethargic.

Thousands of sweating Broncos "fans" left long before the fantastic finish, but those (of the 76,696) who remained had sweaty palms and palpitating hearts when the Broncos' defense stopped the Raiders at mid-field just before the two-minute warning, and the Broncos' went into their 1:58 offense – shotgun, no huddle, pass on every play but one (when Keenum scrambled for seven yards).

The Broncos, who began at their 20, were backed to the 10 on a holding call. And they finally had to play without one of their five starting linemen for the first time this season. Tackle Jared Veldheer was forced to leave with concussion symptoms.

The Keenum version of A Drive wasn't quite as meaningful as The Elway Drive, but did include four passes for 65 yards that won out.

Raiders were kneeling during timeouts and begging out with exhaustion. Altitude, heat and the fleet-feet offense in the fourth quarter made them melt like the Wicked Witches of the West they are.

It was sort of reminiscent of the pace of the Peyton Manning Era. And, a few minutes after the game, Peyton suddenly materialized in the hallway outside the locker room.

Jon Gruden opined afterward that ""everyone was gassed, all four sides of the ball. Their guys, our guys, everybody's guys . . . It comes down to conditioning . . . especially at the end of games."

The Broncos obviously weren't as beat as the Raiders.

They got hot.

Klee's Rapid Reactions: Broncos 20, Raiders 19

By Paul Klee

Colorado Springs Gazette

September 17, 2018

Paul Klee's three quick observations from the Broncos' 20-19 win against the Raiders Sunday:

1. Thank goodness for Brandon McManus — and for the Raiders. McManus drilled a 36-yard field goal with 6 seconds left to lift the Broncos to a win they probably didn't deserve. They got a lot of help from the silver and black. With the Broncos in the red zone but facing a fourth down, Oakland pass-rusher Bruce Irvin went full Serena and earned a penalty flag for screaming at the ref. First down, Broncos. And the comeback was on. The Broncos needed every last one of the 60 minutes to avoid a devastating loss within the AFC West. They were shut out through the first half and didn't reach the end zone until Royce Freeman powered through the pile in the third quarter. If not for Irvin's boneheaded play, the Broncos might still be looking for a score.

2. Thank goodness for Phillip Lindsay and Emmanuel Sanders. Where would Denver's offense be without these guys? While Case Keenum and the offense were punching the snooze button, Sanders woke up the crowd with a dazzling 20-yard reception. He followed it up with another long gain to set up a Brandon McManus field goal. With Sanders owed \$10 million next year and Demaryius Thomas owed \$14 million, one of them will have to go. You won't have to ask Broncos Country twice which one it will be. Thomas struggled yet again with butterfingers, while Sanders shined. And what more can be said about Lindsay? OK, this: the pride of Colorado is the first undrafted player in NFL history with 100-plus scrimmage yards in his first two games. Salute, young man.

3. Thank goodness for air conditioning. Sunday marked the warmest home game in Broncos history — 92 degrees at kickoff. And the Broncos didn't take advantage of the Raiders baking in the hottest part of the stadium, the east sideline. To combat the sweltering heat, the Raiders constructed shades above their bench. But the Broncos slept through the first half. Is it worth noting the Ravens — the next opponent on Denver's schedule — played Thursday and have a couple of extra days to prep while chillin' at home?

With second 100-yard day, Phillip Lindsay adds another historic night to his young career

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
September 17, 2018

“He had 14 [carries] for 107 [yards],” Head Coach Vance Joseph said. “He had a big run for us and finally broke a play for us. He is a good football player — not only as a running back, but as a guy who covers kicks for us and a guy who catches the ball for us. He is a total package as a football player. He’s been impressive. He’s been really impressive.”

That big run Joseph mentioned — Lindsay’s 53-yard sprint on a draw play in the second quarter — was the longest play by either team Sunday. Though the drive ended with an interception, the play showcased Lindsay’s explosiveness and elusiveness, something that you can see almost any time he touches the ball. Whereas more physical backs may gain an extra yard or two simply by embracing contact and falling forward as they’re tackled, Lindsay tacked on extra yardage to his runs on Sunday by twisting around tackles. Even without his 53-yard scamper, Lindsay would have averaged 4.2 yards per carry.

And it’s not just his production that has been impressing his teammates. The way he’s carried himself as a rookie has also made a mark — one that reminds guard Ron Leary of 2016 NFL rushing leader Ezekiel Elliott, who was a rookie at the time.

“I think Phillip is a real confident kid, man,” the former Cowboys lineman said. “He reminds me a lot of a rookie I had in Dallas in ‘Zeke’ in that when he’s in the huddle, he’s telling us, ‘Hey, just make a little crease and [I’ll] hit the hole.’ That’s something you want to hear from a running back, because you know up front it’s not going to always be pretty. But when you’ve got a running back — and him and Royce do a great job of it, and ‘Book’ [RB Devontae Booker] — they do a great job of just making us look a lot better than what we are, just hitting the holes the right way.”

In Leary’s recollection, rookie running backs often are more reserved.

“Most rookies, they don’t say too much in the huddle, but this group of rookies we have, they’re real confident guys,” Leary added. “And they work hard; that’s where their confidence comes from. They put the work in during the week. That’s why they can be like that on game day.”

Lindsay, who consistently demurs when asked about his accomplishments, gave all the credit to Leary and the rest of the offense, which has paved the way to his 178 total rushing yards, which ranks third in the NFL through Sunday night.

“I mean, the offensive line was movin’ ‘em,” Lindsay said. “That’s all I can say about that. They’re out there working their butts off. The receivers are out there blocking. I’m just doing my job.”

That mindset is the same reason why his new NFL benchmark doesn’t mean much to him. This is just going to work — doing the job at the standard to which he holds himself.

"I don't think of things like that," Lindsay said. "For me, it's just a great opportunity to go out there. I'm just happy that we got the 'W' and it's on to the next."

With the same kind performance by him, and of course by the offensive line, the next game could hold another new NFL record and, more importantly, another win.

Why it happened: Broncos 20, Raiders 19

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
September 17, 2018

Once again, the Broncos overcame adversity -- some of it of their own creation.

Once again, Case Keenum shook off an interception to deliver when it mattered most, completing four passes for 65 yards on a 10-play sprint to Brandon McManus' game-winning 36-yard field goal with six seconds remaining.

Once again, the Broncos overcame an early deficit, although unlike last week, the comeback took a while longer, as the Broncos dug themselves holes of 12-0 at halftime and 19-7 in the third quarter before dominating the final stretch, scoring the last 13 points to secure the win.

Once again, the Broncos capitalized off opposing mistakes, none bigger than the dropped fourth-and-1 pass by Oakland fullback Keith Smith on a play from the Denver 33-yard line. Denver immediately responded with a 14-play, 67-yard march that included three third-down conversions and a fourth-and-goal scramble by Keenum for the touchdown that whittled Oakland's lead to two points.

The details were different, but the script was similar to the one that delivered a 27-24 win over Seattle last week. Fortunately for the Broncos, the result was, too.

"We overcame a lot today, and that shows the amount of talent that we have on this team," cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said.

"Everybody just stuck together and didn't point the finger," he added a moment later. "Everybody just kept battling and we realized the plays were going to come our way."

Beyond resiliency, why did the Broncos defeat the Raiders on Sunday?

Because they controlled the game on the ground

Going into Sunday night, one team had more rushing yards through two weeks than Denver (Houston, 157.5). Three teams averaged more yards per attempt (Carolina, San Francisco and Houston).

But no team was more effective at moving the chains. Denver's runners got first downs once every 3.33 attempts in the Broncos' first two games -- including a rate of one every 2.8 attempts against the Raiders on Sunday.

Even when taking out Phillip Lindsay's 53-yard second-quarter gallop, the Broncos still averaged 4.3 yards per carry, enough to sustain and justify a commitment to the ground game that resulted in 28 total attempts for 168 yards. Overall, Denver finished with 168 yards on 28 attempts and 6.0 yards per carry, marking the first time in 34 games that the Broncos ran for at least 150 yards and averaged 6.0 yards per attempt in the same game.

Lindsay played the biggest role in this, exploding for 107 yards on 14 attempts. He became just the second rookie or first-year player in Broncos history to post a 100-yard game in a season's first two weeks, joining Mike Anderson (131 yards against Atlanta in Week 2 of 2000).

Oakland had some early success on the ground. Marshawn Lynch ran twice for 16 yards on the Raiders' opening series, including a 10-yard gallop off right tackle that moved them into range for a Mike Nugent field goal.

But after that, Oakland struggled to generate a consistent ground game. They averaged just 3.0 yards per carry on their final 25 runs after Lynch's opening bursts. Nose tackle Domata Peko Sr. was particularly stout against the run, finishing with five tackles, including one for a loss.

Because the Broncos took the first-half script and flipped it after halftime

In the hottest conditions ever for a regular-season NFL game in Denver, the Raiders drained the energy from the Broncos defense during the first half. Oakland had an 11-minute, four-second advantage in time of possession (20:32 to 9:28) and ran 14 more plays than the Broncos (35 to 21).

After halftime, the Broncos held the football for five minutes, 12 seconds longer than the Raiders (17:36 to 12:24) and ran 18 more plays (43-25). Denver was able to extend its drives because of its success on first down; the Broncos converted 70 percent of their 10 third-down tries in the second half. They followed one of their three second-half third-down failures with Keenum's fourth-and-1 fourth-quarter touchdown scramble.

All four of Denver's second-half drives consumed at least 10 plays and covered at least 50 yards. Only one of Oakland's second-half possessions reached double-digit snaps or 50 net yards. As a result, Oakland's defenders looked gassed, with hands on hips all over the field between plays on the Broncos' game-winning series.

"In the second half, we thought offensively, we had to be more aggressive, [to] take more shots down the field," Joseph said. "That made them a little softer in the second half."

Still, the Broncos know that at some point, they need to break out quicker and not dig themselves an early hole.

"We've got to start faster and stop making these games hard on ourselves," Harris said. "If we start fast and come out and put points on the board, it's going to be over for a lot of teams."

Because the Broncos won the third phase

McManus' game-winning 36-yard field goal was merely the final strike in a game that saw the Broncos have the upper hand on special teams. But a moment that proved equally crucial came when Shaquil Barrett blocked the extra-point attempt of Mike Nugent 35 seconds before halftime.

It marked the second consecutive game in which Barrett made a crucial play just before the midway point. His sack of Seattle quarterback Russell Wilson last week for a 22-yard loss with 37 seconds left in the first half effectively destroyed any chance for the Seahawks to march to a field goal.

"I just came super free, so I put my hands up and I blocked it," Barrett said. "I was mad that it didn't go backwards, so I could get a scoop-and-score, but a block is a block."

Last year, special teams was a reason why the Broncos lost eight consecutive games. This year, it is a reason why they are 2-0.

"I just think that we've got a different mindset. We just practice a little bit different," Barrett said. "If you want to be a good special-teams player, you've just got to have your mind set that you're going to be a good special-teams player. That's what's going on with our team."

Denver also had an advantage in punting, as Marquette King posted gross and net averages of 51.0 and 44.3 yards, respectively. Those figures were 3.7 and 2.3 yards better than those of Oakland's Johnny Townsend.

Most importantly, Townsend could not keep his final punt out of the end zone; the football sailed over the goal line for a touchback and a 29-yard net. This allowed the Broncos to begin their game-winning drive in comfortable field position at their 20-yard line, although that would be negated by a holding penalty on first down.

Because Keenum trusted every target

Tim Patrick couldn't quite come up with a 4-yard touchdown catch in the third quarter, as instant replay wiped it out. But Keenum turned to the first-year receiver in the highest-leverage point of the game, locating him for a 26-yard catch-and-run that moved the Broncos from the Oakland 44-yard line into the red zone and well within McManus' field-goal range.

Patrick was one of the standouts of training camp, but with four receivers ahead of him on the depth chart, opportunities were limited in the last two games.

"I was really glad he got that catch because we had the one called back earlier in the game," Keenum said. "But it is trust. He has made plays like that all preseason, made plays in practice and in camp."

"When it comes down to it, in the fourth quarter, we are tired and we need everybody. We have to roll with guys who have been all trust."

Patrick sprinted upfield, and then got to the sideline and safely out of bounds with 10 seconds remaining, perfectly setting up McManus to seal the win.

'Once we got that stop, it was over for them': Broncos' defense comes up with late stop, and not a moment too soon

By Zach Pereles
DenverBroncos.com
September 17, 2018

In Chris Harris Jr.'s mind, his offense needed two minutes to mount a game-winning drive.

So when he and the rest of the defense took the field with 5:58 remaining and got off of it four minutes later, he knew he had done his job. He had no doubt Case Keenum and the offense would do the rest.

"We had confidence," Harris said. "Once we got that stop, we just needed to give [the offense] about two minutes to go score. Once we got that stop, it was over for them. They couldn't guard us."

The stop certainly didn't come easily, though. Getting off the field against a quarterback that completed over 90 percent of his passes and a running back that's among the strongest in the league is a tall task.

The drive started at the Raiders' 25-yard line. The visitors picked a first down two plays later to move to their own 36. With 4:30 left, Oakland took a timeout with a fresh set of downs. The defense was down to two-and-a-half minutes to reach its goal.

Two plays later, Denver was set up with its first chance to get off the field: A third-and-1 at the Oakland 45-yard line.

The defense hit Marshawn Lynch in the backfield. Lynch powered forward. It was enough — by about half of a football — for another first down.

"The Raiders did a good job today of running the football well on first downs," Harris said. "That really messed us up to where we couldn't get third-and-longs. We just knew if we gave them two minutes they would score."

With those tough runs, Lynch finished the day with 65 yards. But he needed 18 carries to get to that total, an average of just 3.6 yards per carry. His longest rush went for just 11 yards.

"He really is 'Beast Mode,'" said Von Miller, referencing Lynch's nickname, earned from his physical running style. "I looked up, hit him at the line of scrimmage, and they needed two or three yards for a first down. Marshawn is a hell of a player. We all know that. He was in full effect today. Whatever yards we kept him to, it was a great job by us too."

Lynch's last first down came with 2:55 remaining. It set up one final set of downs for the Broncos' defense to make a stop and give its offense a chance.

Earlier stops would have left the offense the luxury of more time and perhaps a timeout or two to use. With 2:55 left, a stop was no longer a luxury for the offense. A stop was an absolute necessity.

Lynch rumbled for 6 yards on first down, but the Raiders backed up 5 yards with a false start. A short run from Doug Martin, swallowed up by Domata Peko Sr., left the Raiders facing third-and-6. It was one of Peko's five individual tackles, tied for the most he's had since 2010.

"We knew today was going to be a tough game," Peko said. "They have one of the best [offensive lines] in the business. We knew we had to go out there and attack them. It all started on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. Today was fun."

The Broncos brought pressure on Carr, and he got the ball out of his hands quickly, just like he had done all game. Amari Cooper caught the ball, but Bradley Roby stopped him with a quick break on the ball and a sure open-field tackle.

The stop had been made, and not a moment too soon. The Broncos got the ball back at the two-minute warning, meeting Harris' goal.

"We all-out blitzed them," Harris said. "We were in zero coverage, so he had to get the ball out fast. We forced him to get that ball out fast. ... He threw it fast, exactly what we wanted him to do."

A week after clinching a win over Seattle with a late interception, the defenders were able to watch Keenum and Brandon McManus complete the comeback from the sideline

"It felt good," said Harris of seeing the game-winning drive unfold. "That's the first time in a long time. ... We were confident we could win that game."

For the second straight week, the Broncos' defense needed to get a late stop to get a win.

And for the second straight week, it did exactly that.

Capping a comeback: The anatomy of a game-winning drive

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
September 17, 2018

When Case Keenum arrived in Denver in March, he spoke proudly of his postseason success with the Minnesota Vikings.

He was just two months removed from the Minneapolis Miracle that spurred his team to a win and him to a free-agent contract. And it was all most reporters wanted to ask Keenum about.

Keenum, though, made it clear he had goals past his game-winning pass to Stefon Diggs.

“To be honest, I’m ready to make some more memories,” Keenum said in mid-March. “I got real close to the big game. I got a taste of what it could be like. [It was] my first real, live playoff atmosphere [and] game situation. I’m hungry. I’m not satisfied with where we got to. I want more. So I’m ready to hit the ground running, and I’m ready for more.”

And while Keenum’s game-winning drive on Sunday against the Raiders wasn’t for a playoff win — or even a playoff berth — it was Keenum’s first taste of “more.”

The 10-play, 62-yard drive erased any bad memories of a first-half interception. Instead, the lasting visual from Sunday’s game will be 76,000 Broncos fans screaming in unison as wide receiver Tim Patrick ran away from Oakland cornerback Gareon Conley to set up Brandon McManus’ game-winning field goal.

Over nearly two minutes of game time — and eight minutes of real time — Keenum guided the Broncos to a 2-0 start to the season.

“Any time you have a game where you drive in the fourth quarter, it feels pretty awesome,” Keenum said Sunday. “This week was a lot of fun. They are all special. This is incredible — starting my first two games at Mile High.”

It was just one win, but it was a look at what’s possible for this Denver Broncos team.

This is the anatomy of a game-winning drive.

First-and-10, 1:58 to play, Denver 20-yard line

Keenum and the Broncos get off to an inauspicious start. Raiders defensive end Arden Key beats his man and races into the backfield. He almost knocks the ball away from Keenum, but other damage is done when Garrett Bolles is called for offensive holding.

First-and-20, 1:51 to play, Denver 10-yard line

Backed up at their own 10-yard line, the Broncos keep tight end Jake Butt in to help protect Keenum, who fires a quick slant to Demaryius Thomas. Rashaan Melvin knocks the away the pass, and it falls incomplete.

Second-and-20, 1:47 to play, Denver 10-yard line

Denver goes three wide and keeps the pocket clean for Keenum, who needs 20 yards for a first down. He finds Emmanuel Sanders for 21. Sanders slides to make a catch at the 31-yard line, and the Broncos get their first break of the drive.

“[Offensive Coordinator] Bill [Musgrave] made a great call on that second down. Emmauel ran a great route. I thought the offensive line did an incredible job on that last drive. We just needed time.”

As Sanders slid down with the ball, it looked like they might have just enough of it.

First-and-10, 1:25 to play, Denver 31-yard line

The Broncos rush to the line but do not spike the football. Keenum looks deep for Thomas, but the ball is over the veteran receiver’s hands. Thomas and the Broncos’ sideline looks for a pass interference call, but they don’t get it. The Broncos remain 30 yards away from McManus’ target line.

Second-and-10, 1:21 to play, Denver 31-yard line

Keenum drops back and finds Jake Butt on a crossing route. The tight end, playing in just his second game, shoves linebacker Tahir Whitehead away and picks up three or four extra yards. Every foot is critical.

First-and-10, 0:58 to play, Denver 45-yard line

The Broncos again move quickly to the line, and Keenum faces near-immediate pressure. With a defender in his face, Keenum looks for Courtland Sutton in the left flat. The ball is overthrown, but Denver’s quarterback doesn’t take a sack and the clock stops.

Second-and-10, 0:54 to play, Denver 45-yard line

A few minutes after running a quarterback draw on fourth-and-goal from the 1-yard line, Keenum makes another play with his legs. He pump fakes from the pocket and then takes off to his right. Keenum attempts to gain the first-down yardage, but he’s brought down by Whitehead a few yards short.

“Case should play running back,” Sanders said. “He is a competitor. We played high school football in Texas. [When you play] football in Texas, you become a football player, not just a quarterback or wide receiver. It showcased tonight.”

The Broncos have no timeouts, and the clock runs.

Third-and-3, 0:26 to play, Oakland 48-yard line

On an extremely important snap, Keenum makes a smart play. Tight end Jeff Heurman runs right to the sticks, and Keenum finds him on a quick out. There’s not much time left, but the Broncos have another set of downs.

A drive like the one Keenum engineered takes maturity. It takes composure.

So what was Keenum like in the huddle on Denver's last drive?

Like steak sauce, according to running back Royce Freeman.

"A1," Freeman said. "It was great. He didn't flinch. He's been through many situations like this. He's not new to it. To have a quarterback like him is definitely comforting for a last drive like that."

First-and-10, 0:22 to play, Oakland 44-yard line

On the CBS broadcast, commentator Bruce Arians notes the Raiders' pass rush is exhausted and must blitz to bring pressure. They do just that. Keenum is forced to fire a quick throw, but he and Thomas can't connect on a sideline throw that would've put McManus in field-goal range around the 30-yard line. For a moment, it appears the Broncos have wasted an opportunity. They need at least five more yards. Will they get it?

Second-and-10, 0:18 to play, Oakland 44-yard line

The Broncos can't have many snaps left now.

Patrick is lined up to the left with Sanders, and he runs an underneath route to the sideline as Sanders runs over the top over Conley.

The Raiders cornerback is caught. Does he stay with Sanders and prevent the deep pass, or does he come up to tackle Patrick at the 40-yard line?

For a moment, it appears he's going to bail with Sanders, and that's all Keenum and the Broncos need. Keenum hits Patrick, and in the open field, the Broncos wide receiver makes a move past Conley. Then he dodges cornerback Leon Hall.

Patrick streaks down the sideline before stepping out of bounds at the 18-yard line.

McManus just needs to convert a 36-yard field goal.

"I knew he was going to make it," Head Coach Vance Joseph said later.

The crowd roars, and Keenum walks off slowly.

"I take a second on walking off of those drives," Keenum said afterward. "I have not had many."

He can add this one to the list.

Cover 4: Broncos beat Raiders 20-19 after fourth-quarter comeback

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

September 17, 2018

Game-changing moment:

When Case Keenum arrived in Denver in March, he said he was ready to make some new memories. He did that on Sunday afternoon against the Raiders. Down two points with 1:58 remaining, Keenum made several big throws to guide the Broncos down the field for a game-winning field goal attempt. A 21-yard completion to Emmanuel Sanders on second-and-20 in the shadow of their own goal line helped the cause. He then found Jake Butt for 14 yards. But it was a short throw to Tim Patrick that resulted in a 26-yard catch-and-run that made the difference. Patrick made it all the way to the Oakland 18-yard line, which is where Brandon McManus nailed a 36-yard field goal to win the game. If Keenum wanted memories, he got one Sunday. Anyone ready for more?

Memorable highlight:

The game wasn't decided until a few minutes later, but Case Keenum showed off his wheels with 5:58 to play in the fourth quarter. Facing fourth-and-1, the Broncos spread the offense out and left Keenum alone in the backfield. Denver's quarterback took the snap in the shotgun, hesitated for a moment and then burst forward and dove into the end zone. Keenum didn't throw for a touchdown on Sunday afternoon, but he found another way to contribute as he did it with his legs.

Top performers:

A week after Emmanuel Sanders caught 10 passes for 135 yards, he compiled another strong performance. The former Pro Bowler only caught four passes, but they went for 96 yards and were often momentum-swinging plays. Denver's offense, which struggled in the first half, got going after the break, and Sanders played a major part.

Rookie running back Phillip Lindsay also turned in a strong showing. Lindsay built off his Week 1 performance with a 14-carry, 107-yard game in Week 2. His biggest play came on a 53-yard scamper in the first half, but his most important plays may have come in the second half when he picked up crucial yards as the Broncos tried to work their way back from a 12-point deficit.

The Broncos' defense earns a collective nod for the way it bottled up Marshawn Lynch, who rushed for 65 yards but had a long of just 11 yards. Denver's run defense never let "Beast Mode" break out, and it helped them win the game.

And who could leave out Tim Patrick, whose one catch of the day may have been the most important of the Broncos' young season.

Defining statistic:

20-7.

The Broncos struggled drastically in the first half as the Raiders out-gained them, earned more first downs and dominated time of possession. And, most importantly, the Raiders headed into the locker room at the break with a 12-0 lead. That all changed after halftime. The Broncos found ways to move the ball on the ground and through the air as they outscored the Raiders 20-7 to cap a double-digit comeback. The defense allowed one long touchdown drive in the second half, but the unit otherwise kept Oakland from scoring. That proved critical as the Broncos moved to 2-0 with a one-point win.

Injury updates: Jared Veldheer out with a concussion

By STAFF

DenverBroncos.com

September 17, 2018

Right tackle Jared Veldheer is being evaluated for a concussion after leaving the game in the third quarter.

Veldheer, 31, is in his ninth year in the NFL and his first with the Broncos. He was replaced by Billy Turner.

UPDATE [4:35 p.m. MT]: Veldheer was ruled out with a concussion.

UPDATE [5:47 p.m. MT]: Head Coach Vance Joseph provided a brief update on Veldheer's status after the game. "We had one injury, one guy that didn't return. That was Jared Veldheer. He's in the protocol for a concussion. We'll see about him tomorrow."

NFL Week 2: Bortles Unchained, Mahomes Unstoppable

By Albert Breer

MMQB

September 17, 2018

The groundwork for the Jaguars' breakthrough—and the difference from January to September—was laid in a coaches meeting on Thursday. This is the time of week when coach Doug Marrone charts the game-day course for his assistants, and it was clear to offensive coordinator Nathaniel Hackett coming out of last week's meeting what that course was.

"He always has a plan for us, how to beat each team, what he thinks we need to do," said Hackett from a jubilant postgame locker room. "Coach Marrone talked about if we potentially got into a four-minute situation, how he wanted me to handle it. And he gave me the green light—he gave me the green light to do whatever I want.

"My personality is to naturally always be very aggressive."

Marrone knew as much, of course. He also knew that green light ran counter to how last season ended for the Jaguars, which was exactly the point.

In the AFC Championship Game in January, Jacksonville lost to these Patriots after going for the jugular for three quarters and building a double-digit lead, only to revert to the football equivalent of playing four corners and blow the game in the final 15 minutes. It was easy in the aftermath for the Jaguars and their coaches to vow it wouldn't happen again. It's harder to actually change.

But Marrone did, and Hackett didn't need to be asked twice to sign up for it.

The four-minute situation arrived with 3:28 left in the fourth quarter on Sunday and the Patriots having cut the Jags' lead to 31-20. Dede Westbrook had just been dropped for a 6-yard loss on the first play of the next possession, and that left Jacksonville in second-and-16. The conventional call in that situation would be, of course, to hand the ball off twice, force Bill Belichick to spend his last two timeouts, and punt.

There would be none of that.

"They get into really big fronts [in four-minute], they get into goal-line and stuff like that," Hackett said. "We figured they'd want to get in goal-line against us, and we thought we had a great matchup with Niles Paul on the field. So we just got a nice max protection, and Blake made just an unbelievable, great decision, like he had been doing all day—he was feeling really good. We were rolling with the hot hand."

Bortles found Paul for 22 yards. The Patriots never got the ball back.

Final: Jaguars 31, Patriots 20.

Bortles: 29-45, 377 yards, four TDs, one INT.

Upshot: If the Jaguars get quarterbacking like this, they can be positively scary.

Crazy Sunday in the NFL that lacked the overriding headline of Week 1's Aaron Rodgers heroics but made up for it with a frenzy of action across the board. Including ...

- Patrick Mahomes' six-touchdown effort in Pittsburgh, allowing the Chiefs to hold off the Steelers, 42-37 in a wild shootout and climb to 2-0
- Kickers coming into play again, costing the Browns bigtime for the second week in a row and the Vikings in a game that could well be the difference, for both Minnesota and Green, between a 1 or 2 seed and a 5 or 6 seed.
- Speaking of costing the Browns, Cleveland went to Sunday's game hours after the announcement that the team was letting Josh Gordon go.
- Ryan Fitzpatrick's second consecutive 400-yard, four-touchdown effort—this one against the world champion Eagles—with one game left in Buccaneer starter Jameis Winston's suspension.
- Matt Ryan and the Atlanta offense coming alive to outgun Cam Newton and company and keep pace with those division-leading Buccaneers.
- The Giants offensive line, even with expensive left tackle acquisition Nate Solder and second-round pick Will Hernandez in the lineup, still struggling mightily.
- The Broncos and Dolphins moving to 2-0, joining the surprising Bengals after Cincy's Thursday night AFC North win over the Ravens.
- The Bills and Cardinals seemingly circling the drain, so much so that one Buffalo player decided to up and retire during halftime of Sunday's loss to the Chargers.

To me, though, there's no more compelling story from the Week 2 slate than the Jaguars slaying the demons of January's past at TIAA Bank Field, and doing so by not hiding, but rallying behind the quarterback they swore to everyone they still believe in, whether or not anyone else does.

WATCH: THE MONDAY NIGHT KEY

Albert Breer breaks down a critical factor in the Seahawks-Bears Monday night game.

While others wondered if the Jags would trade for Alex Smith, or try to clear cap room for Kirk Cousins, or draft Lamar Jackson, the team was busy hammering out a three-year, \$54 million contract to keep Bortles, the No. 3 overall pick of the 2014 draft, in town. And Hackett's feelings about the quarterback mirrored those across the organization.

Bortles, the Jacksonville brass believed, was never really given a fair shot. Despite being seen universally as raw coming out of Central Florida, he was starting four games into his career and had three different offensive coordinators in his first three NFL seasons. As Hackett saw it, Bortles was just going out and playing football at that point, rather than playing quarterback. It would take time to go from the former to the latter.

That's what Hackett and Bortles have been working on since Hackett got the coordinator's job full-time in January 2017. Last year the focus was on Bortles controlling his urge to take shots, accepting the checkdown more often, and using his legs more effectively.

This year they're working the shots back in, but only as they come organically. The aforementioned 22-yard conversion of that second-and-16 is one example, of course. But there was another play six snaps later that was meant to be a shot, and instead became an example of Bortles growth.

NFL

This Time Around, the Jaguars Weren't Letting the Patriots Win
It was third-and-three, with 1:11 left.

"We were going to try to take a shot to DJ Chark," Hackett said. "He ran a post—I thought [New England's Stephon] Gilmore did a really good job covering it—and Blake casually went back around, didn't worry about it being a four-minute situation. It was just third down, and he just flipped the ball over there to Corey [Grant], and Corey did what Corey does." The play went for five yards and a first down, sealing the win.

"That allows you to be more aggressive," Hackett said of Bortles' poise and composure, "just like how we called a bunch of passes today. [Bortles] was continually getting completions, he was using his feet, he understood how to continually move the chains. What do you ask for from a quarterback? You don't ask them to make every throw, you don't ask them to make all the tough throws. You ask them to make the right throw."

Grant, Hackett told me, was the fifth receiver in Bortles' progressions on that play. All that was left after that one was a single kneel-down. And when it was over, there was plenty to take away.

The Jaguars manhandled the Patriots at the line of scrimmage. Rob Gronkowski was held to 15 yards on two catches. Jacksonville's young receiver group showed its potential, with sophomore Keelan Cole making one of the craziest one-handed catches you'll see—"I'm not gonna lie," said Hackett, "it was hard to call a play after that, I was so jacked up"—as part of a 77-yard afternoon.

But more than anything, you saw a quarterback who too often hasn't lived up to his promise absolutely looking like a third overall pick.

"Everybody has written the story on him—they've decided what they think," Hackett said. "He's been through a whole bunch, going on his fifth year. How I look at it, he's had a bunch of different coaches, a bunch of different systems. This is him going into his second year in the same system. He's very confident in himself, he always has been, he's an aggressive person naturally. And he doesn't listen to the outside noise. Whether it's positive or negative, he never has.

"I can't tell you enough about how mentally strong and how tough this guy is, and that's what you want in a quarterback. He's learning every day, he's getting better, and he needs to continue to get better. He's still not where he needs to be, but he's on his way and that's all you can ask for."

This much is for sure: If there's more of that coming, the Jaguars will take it.

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR MAHOMES TO MAKE HISTORY

Eleven quarterbacks threw for more than 300 yards on Sunday, but there's no question who the shining star of Week 2 was, and it's the same guy who was a revelation in Week 1—22-year-old Chiefs QB Patrick Mahomes. And I'm saying that because not just from watching him, but from what I'm hearing about him.

Sunday's game was significant in that the Steelers have been a thorn in Kansas City's side, and a reason for a retooling this offseason. Andy Reid was 1-4 against Pittsburgh since arriving in K.C. in 2013, and the last couple of losses convinced the Chiefs brass that they needed to build a tougher and sturdier roster, which is part of what led to the defense being overhauled in March and April.

The Chiefs did get over the hump on Sunday. But it wasn't because of all those changes. More so, it was about the change under center.

"Nice to beat those guys," texted one team official. "This QB is special."

Mahomes, as he did against the Chargers in Week 1, made it look easy against the Steelers, smoothly connecting on 23-of-28 for 326 yards and six touchdowns without a pick. He now has 11 touchdown passes for the season, two more than any other quarterback has ever had through two weeks in the Super Bowl era.

I'd encourage you to take a look at the story we did last week with Mahomes—he detailed a number of plays from the Week 1 win over the Chargers that showed his growth as a passer, and one he'd like to have back, and explained how baseball taught him to make some of the trick-shot throws he does.

And I'd warn you too, that there will be an adjustment coming from opposing defenses that may cause Mahomes to stumble a little. It happened to Carson Wentz two years ago, when opponents started sitting on the short stuff and forcing the then-Eagles rookie out of his comfort zone. It happened with Marcus Mariota the year before that.

NFL

Spending a Season on the Bench Has Already Paid off for Chiefs QB Patrick Mahomes

The good news is that Mahomes is ready for that, too.

"As teams get more and more tape, they're going to try different stuff," Mahomes told me. "They're going to try to confuse me. But at the same time, Coach Reid prepares me for every situation. We make adjustments through the whole game, and that's something that I'm going to keep working on, keep getting better at—being able to make adjustments quick on the fly, and then get the ball into the hands of all these playmakers I have and let them make the plays."

That cat-and-mouse game ahead should be a blast to watch.

IT WASN'T THE AARON RODGERS RULE. STILL ...

The Packers thought it was over when rookie corner Jaire Alexander picked off Kirk Cousins with 1:37 left in Sunday's showdown with the Vikings. Referee Tony Corrente and crew had other ideas, throwing a flag on Green Bay linebacker Clay Matthews for roughing the passer that seemed dubious at best.

On the play, Matthews came shoulder first into Rodgers' midsection. At first it looked as if the flag was for violation of the new so-called Aaron Rodgers Rule (born of Vikings linebacker Anthony Barr's season-altering hit on Rodgers last October), which prohibits defensive players from landing on quarterbacks with

most of their body weight. But according to the pool report from ESPN.com's Rob Demovsky, it was actually for violation of a rule prohibiting scooping the quarterback off his feet.

Here's the report ...

Demovsky: Tony, can you explain the penalty on Clay Matthews and what you saw there on the late hit?

Corrente: That was the play in the fourth quarter.

Demovsky: Yes sir.

Corrente: When he hit the quarterback, he lifted him and drove him into the ground.

Demovsky: Is that enforced under the new helmet rule?

Corrente: Not at all. It has nothing to do with the rule of full body weight. It has nothing to do with helmet-to-helmet. He picked the quarterback up and drove him into the ground.

Demovsky: What could he have done differently on that play?

Corrente: Not picked him up and drove him to the ground.

If you go back and look at the play, Matthews comes in neither high nor low. The only reason Cousins leaves his feet seems to be because he had forward momentum following through into his throw, with the Packers linebacker connecting in the midst of that follow through.

NFL

Packers-Vikings Tie Leaves the NFC North Rivals Understandably Frustrated

The end result? After the penalty, Cousins took eight plays to navigate the 60 yards left, throwing a touchdown pass to Adam Thielen, then a two-point conversion toss to Stefon Diggs to tie the game and force overtime. The extra 15 minutes settled nothing, the teams went home with a tie, and there are certainly scenarios to consider that could cost the Packers four or five spots in the seeding relating directly back to this weekend.

I personally hate the call, and not because I'm trying to be a tough guy. I hate the call because I don't know what Clay Matthews was supposed to do there, no matter what Corrente thought he might be capable of.

JUDGING JOSH GORDON

The Browns have been in touch with potential suitors for troubled receiver Josh Gordon in the 24-plus hours after the team's announcement that they were planning to release him on Monday—which was a de facto “make us an offer” smoke signal to the rest of the league. And as much as getting a return might be nice, I think controlling Gordon's destination is as important to Cleveland.

So your favorite team's fate on this one is, at least for now, in the hands of Browns GM John Dorsey. You want to know about Gordon? Here are a few things you should know ...

- There were signs of trouble early in the summer, with rumors buzzing before the July 4 holiday that he'd slipped up. That was followed by Gordon staying away from the start of Browns training camp, a move that came as a surprise to some on the Cleveland coaching staff.
- Gordon's final days in Cleveland were just as strange. On Friday he tweaked his hamstring doing a promotional shoot. The team found out about it on Saturday, after Gordon showed up to work late.
- Gordon is one failed drug test from banishment from the league.

- The one year Gordon stayed out of trouble was 2013—and he caught 87 passes for 1,646 yards and nine touchdowns. That year, then-Browns CEO Joe Banner hired performance psychologist James Bell and Cleveland Clinic psychiatrist Mayur Pandya to help with troubled players, and the two were vital in Gordon staying on track.
- Gordon is seen as easily influenced, which is why the Browns have tried as much as possible to get him around a brother of his who was living in California and is seen as a positive force in his life.
- Those who know Gordon say his substance abuse problem stems from deep insecurity and self-esteem issues. No one seems to think he's a bad guy. That's why so many people are rooting for Gordon to make it. It's hard to find someone who's played with or coached him who isn't.

NFL

It Is Time for Baker Mayfield

There's clearly a lot to deal with here. That said, Gordon would come cheap, probably for a low-round pick and at less than \$1 million for the rest of the year. And the one thing that always affords guys second chances in the NFL—talent—is something Gordon very clearly has.

So stay tuned on this on Monday.

FALCONS RALLYING AROUND SARK?

I'd heard enough questions about Matt Ryan's arm strength in the Thursday night opener, from inside the league and out, to compel me to ask the question of the Falcons quarterback on the phone after Atlanta's 31-24 win over Carolina on Sunday. Was something wrong in Philly?

"No, I was healthy," Ryan responded. "I just didn't play well enough, and sometimes that happens. There are nights where you just don't play your best. And I felt like I played a lot better today."

There's no doubt about that. Ryan threw for 272 yards and two touchdowns on 23-of-28 passing as the Falcons bounced back from a bad opener in Philly, and maybe, just maybe, created some optimism for embattled offensive coordinator Steve Sarkisian's unit.

And the team could use it. The tough loss in the opener was followed by even tougher news that both middle linebacker Deion Jones and strong safety Keanu Neal were headed for injured reserve—delivering a pretty heavy blow to a talented young defense that seemed to be on the verge of turning the corner. That, of course, put the onus back on the offense to pick up the slack.

"You never want to see guys go down like that, especially leaders and such productive players for us," Ryan said. "But I think one of the things that helps is Dan [Quinn] does such a great job of guys to come along, developing them. We spend a lot of time in the offseason with the young guys, getting them up to speed. I thought our guys that came in and replaced them today did a nice job."

"But offensively, our mindset was, Whatever we have to do to win, we just gotta do. We have to find a way to get it done."

It's not a totally unfamiliar spot for the group, either. Over Quinn's first two years, Ryan, Julio Jones and company carried the Falcons through a rebuild on the other side of the ball. It worked, too, with Kyle Shanahan's offense taking off in Year 2 and the driving the team all the way to the Super Bowl.

That offense set a high bar. But there's at least hope—and it showed up late in this game—that Sarkisian will see a second-year leap like his predecessor did.

NFL

Kirk Cousins's First Vikings Moment, A Bortles Day as Jaguars Put the AFC on Notice, Fitzpatrick on Verge of Ending the Jameis Winston Era in Tampa, Browns Can't Kick Losing

"I thought he did an excellent job on our last touchdown drive," Ryan said of the 7-play, 75-yard possession. "He did a great job setting things up, calling things out of certain personnel groupings that we worked through the entire game. Knowing we've worked on those things when we get the looks, and just his timing on the calls on the last drive for the touchdown was great.

"He had guys open—we hit [tight end Austin] Hooper for a [30-yard] gain in 22 personnel, which was huge, hit a screen the next play for about 10—I just think his timing on things was really good today. And I think his comfort level certainly plays a part in that."

It looked different, too, than it did 10 days earlier, which in this case was a good thing.

... OF THE WEEK

TWEET

Not bad right there.

MEME

QUOTE

"Never see anything like it—Pop Warner, high school, college, pros. Never heard of it, never seen it, and it's just completely disrespectful to his teammates. He didn't say nothing to nobody. ... You know as much as I know. I found out going into the second half of the game. I was coming out, they said, 'He's not coming out. He retired.' And yup, that's it. ... Guys heard about it and said he wasn't coming back out."

Bills LB Lorenzo Alexander on veteran cornerback Vontae Davis' retirement from football in the middle of the Chargers-Bills game. This is my 14th year covering the NFL, and I've seen a lot, but this is a first. And Alexander had a right to be pissed off. Davis, who was in his 10th season and signed with Buffalo as a free agent last spring, released a statement later that didn't really apologize to his (former) teammates for abandoning them in the midst of a game. An apology absolutely needed to be in there. Just a weird situation in general, even by NFL standards.

VIDEO

The best part of this clip is that Ryan Fitzpatrick is deadpan the whole time—"We just gotta stay humble." OK, that's not really the best part. The best part is his outfit." More on this important story here.

S/O TO ...

Dolphins wide receiver Kenny Stills is one of two players, along with teammate Albert Wilson, who is still kneeling during the national anthem, and he's said, repeatedly, that the gesture is not about the anthem itself, or the military. This week Stills used his time off to visit veterans with health-care needs in South Florida. "To see and know that veterans understand what we're doing and why we're doing it," Stills told the Palm Beach Post's Joe Schad, "we're not against them. And it's never been about that. I think that's really important, and it means a lot to them. Like I said before, this has never been about the military or the flag or the police." We saw a lot of similar situations on Tuesday from players involved in the social-justice protests, and I don't think it was a mistake that their actions were promoted by their teams and the league. To me it's a sign that the union and league are finding solutions behind the scenes as they try to move the ball forward on this issue.

SIX FROM SATURDAY

1. Iowa State coach Matt Campbell is firmly on the NFL's radar and could wind up getting calls in December and January. A GM raised his name to me over the summer, and another exec brought him up on Sunday morning after his Cyclones hung tough against the fifth-ranked Oklahoma Sooners. During their school visits, NFL scouts have seen the smooth operation the 38-year-old Campbell runs, and he's shown a propensity for getting more out of less first at Toledo and now in Ames.

2. Not a banner Saturday for the top quarterback prospects, as Oregon's Justin Herbert and Auburn's Jarrett Stidham threw multiple picks, and Missouri's Drew Lock was up-and-down in a win. Scouts have been waiting for someone to emerge from the group, and it hasn't quite happened yet. It's worth mentioning: Those who've been through Eugene on school calls have left very impressed with Herbert.

3. Speaking of quarterbacks, Vanderbilt's Kyle Shurmur, son of Giants coach Pat Shurmur, was awfully impressive in defeat in South Bend. The Commodores fell 22-17, but Shurmur, a senior, kept his team in the game down the stretch, finishing 26-of-43 for 326 yards, a touchdown and a pick.

NFL

Bryce Love Shows NFL Draft Scouts He Can Do It All

4. The NFL's reaction to the Big 10's bad day—Wisconsin losing to BYU, Nebraska to Troy, Rutgers to Kansas, Northwestern to Akron and Maryland to Temple—was pretty much what you'd expect it to be. And it doesn't change the notion that they had that Ohio State and Penn State are a cut above the rest of the conference talent-wise.

5. I was very, very impressed watching TCU's Gary Patterson—who really is that school's Bear Bryant—coach in primetime against my alma mater on Saturday. And when I asked around, one AFC exec responded, "It's about time he's in the conversation for best coach in college football." So the natural next question: Could it work in the NFL? He's 58, so that ship has probably sailed. But even taking that out of the equation, the guys I asked said he'd probably have a difficult time because he's demanding and tough, which has worked with hungry overlooked kids. There's a reason TCU shies away from superstar recruits, and that reason explains where Patterson might have issues in the pros.

6. Speaking of that game, it was the final one for Ohio State's Ryan Day as interim coach—Urban Meyer is back now—and I thought what he said about Buckeyes defensive coordinator Greg Schiano was interesting: "What Greg Schiano's done for me in the last month is something I'll never forget. He's the classiest person I've ever been around in the coaching profession, the way he's handled himself, helping me along the way, counseling me on day-to-day stuff." Schiano's had image issues over the last few years,

but he has also has a lot of support from people who've worked with him or know him, and this is more evidence of that.

TEN TAKEAWAYS

1. Chalk one up for the new Dolphins culture—coach Adam Gase conceded to me last week that his 2017 team probably wouldn't have handled the double rain-delay opener as well as the '18 Dolphins did, and this Sunday gave the team another one of those “we might not have pulled this off last year” moments. One reason Gase overhauled the locker room this offseason (Ndamukong Suh and Jarvis Landry out; Frank Gore, Josh Sitton, Danny Amendola, Albert Wilson in) was because of what he saw last December—the team beat New England on a Monday night, only to lay an egg six days later in Buffalo. Suffice it to say, in jumping out on the Jets early at MetLife Stadium, and then holding them off late, these Dolphins, now 2-0 and leading the AFC East, showed they could handle prosperity a little better than last year's gang.

2. While we're on the Dolphins, we have to mention Frank Gore moving to fourth on the NFL's all-time rushing list—he passed ex-Jet/Hall-of-Famer Curtis Martin on Sunday. Of the 12 players directly behind Gore on the list, 10 are enshrined in Canton, an 11th (Adrian Peterson) is a sure thing to get there, and the 12th is a maybe (Edgerrin James). So I called the man who drafted Gore into the league 13 years—and of course Scot McCloughan, who texted with Gore on Sunday night, didn't hesitate when talking about about his Canton candidacy. “No doubt about it, he's a Hall-of-Famer,” said McCloughan, who was the Niners' GM in 2005 when he drafted Gore in the third round out of Miami. “He's all football, through and through. Still to this day, he cries when they lose. That's how much it means to him. This guy's not as talented as some others I've been around, but he's more of a football guy. Guy's a stud.” Remember, when McCloughan drafted him, Gore had two reconstructed shoulders, two reconstructed knees and a bad 40 time. He had to have conviction then. So it's no wonder he has conviction now.

NFL

Frank Gore: What I've Learned from Football

3. One of the biggest disappointments of Week 1 was a Saints defense that looked loaded going into the season and listless once it started. A 21-18 New Orleans win over Cleveland on Sunday was a modest step forward for a unit that believed it boasted two Defensive Player of the Year candidates (Cam Jordan, Marshon Lattimore) and a few guys set to break out (most notably safety Marcus Williams) coming into the year. “Week 1 gave you the look at when everybody's not on the same accord, these are the things you have to look back on,” Jordan told me. “So Week 2 we did exactly what we needed to do to gain confidence. That being said, we're still building. ... It's going to be a hard battle uphill, especially after what we had last week. But we're on the right steps. For us to contain an offense with Jarvis Landry, with Tyrod Taylor, with Carlos Hyde, that's a pretty solid one. Had they had Josh Gordon, that's a deep-threat receiver. But apparently, so is this Callaway kid, right? It's something we're going to have to continue on because next week we've got Julio Jones, and the young kid [the Falcons] drafted, Calvin Ridley, and Mohamed Sanu. It's gonna put it on us.” Saints-Falcons be a good referendum on both groups.

4. We went to a couple of special teams coaches on Sunday night looking for an explanation for the kicking fiasco of Week 2. So let's start with the two most glaring cases from Sunday—Cleveland's Zane Gonzalez (among four missed kicks, he botched a go-ahead extra point in the fourth quarter and a potential game-tying field goal after that) and Minnesota's Daniel Carlson (three missed field goals, two in overtime). One special teams coach pointed to roster moves in each case. The Browns actually picked Gonzalez over Cody Parkey at the 2017 roster cutdown, and Parkey went on to put together a very solid year in Miami after that, then signed a four-year deal with the Bears. The Vikings, meanwhile, switched punters, bringing in Matt Wile on Sept. 2. That also meant switching holders, which can mess with a rookie like Carlson. And

then there's an overarching element that touches these two kickers and all the others: When the PAT was basically a 20-yard field goal, kickers would use it to work through their kinks in game conditions, and they don't have that anymore.

5. The Giants spent a lot of capital to fix that offensive line of theirs. Nate Solder is on a four-year, \$62 million deal. Will Hernandez cost them the 34th pick. And Ereck Flowers and Jon Halapio are making those investments not matter much. New York averaged a grand total of 2.1 yards per rushing attempt and Eli Manning was sacked six times on Sunday night. That calls into question the win-now move to draft Saquon Barkley second overall, over Sam Darnold in April, a decision that will probably only be debated for the next 30 years or so in New York. (Credit to a Dallas defensive line with a ton of potential, too).

6. I liked the undermanned Bills' fight on Sunday against the Chargers. They could've easily folded up the tent (and yes, one of the 46 guys who dressed actually did) down 28-3, but they made the final score respectable in the end, which is a credit to what Sean McDermott has built there over the last 20 months. This year was always going to be rocky. There's more than \$50 million in dead money. Only five pre-McDermott Bills draft picks remain on the roster. But a rip-the-band-aid-off season was necessary in Buffalo, and so it's good that the brass there has the credibility of a playoff season in its back pocket to keep the players engaged through what'll be a long few months.

7. My underrated play of the day—Aaron Rodgers escaping the rush on third-and-6 with 2:23 left in the game, on a bad wheel, to throw the ball away. If he'd taken the sack, and Everson Griffen was all over him, it might have knocked Green Bay out of field goal range. Instead, Rodgers saved the yardage, and Mason Crosby drilled a 48-yarder on the next play to make it 26-21. Without Rodgers making that heads up play, one that shows up looking like a whole lot of nothing in the stat sheet, the Packers might have lost in regulation.

8. Case Keenum is 12-1 in his last 13 regular season starts, and 13-2 if you include playoffs. And while I'm not going to give him all the credit, Keenum has come through when the Broncos have needed him. Last week he put together a seven-play, 75-yard drive in the fourth quarter to give Denver the go-ahead touchdown. This week, 10-play, 62-yard march set-up Brandon McManus' game-winning 36-yard chip shot.

9. For what it's worth, Derek Carr was pretty good in defeat Sunday, going 29-of-32 for 288 yards and a touchdown. And Amari Cooper had 10 catches for 116 yards. Yes, the defense needs work. Yes, that's partly Jon Gruden's doing, given the Khalil Mack trade. But maybe we should hang around a little while before dismissing Chucky as a dinosaur?

10. Damontae Kazee's ejection for his hit on Cam Newton on Sunday—which was an easy call, and the correct one—brought me some clarity on all the fuss over the rules changes. We were all worried about the helmet rule. And as far as I can tell, it hasn't created nearly the problem that the body-weight rule has. The reason? I think it's because it's been a long time since coaches were teaching the kind of hitting that the helmet rule is meant to eliminate, while the body-weight rule requires a very real adjustment to the way things have been done recently.

NFL

Everyone Was Worried About the New Helmet Rule, but the 'Body Weight' Call Might Be What Really Drives Defenders Crazy

FIVE-DAY FORECAST

Consider this 17-day stretch in Sam Darnold's life ...

Sept. 3: Named Jets starting quarterback.

Sept. 10: Regular season debut at Detroit.

Sept. 16: Home opener vs. Dolphins.

Sept. 20: Thursday Night Football at Cleveland.

In that span are three defensive coaches—Detroit's Matt Patricia, Miami's Matt Burke and Cleveland's Gregg Williams—who like to throw plenty at the quarterback.

Because of the kind of kid he is, I think Darnold will come out better for it. But man, that is a challenging way to enter the league. A week to prepare for a road game in Week 1, then consecutive games on short weeks.

Oh, and as for tonight, give me Bears 24, Seahawks 20.

Broncos pull out 20-19 victory over Raiders

By Charean Williams
Pro Football Talk
September 17, 2018

Brandon McManus kicked a 36-yard field goal with six seconds remaining to give the Broncos their first lead and a 20-19 victory over the Raiders.

It marked the second consecutive fourth-quarter comeback for the Broncos, and the second consecutive blown halftime lead for the Raiders.

Last week, the Broncos trailed 24-20 in the fourth quarter when Case Keenum directed a seven-play drive for a game-winning touchdown with 11:11 left in the game. He was 4-for-4 on the drive, including the 4-yard touchdown throw to Demaryius Thomas.

It was even more dramatic Sunday.

The Broncos trailed 19-17 when they got the ball back with 1:58 remaining at their own 20. He completed 4-of-8 passes for 65 yards and had a 7-yard run in driving Denver to the Oakland 18.

Tim Patrick caught the last pass for 26 yards, getting out of bounds to stop the clock with 10 seconds left.

It culminated a furious second-half rally for the Broncos, who trailed 12-0 at halftime and 19-7 late in the third quarter.

Keenum, who went 5-of-11 for 38 yards and an interception and a passer rating of 16.5 in the first half, finished 19-of-35 for 222 yards and an interception. He ran for a fourth-quarter touchdown on fourth down.

Rookie Phillip Lindsay is the first undrafted player in NFL history with more than 100 scrimmage yards in each of his first two games. He ran for 107 yards on 14 carries and caught one pass for 4 yards.

The Raiders had their second heartache in six days. They led the Rams 13-10 at halftime Monday night before wearing down in the second half and losing 33-13.

Derek Carr completed 29 of 32 passes for 288 yards and a touchdown. Amari Cooper caught 10 passes for 116 yards.

Jared Veldheer out with a concussion

By Charean Williams

Pro Football Talk

September 17, 2018

The Broncos have ruled tight tackle Jared Veldheer out with a concussion.

Veldheer left the game in third quarter, and doctors diagnosed him with a head injury.

The Broncos listed swing tackle Elijah Wilkinson among their inactives, so Billy Turner entered the game at right tackle in Veldheer's spot.

Denver signed Veldheer in the offseason to stabilize the position. He spent four seasons in Oakland and four in Arizona before signing with the Broncos. Veldheer started his 103rd career game Sunday.

FMIA Week 2: Players Make Plays, and Patrick Mahomes Has Made a Perfect 10 For The High-Flying Chiefs

By Peter King
Pro Football Talk
September 17, 2018

Before the Chiefs and Steelers met Sunday at Heinz Field, Pat Mahomes the dad met Patrick Mahomes the son for their traditional pre-game hug. Pat Mahomes the retired baseball pitcher and Patrick Mahomes (yes, “Patrick;” his mom has decreed the son will be called a different name than the father) the young Chiefs quarterback have been doing this since seventh grade. If dad is at the game, he’s hugging his son and saying the same thing on this breezy 80-degree afternoon at one of the coolest places to play pro football—the confluence of the Three Rivers—that he’s said before youth, high school and college football games.

“Players make plays,” Pat Mahomes said to his son. “Go out there and have fun.”

Pat Mahomes’ 11-year major-league career ended just down the street 15 years earlier—his last MLB stop was with the Pirates in 2003—but he wasn’t thinking much about that sitting in his normal-fan end-zone seat Sunday. Mostly, he was thinking about the eerie calm of his son.

“It’s just crazy,” said Pat Mahomes late Sunday night after his flight home to Texas landed in Dallas. “Watching him, he’s so calm. The thing that’s funny to me is he really doesn’t realize what he just did. He went into Pittsburgh, where they’ve won more Super Bowls than any team in history, and he won. He really doesn’t think about that stuff. He doesn’t think about being in Heinz Field playing Roethlisberger. He just goes and plays football.”

The Lead: Mahomes

Players make plays. Patrick Mahomes leads the NFL in making them. He’s quickly becoming the big story of this NFL season. In the Chiefs’ 42-37 win over the Steelers—the first win for Kansas City in Pittsburgh since 1986—Mahomes threw six touchdown passes and no interceptions. Watching a good portion of it on CBS, I’m surprised Ian Eagle finished the game with a voice. What Mahomes is doing has never been done. No player, never mind a player in his second and third NFL starts, has opened a season with a 10-to-0 touchdown-to-interception ratio in two games. Now, it’s only an eighth of the season, but Mahomes has gone on the road twice, played playoff contenders with Hall of Fame-contender quarterbacks (Philip Rivers, Ben Roethlisberger), gone 2-0, put up 80 points, and thrown touchdown passes to four wideouts, a tight end, a running back and a fullback.

It’s not just the raw numbers. It’s the way he’s done it. Watch Mahomes play, and you see an eight-year vet, or someone who plays like one. No happy feet, no real highs of emotion, calm in the pocket even when there’s traffic. He’s in such a perfect system, with speedy and talented wideouts, the defending NFL rushing champion and a tight end bettered in today’s game only by the great Gronk. Andy Reid just spreads the field—five of the six touchdown passes Sunday came on two-by-two formations—and lets Mahomes find the open guy. He doesn’t care who it is.

I spoke to Patrick Mahomes while he and his dad walked to the team bus after the game. Patrick Mahomes was polite. He dished out credit like John Stockton dished the basketball. He sounded absolutely unsurprised by what's happened in the first two games.

"What's happened speaks to Coach Reid and everything he's taught me in the last year," Mahomes said. "He's prepared me to go out and play fast. In this system, if you can play fast, you can take advantage of things against the defense. And the talent and the legends I have around me—I'm just really trying to get the ball out of my hands and into these playmakers' hands."

This was an odd game. The Chiefs went up 21-0 on three TD throws from Mahomes in the first quarter. The Steelers came back with a 21-0 second quarter, on three TD throws from Roethlisberger. So the Steelers, and their crowd, came out revved up when the Chiefs got to the ball to start the third quarter.

Bang: first play, Mahomes to Tyreek Hill for 36 yards. Four plays later came Mahomes' favorite play of the day. From the Steeler 25, two receivers left (tight end Travis Kelce on the inside) and two split right, Mahomes took a shotgun snap and stared down Chris Conley, the receiver to Kelce's left. That seemed to keep rookie safety Terrell Edmunds outside, on Conley. Now came Mahomes' eyes back to center field, to Kelce. He zinged a laser to Kelce up the left seam. I wouldn't have been surprised to see Mahomes go to either receiver on his right, really; the spacing on this play, and in this offense in general, is superb.

"I kind of eyed the safety off," Mahomes said, "and that gave Travis enough room. I actually threw it a little low, but he made a heck of a play to catch it."

"I thought that was the amazing part of the game," dad Pat Mahomes said later. "The Steelers come back to tie it, and on the first series out of halftime, he just drives the length of the field and throws another one. Right there, everybody realizes he's a player."

We see. "I mean, there's a little bit of a surprise," Patrick Mahomes said. "I knew with this offense anything could happen, but coming out of the gate like this, it's pretty awesome."

I wondered what Pat Mahomes the pitcher thought of how his son had been schooled so far. He praised Reid lavishly ("He's taught my son how to be a professional") but he saved special praise for Alex Smith. Last year, Smith knew when the Chiefs traded the 2018 first-round pick to move up in the 2017 first round to take Mahomes his days were numbered. Smith, of course, lasted one more season. But he taught Mahomes what he knew about football. "How to prepare, mostly," Mahomes the quarterback told me. "He taught me how to make sure I was ready for any situation that presented itself in a game. I owe him a lot."

Dads understand and appreciate help given to their children. So Pat Mahomes told Smith several times last year how much he appreciated what he did for his boy. Unspoken was the fact that they both knew Patrick was there to take Smith's job.

"That's what's so admirable about what Alex did all season for him," Pat Mahomes said. "I know how it was when I came up [to the Minnesota Twins, in 1992]. I remember one time that year asking Jack Morris how he threw his split-finger fastball. He said, 'Get away from me, you little MF. You'll be trying to take my job next year.'"

When Patrick was 6, in 2001, his father played for the Texas Rangers. Alex Rodriguez was a first-year Ranger, having signed a \$252-million deal to move from Seattle. "Alex would take Patrick down to the cage, and he'd take batting practice, and then he'd break down the tape with Patrick and teach him about his swing. Patrick loves A-Rod," Pat Mahomes said. "Being around those clubhouses was great for him. It taught him the value of hard work in sports, and how professional athletes should act."

The lessons worked. Patrick fell in love with football, and football is loving him back right about now. "We're not done," offensive coordinator Eric Bienemy told Mahomes after the game in Pittsburgh.

"I know," Patrick Mahomes said. "I've got a long way to go."

The path looks pretty clear.

The Rest of Week 2

It's been quite a fortnight.

Buffalo cornerback Vontae Davis, who made the Pro Bowl three years ago, walked into the locker room at halftime Sunday in western New York and quit football. He didn't tell his teammates. He just took off his uniform and walked away from the game.

In non-quitting news:

- Ryan Fitzpatrick, Ryan Tannehill, Case Keenum, Andy Dalton: 8-0.
- Matthew Stafford, Derek Carr, Deshaun Watson, Eli Manning: 0-8.
- Florida is 6-0. New York/New Jersey is 1-5.
- Wish my two-game MVP a happy 23rd birthday today. Patrick Mahomes has more touchdown passes (10) through two weeks than former MVPs Aaron Rodgers, Matt Ryan and Cam Newton (nine) combined.
- Teams are scoring eight points per game more through two weeks, and an all-pro defender, Calais Campbell, has a theory.
- Marcus Mariota (elbow) was on the bench Sunday, and his fellow top-of-the-draft quarterback in 2015, Jameis Winston, may join him there when he comes off suspension in eight days.

Let's dive in:

Fitzpatrick, Bucs Ball Out; Winston Texts: 'Awesome game!'

When Tampa Bay players came back to the locker room after conquering the Super Bowl champion Eagles at Raymond James Stadium on Sunday afternoon, the receiver group found a group text on their phones. "Awesome game!" was the message ... from Jameis Winston. Of course, Winston is missing the first three games of the season because of league discipline stemming from his alleged groping of an Uber driver in 2016, and Ryan Fitzpatrick has Tampa Bay off to a 2-0 start with the kind of quarterbacking that's put Winston's starting job in jeopardy. "That was great to hear from him," said wideout Mike Evans from the Bucs' locker room. "Jameis did an awesome job in camp, and he supported Fitz all the way. But he's a team guy."

Tampa Bay hosts Pittsburgh next Monday. When Winston returns to the team the next day after the suspension lapses, the Bucs will have a short week to prepare for a road game in Chicago in Week 4. Then their bye comes. So coach Dirk Koetter will have a ready-made reason to stay with Fitzmagic—it'd be unfair to stick Jameis in the lineup after being off for three weeks and then preparing in a short week—before having a real decision to make when, in Week 6, the Bucs travel to Atlanta. Still, it's hard to imagine Koetter going back to Winston the way Fitzpatrick is playing. In the first 133 games of Fitzpatrick's 13-year career, he had one 400-yard passing game. He's had two in his last two games.

"We can be as explosive as any team in the league," Evans said. "We're not surprised by this success. I think there's a lot more out there. Ryan's working really hard, spreading the ball around, and he's playing great football with great playmakers around him." All true. Hard to imagine Koetter fiddling with that success when the top pick of the 2015 draft returns in eight days.

Cousins Picks Fine Time To Be Great

"I don't really know how to feel after a tie," Kirk Cousins said from Green Bay on Sunday after Vikings 29, Packers 29. Let me help: Angry, because Vikings kicker Daniel Carlson missed 49 and 35-yard field goals in the scoreless OT ... Fortunate, because a bad roughing-the-passer call on Green Bay's Clay Matthews wiped away a Cousins interception in the final two minutes with the Packers up eight ... Proud, because the Packers are THE rival for Minnesota, and Cousins played the kind of game befitting a three-year, \$84-million quarterback.

Quite a weekend for Cousins. The Vikings stayed at the Red Lion Hotel Paper Valley in Appleton, a half hour drive from Lambeau. Lots of teams stay there. "I came to Lambeau in 2003 for a game in 2003 as a high-school freshman, and I stayed at the same hotel I stayed at last night," Cousins told me. "It hasn't changed much." (I can attest to that. My first time at the Paper Valley was in 1990, and when I returned a couple of years ago, a quarter-century hadn't brought a significant facelift.) Then the game. If you've been able to doubt Cousins on one major element, it's his play in very big games, or in playoff-deciding games. His uninspired performance in a Week-17 loss to the Giants in 2016—I'll always believe—is one reason why Washington was okay acquiring Alex Smith and watching Cousins sign with Minnesota last March.

But a 425-yard game, four-touchdown, 118.8-point rating game put a pretty big dent in that narrative for Cousins. Down 20-7 entering the fourth quarter, Cousins threw three touchdown passes, the last with 31 seconds left in the game to Adam Thielen. Amazing throw. Two Packer defenders had a shot to tip it away at the goal line, but the ball threaded some invisible needle and landed perfectly in Thielen's gut.

"I knew it was gonna be tight," Cousins told me. "I got hit as I threw, so I didn't even see it, but I knew when I threw it Adam might have to play DB and knock it away." But that just made it 29-27. Cousins had to execute a two-point play to tie. His fade to Stefon Diggs in the left end was perfect. But it wasn't good enough. Carlson couldn't hit the winner.

Now for the Matthews penalty. With 1:45 left in the game and the Vikes trailing 29-21, Green Bay's Jaire Alexander picked off Cousins and returned it to the Minnesota 18. But ref Tony Corrente called roughing the passer on Clay Matthews; Corrente said later Matthews "lifted [Cousins] and drove him into the ground." If Matthews did lift Cousins, and it's not clear he did, it was maybe an inch. And the "drove him into the ground part?" It looked very much like the kind of safe tackle the league is encouraging players to make in these days of uber-caution around touching the quarterback. Said Cousins: "I haven't seen it.

I'm sure it was probably a generous call, and two or three years ago, it probably doesn't get flagged. But that's one of those plays the Packers felt made a huge difference in the game, and there are some we felt made a huge difference in the game. Both sides can point to several plays I'm sure."

He's right. It's not the only call on this day that influenced a game. But this is Green Bay-Minnesota. The big calls in this rivalry get magnified, and they'll be talked about in Mankato and Manitowoc for years.

Jags-Pats: Revenge is sweet

Regardless what Doug Marrone says, he's got to have some regret over going conservative in the fourth quarter of the AFC title game. The Jags led New England 20-10 early in the fourth quarter, but sandwiched around two Patriot touchdown drives, Jacksonville tried to play clockball instead of football. New England won 24-20.

"We've got a little bit of a different style now," defensive lineman Calais Campbell said Sunday night. "We're more confident. We saw how close we got last year, and we know we're better." That carried into Sunday, when the Jags gained a gaudy 481 total yards, and Blake Bortles threw for a gaudier 377 against the Bill Belichick defense. Jags 31, Pats 20. And when it was 24-3 with 20 minutes to go, most of America probably turned the channel.

I thought it was a redemptive day for Bortles, the 26-year-old quarterback who might just have needed more time to establish himself than the average Mahomes. Because Bortles certainly looks good now. He balances when the throw and when to run, and he's become smart at each. Amazing, too, that with three key receivers from recent seasons (Marqise Lee, Allen Robinson, Allen Hurns) missing this year, Bortles has found a new nucleus, led by the acrobatic Keelan Cole. "We compete at practice every day," Campbell said. "We're a pretty good defense, and I can tell you, Blake makes us struggle a lot. We've got a good group that we know can compete with any of the top offenses."

With Tennessee and the Jets at home on the horizon before a tough October stretch, the Jags could put some distance between themselves and the rest of a mortal AFC South by month's end.

Book Review: 'Big Game'

One way you can tell that writer Mark Leibovich knows his stuff comes early in his new book "Big Game: The NFL in Dangerous Times" (Penguin Press). Writing about the feverish pace of the NFL's supposed annual downtime, Leibovich touches on how the league has a four-month regular season but a 12-month obsession with calendar control, devouring every sport and leisure pursuit in its way. Writes Leibovich: "'Off-season' has in fact become a misnomer and even a dirty word inside the modern NFL. 'Off'-anything is an affront to the manifest destiny of a sports whose mission is predicated year-round upon the conquering of American downtime. No hour of the year should be safe from the league's revenue grabs."

That's what I really like about "Big Game." Leibovich, 53, has covered Washington politics for 17 years for the New York Times (now) and formerly the Washington Post. He took on the book project, in part, for a rest from the Washington grind and the novelty of writing about a sport he loves. He brought a semi-cynical, oft-disgusted and altogether fresh set of eyes to a view of the league and the incredibly wealthy men who run it. The cynical part I thought was vital.

Leibovich:

- On comparing Lambeau Field to Gillette Stadium: “If Lambeau was the NFL’s Louvre, Gillette ... was like going to Hooters for a nightcap.”
- On why the owners stand behind their embattled commissioner: “Goodell is clearly gifted at working the members. He makes them feel important and heard. And he is especially good at gratifying the older members, whom he cultivates as mentors, even quasi-father figures ... When you hear Goodell speak around his owner-bosses, he can evince a similar tone of an approval-seeking son.” This is as spot-on as anything he writes in the book.
- On how Goodell handled Leibovich’s question about whether he had regrets on the handling of Deflategate: “‘Fans want to know that we’re going to make sure that the rules are enforced across all 32 teams,’ Goodell lectured me. He is, after all, the last line of integrity against all enemies of the shield, foreign and domestic. ‘Thank you for looking after the game,’ people tell him. ‘I hear that a lot,’ Goodell said. ‘I hear that all around the country, all the time.’ This explains why Goodell is so beloved in fan surveys.”
- Quoting Tom Brady Sr., on how the end will come for his son in New England: “It will end badly. It’s a cold business. And for as much as you want it to be familial, it isn’t.”
- On the late Dan Rooney, quite possibly the only owner in the league to be spared the sharp spear of Leibovich’s keyboard: “Rooney was never comfortable with the big business and audacious commercialism that had overtaken the modern NFL.”

I met with Leibovich a few times over the past three years, and what I liked about him was his genuine curiosity and desire to get things right. That really shows up in the book. He met people, sized them up, listened to their words, watched their actions, and then put it all down on paper, unfiltered. He didn’t enter this project with the idea of slapping Robert Kraft around, because Leibovich grew up (and still is) a Patriots fan. But slap Kraft, Goodell, Jerry Richardson and, a bit less, Jerry Jones he did. He also slapped around the business of covering the NFL—“the nugget business,” he called it—finding, and I am taking this farther than Leibovich did in the book, the business of “off the record” between journalists and sources in the NFL to be out of control. I will admit there’s something to that. But that’s why this book is important. It’s an impartial, smart and journalistic voice examining an insular business. I liked this book a lot, even just to show all of us in the business that it’s good to step back once in a while and say, Open your eyes.

Leibovich is new at this, and a very good reporter, and he sees problems with the game he loves.

Two quibbles: The book is over-Patrioted; time and again Leibovich keeps coming back to New England themes. I’d have preferred to read more about the other 31 teams. (Ironic I’m saying that; many of you who see me as Mr. New England will chortle.) And it’s too short. It’s 354 pages. We needed 654.

This book takes its place alongside the exhaustive living history tome “America’s Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation,” by Michael MacCambridge as works telling us how America’s favorite sport became The Game. As someone who’s covered the league for three decades and knows how difficult it is to get behind the curtain, I can tell you “Big Game” is genuine and important—and a great read.

The Award Section

Offensive Players of the Week

Patrick Mahomes, quarterback, Kansas City. “Looks like Kansas City hit a home run with Mahomes,” Tony Romo said during Jags-Pats. You think? Mahomes, with his dad the former big-league pitcher in the stands at Heinz Field watching, threw for 326 yards, six touchdowns and no interceptions. Andy Reid is putting a load on Mahomes’ plate early on, and all the kid’s doing is responding big-time.

Blake Bortles, quarterback, Jacksonville. He outplayed Tom Brady. Seriously. Now Bortles had help from his pressure defense. But Bortles had the game in hand by halftime (17 of 25, 200 yards, three touchdowns, no picks) and did everything he could to avenge the toughest loss in Jags’ history—the 24-20 AFC Championship Game in Foxboro eight months ago. For the game, Bortles threw for 377 yards, four touchdowns and one pick. Revenge is sweet.

Kirk Cousins, quarterback, Minnesota. Cousins is 30, grew up in the Midwest, is a football lifer ... and this was the first time he played football at Lambeau Field. Nice debut. He threw for 425 yards (144 more than Aaron Rodgers), four touchdowns (three more than Rodgers), for a 118.8 rating (21.4 points higher than Rodgers) in the 29-29 tie. With the Vikings down by 13 entering the fourth quarter, Cousins forced OT with touchdown throws of 3, 75 and 22 yards—then put the Vikes in position for two overtime field goals, both of which were missed. A rather amazing chapter in Cousins’ football life.

Defensive Players of the Week

Darius Leonard, linebacker, Indianapolis. The rookie second-round pick from South Carolina State had the kind of game prospects can only dream of: 18 tackles, a sack, a pass defensed, a forced fumble and a tackle for loss. The Colts held Washington to nine points—no touchdowns—in its home opener.

Special Teams Player of the Week

Kevin Byard, safety, Tennessee. The third-year safety, a Pro Bowler last year, is the upback on the Titans’ punt team. Surprisingly, on the Titans’ first punt of the game, the snap went to Byard, a southpaw, and he threw a little pushed shotput kind of throw up the right side of the field, traveling 27 yards in the air. It fell where gunner Dane Cruikshank was running, right at midfield, and Cruikshank sprinted up the right side for the last 50 yards. Touchdown.

Geronimo Allison, wide receiver, Green Bay. It can’t be all glamour and Aaron Rodgers touchdown passes for Pack wide receivers. Sometimes, as happened Sunday in the first half of the big rivalry game with Minnesota, you’ve got to be on the punt-block team and smother a Viking punt for a touchdown. Heck of a hustle play by Allison.

Coach of the Week

Dave Toub, special teams coach, Kansas City. He called the coolest punt-return play I’ve seen in a while, and it worked. In Pittsburgh, knowing the Steelers would have great respect for Tyreek Hill in the return game, Toub put De’Anthony Thomas about 10 yards ahead of him, and when the Steelers made their first punt of the game, Hill gave way to Thomas, who surprised the Steelers and returned the punt from the Chiefs’ 42 to the Pittsburgh 10. There’s a reason why Toub has had head-coach interviews. He’s smart, he’s bold, and innovative in a part of the game that smart teams take advantage of.

Bill Lazor, offensive coordinator, Cincinnati. This offense sputtered too much last season, and the Bengals seriously considered drafting Lamar Jackson to pressure Andy Dalton so 2018 wouldn’t be Groundhog Day

again in Cincinnati. Lazor has emphasized precision and balance, and so far, the 2-0 Bengals have had both. They're rushing for 4.4 yards a carry (Joe Mixon: 38 for 179 yards), and Dalton's two-game rating is 108.5, with six TDs and a single pick. Replacing Ken Zampese with Lazor when the Bengals were 0-2 last year was messy for Marvin Lewis, but it's paying off this year.

Goat of the Week

Zane Gonzalez, kicker, Cleveland (not for much longer). Last week, he had the potential game-winning field goal blocked in overtime. Yesterday, in New Orleans, he missed, in order, in the last 23 minutes: an extra point, wide left; a 44-yard field goal, wide left; an extra point, wide left, that would have given the Browns a lead with 1:24 left; and a 52-yard field goal, wide right, that would have forced overtime at the gun. I cannot imagine what Zane Gonzalez—or 23 million Browns fans around the planet—must feel like this morning.

Daniel Carlson, kicker, Minnesota. The fifth-round kicker from Auburn might not be the Vikings' kicker much longer. He missed three field goals in the 29-29 tie at Green Bay, including 49- and 35-yard kicks in overtime. Both were wide right. And the second one hurt badly. The Vikings got the ball right in the center of the field for Carlson, and let the clock run down to four seconds. On a beautiful day with light-to-no wind, Carlson shanked it.

Damontae Kazee, safety, Atlanta. I know the Falcons won, but Kazee's play and resulting ejection really rankled me. Eighteen minutes into a game that began with a debilitated defense (including the injury absence of crucial safety Keanu Neal), Kazee, starting because Neal was out, made a stupid and totally uncalled for hit on Cam Newton. Kazee dove head-first at a sliding Newton, who was clearly giving himself up. The hit left Newton shaken and laid out on the ground. Kazee, rightfully, was ejected ... leaving the Falcons down two safeties five quarters into the 2018 season, in an important division game. His teammates saved Kazee's bacon with the 31-24 win.

Quotes of the Week

I

"Never heard of it. Never seen it. Completely disrespectful."

—Buffalo linebacker Lorenzo Alexander, after Bills cornerback Vontae Davis quit at halftime of the Bills' home opener Sunday.

II

"We're fine. If you're one of the guys, one of the fans, one of the people hitting the panic button, then that's on y'all."

—Deshaun Watson, pointedly, after the Texans fell to 0-2. They played poorly in a 20-17 loss at Tennessee.

III

"I don't know what else to do. You tell me. I thought I hit him within his waist to chest ... To call it at that point in the game is unbelievable."

—Green Bay pass-rusher Clay Matthews, after he was flagged for a huge roughing-the-passer penalty with 1:37 left in the fourth quarter and the Packers up 29-21. Kirk Cousins was intercepted on the play, and Green Bay might have been able to run out the clock on the ensuing possession. Instead, the Vikings tied the game, forced overtime, and it ended in a 29-29 tie.

IV

“Sad to say, I was a Jets fan growing up ... Watching Curtis Martin and Thomas Jones, and the Mark Sanchez era, and just visualizing myself being there one day, and playing at MetLife. Obviously, I had a vision of the green, putting on the green.”

—Giants running back Saquon Barkley, who now wears blue instead, playing for the other New Jersey team Sunday night in Dallas.

V

“I won’t speak for the NFL; I’ll speak for the NBA. We believe our players should express themselves. I encourage our players: Use your platforms. Speak.”

—Los Angeles Clippers owner Steve Ballmer, on Bill Maher’s HBO show Friday night, on the NFL’s anthem situation.

VI

“If this offensive line won’t protect Andy Dalton, Walt Coleman certainly will.”

—FOX/NFL Network color analyst Troy Aikman, after Coleman’s 18th roughing-the-passer penalty since the start of 2017—which FOX said was most of any referee in the NFL—gave the Bengals a first down in the first half of their win over the Ravens on Thursday night.

What I Learned

‘Sleep is my P.E.D.’

Six-time Pro Bowl guard Marshal Yanda, who turned 34 on Saturday, on extending an NFL career while trying to preserve his health for life after football.

“The first thing I learned is how far I had to come when I got to the NFL. I was a junior college transfer, so I was a raw player even as a senior at Iowa—then I was gone after two years there. In my first training camp with the Ravens I was so awful I thought they might cut me, even though I was a third-round pick. So my first, second, third, fourth year in the NFL, I kept attacking practice every day. Some players peak when they’re seniors in college, or their first or second year in the NFL. I was not peaking. I kept getting better as the years went by. I’ve achieved stuff I never knew I could—Pro Bowl, all-pro—but I didn’t think about that stuff. I took care of today. I took care of the weights. I took care of practice. I took care of watching film.

“I’ve learned how much I love this game. It’s just more important to me every year so I just continue to grind out every little thing that’s gonna make me better, whether that’s eating, sleeping, lifting, whatever

I can do. A great meal for me has changed. I'm into quinoa now for my carbs. So I'll eat quinoa, and my protein is chicken, and then I use a Vitamix blender and I blend up spinach and kale for my vegetables.

"Kale is ruthless. It is! I don't like drinking it. I put a little hot sauce in there too, to try and give it some zing so you can drink it.

"I eat brown and white rice, a mixture. I bought a rice cooker a couple of years ago, and you can cook the quinoa in there too. Also, I drink a gallon of water every day.

"Sleep is huge. Sleep is my P.E.D., my performance-enhancing drug. I'm usually asleep by 9:30. Sleep experts say you want to stay on a schedule. You want to try to go to bed at the same time and get up at the same time.

"For pain management and flexibility, I picked up yoga this offseason. I did it twice a week. For stretching and range of motion, like range of motion in my hips, it's good. My hips are looser. In my stance, I just feel a little bit loose and a little more spring in my steps. With my shoulders too ... stretching my shoulders is big now. We lift all these weights all the time and it's always build and build and build and they get you to stretch, but usually I stretch after I lift and I'm fatigued from my lift, I don't want to necessarily stretch like you should. I kind of go through it fast because I'm tired and I just want to get to the shower and relax. But now I literally spend an hour on stretching, deep stretches, and I definitely feel like I've gotten more range of motion and I feel better in my hips and my knees and my shoulders.

"I think about my health more as I get older. I've been fortunate—and I'm knocking on wood—I haven't had any head or neck injuries, and no concussions. That's pretty amazing. I still think the good of the game and what the game has given me, and how many experiences that the people I've gotten to meet, and the neat stuff that I've gotten to experience, and my entire family's gotten to experience, will end up outweighing the stiffness and the soreness and stuff as I get older. The longer I've been in the game, I'm learning what I'm doing now is going to help me not only stay in football longer but help my health later in life."

Numbers Game

The NFL is just 31 games into a 256-game regular season, but something interesting, and perhaps very predictable, is happening. Offense is exploding. Entering the final game of Week 2, check out this trend/outlier through two weeks of this season and last:

2017 Season

Games Played: 32

Points Scored: 1,249

Average Per Game: 39.03

2018 Season

Games Played: 31

Points Scored: 1,465

Average Per Game: 47.26

Point Per Game Differential: +8.23

Again, it's too early to call this the new normal. But in the offseason, the NFL took more pains to protect the quarterback (we saw it with calls like the Clay Matthews "roughing the passer" on Kirk Cousins at a crucial moment in Green Bay on Sunday) and to penalize players for using their helmets on tackles, which is likely going to adversely affect defenders.

And when I asked respected veteran defensive lineman Calais Campbell on Sunday night about the eight-point rise in scoring early this year, he said: "Look at the rules. I know the NFL is trying to make the game safer, but the safer they make it, the easier they make it for the offense. Offense makes good TV. The quarterbacks are the rock stars of the league, and they want to protect them. My job's harder."

Factoidness

I

Since Week 6 of 2015, the Cleveland Browns are:

2-1 versus teams from California.

0-41-1 versus teams from the other 49 states.

Notes: Cleveland is on a 22-game road losing streak ... The Browns beat the Niners in '15, the Chargers in '16 ... The Browns' last road win came in Week 5 of 2015, when there were still 15 months remaining in the Barack Obama presidency, and Josh McCown threw for a franchise-record 457 yards in a 33-30 overtime win in Baltimore ... The next best chance to break the 22-game road schneid: Sept. 30, at Oakland (a team from California—for now).

II

Not to over-Brown you, but ...

Quarterback Patrick Mahomes, who threw six touchdown passes Sunday; running back Kareem Hunt, who led the Chiefs with 75 rushing yards; and the five pass-catchers who scored the six Chiefs touchdowns Sunday to beat Pittsburgh (Travis Kelce, Chris Conley, Tyreek Hill, Hunt and Demarcus Robinson) all were drafted by John Dorsey.

King of the Road

No big trips this week, so I'll give you one New York-life snippet: I usually go to SoulCycle, the chain of stationary-bike studios, where you pay \$37 for a 45-minute session with an instructor/abuser and very loud music, once a week when I'm home. Most of the people who ride are half my age (61) or less, from the looks of it. I rode the other day in a SoulCycle on the West Side, and the pleasant woman leading the session said to us: "Talk to your bike. Have a conversation with your bike."

I didn't quite know how to do that, having never talked to a bike before, but I tried.

"Hey bike! How's life?" I said.

"Shut up and ride, old man," the bike said. "I only talk to riders under 50."

We rode in silence the rest of the way. Probably better that way.

Intelligent Football

Tonight's the Soldier Field debut of star pass-rusher Khalil Mack, who had a smashing first game last week in the 24-23 loss at Green Bay: sack, forced fumble, recovered fumble, pick-six, three tackles, all in 40 snaps.

Mack could have the same kind of impact in game two. When he rushes from his customary left outside linebacker spot, he'll be trying to beat Seattle right tackle Germain Ifedi. While it's not quite Max Scherzer against the number eight batter for the Marlins, it's a pretty major mismatch. Pro Football Focus quantified it for FMIA.

Seattle will give help to Ifedi on Mack. Last week in Denver, on six of the seven Russell Wilson dropback passes on third-and-long or fourth-and-long, Ifedi had a tight end on his side chipping or helping versus Von Miller. (Last year, Ifedi allowed pressure on 12.6 percent of third or fourth-and-long plays.)

Three other points I'm sure Seattle offensive coordinator Brian Schottenheimer knows entering tonight's fray:

- Since entering the league in 2016, Ifedi is rated 216th out of 229 offensive linemen with at least 500 snaps on the PFF scale, which grades players' performances on every snap they play.
- Mack's PFF grade since opening day 2016 ranks first out of 117 edge defenders.
- The Bears had 16 sacks/pressures/hits of Green Bay quarterbacks last week, and that came against a better offensive line than Seattle's. You hate to put such pressure on Wilson every week, but there's no question if the Seahawks have much of a chance to night, it's going to have to be with Wilson making plays on the move.

Tweets of the Week

[View on Twitter](#)

Newman!

Mail call from readers.

Hue's not getting whacked. From Ken K.: "If the Browns lose on Thursday to go 0-2-1, do you think this spells the end for Hue Jackson? Or do they ride with things a few more weeks to see if they can turn it around? If so, is Todd Haley the clear-cut choice to take over?"

I don't see the Browns making a coaching change three weeks into the season, when they'd be 2-0 if they had a competent field goal unit and a kicker who hadn't cracked. If the Browns were losing badly and not competitive, I could understand impatience with Jackson. But the end of these last two games is pretty hard to pin on the head coach. As far as the next Browns coach, I see Jackson making it through the end of this year, at least.

Stop promoting hotels and such. From Ricky T.: “Why do you randomly promote businesses in your column? Do they pay you for these shoutouts you give them? That would be a serious breach of ethics, would it not?”

I am not getting paid, and have never gotten paid, for anything I have written in the 22-year history of this column (including the previous iteration when it was Monday Morning Quarterback). I write about the hotel in Green Bay or the beer in Spartanburg, S.C., because they are things I come across and like and want to share. I try in this space to inform about football for 85 to 90 percent of the time, and also try in a much smaller way to bring you along with me as I travel across the country covering the NFL.

I must just hate the Rocky Mountains. From Troy H.: “Why are you biased [against] the Denver Broncos?”

I’m not. Many people in Colorado believe I’m anti-Bronco because of the delay in Pat Bowlen’s Hall of Fame candidacy, and because of a talented Denver trio (Randy Gradishar, Karl Mecklenburg, Steve Atwater) not being in the Hall. Some people believe because I have lived in the New York area for much of my professional life, I’m unfairly partial to New York teams. I would point out one thing: In the last 15 years, four Broncos (Elway, Zimmerman, Little, Davis, and a good chance for a fifth in Bowlen) have been elected to the Hall of Fame, while three Giants (Carson, Parcells, Strahan) and one Jet (Curtis Martin), combined, have been elected.

As for the snub of Von Miller as a player of the week last week, I probably should have included him, and I said that on Twitter the other day. I often miss great performances in the course of a Sunday. But it’s not hating Team X; it’s getting overwhelmed with information as the day goes on and the work piles up.

MVP Watch

In semi-regular installments throughout the season, I’ll give you my ranking of the five most valuable players in the NFL. Expect weekly fluctuation to ensue.

1. Pat Mahomes, quarterback, Kansas City. Two weeks, two road wins over playoff contenders, 10 touchdown passes, 80 points produced. I mean, right now, it’s not even close for the MVP.
2. Ryan Fitzpatrick, quarterback, Tampa Bay. Two 400-yard passing games in his first two weeks, plus a conquest of the defending Super Bowl champs. That’s a wow, and in most other years, he’d be in the lead for MVP one-eighth of the season in.
3. Aaron Rodgers, quarterback, Green Bay. Extra credit for, on one leg, leading the Packers back from a 17-point deficit (for the first time in franchise history) at the start of the fourth quarter in Week 1.
4. Todd Gurley, running back, Rams. Two routs, 220 scrimmage yards, four touchdowns so far.
5. Andy Dalton, QB, Cincinnati. Frame this, Bengal fans. Not sure Cincy will have an MVP rep on this list the rest of the year.

10 Things I Think I Think

1. I think it’s crazy and sad that the first thought among so many in our business and so many fans once Josh Gordon’s looming release became public Saturday was this: Should our team sign him? Gordon, one of the most troubled substance-abusers in recent NFL annals, on Saturday gave the Browns concern “that

perhaps he was struggling again with his sobriety or on the verge of relapsing,” according to Mary Kay Cabot of the Cleveland Plain Dealer. To refresh memories:

- Gordon was suspended two games for substance-abuse in September 2013.
- He was suspended 10 games for substance-abuse in August 2014.
- He was suspended for the final game of 2014 by the Browns for an undisclosed violation of team rules.
- He was suspended for the full season in 2015 for substance abuse.
- After being reinstated for the 2016 season, he was suspended for the first four games of the season.
- Before finishing his 2016 suspension, he entered an in-patient substance-abuse facility. He missed all 16 games in 2016.
- He was reinstated midway through 2017 and played five games for the Browns.
- He missed much of training camp this season “as part of my overall health and treatment plan,” he said in July.
- He played the first game this season, against Pittsburgh, and reported to the team facility Saturday with a hamstring injury the team believed did not happen at practice during the week.
- He has played in six games since Christmas Day 2014, a total of six games out of the Browns’ last 51.

Jay Glazer reported Sunday that Browns GM John Dorsey had received feelers from three teams about dealing Gordon, with the likelihood he will be traded Monday.

Two questions: Can we let a 27-year-old man try to conquer his addictive demons first? And what is the rush to do this—have the teams drooling over Gordon taken time to consider that, since entering the league six years ago, he has been suspended five times and at least once was self-admitted to a rehab facility? I’m not suggesting Gordon be banned from football for life. I am suggesting that there is evidence—circumstantial evidence, but there’s some heavy smoke here—that there’s something amiss with Gordon. And this is moving way too fast for any team to satisfactorily examine Gordon.

2. I think these are my quick-hit thoughts from Week 2:

- a. Catch of the Year: the 22-yard one-hander by Jacksonville’s Beckham impersonator, Keelan Cole.
- b. John Dorsey should sign the second-most-accurate kicker ever, Dan Bailey. Zane Gonzalez is as shaky as the mohel in “Seinfeld.” Oh, you missed that one?
- c. Cleveland’s defense means business. The Browns will win a few games this year, and soon. Unless they’re incredibly, ridiculously, stupidly cursed.
- d. Things are just peachy in Buffalo, where the Bills are 0-2 and a guy retired at halftime of the home opener.

e. Great stat/factoid by CBS: Blake Bortles has the third-highest career quarterback rushing average, behind Mike Vick and Bobby Douglas. Never would have predicted that.

f. That roughing-the-passer call on Clay Matthews that enabled the Vikings to tie the game late in the fourth quarter at Lambeau? A gift. Not roughing-the-passer. Not close. Well, it's close in the NFL in 2018, but in real football, that should never have been called.

g. Ref Tony Corrente in an NFL pool report, on that call: "When he hit the quarterback, he lifted him and drove him into the ground." Not how I saw it. I saw Matthews hit Kirk Cousins a split second after the ball was released, and not violently drive him to the ground at all.

h. Ravens: 42-42, with one playoff appearance, since winning the Super Bowl in the 2012 season.

i. Geno Atkins has already played 120 snaps in two games, and he looks as dominant as ever.

j. I picked the Bengals to win the AFC North, so I think what we're seeing is real. But I do not expect Cincinnati to average 34 points a game.

k. You've got to be better than that, Joe Flacco.

l. One day, about 15 years from now, a few years after Adam Vinatieri enters the Pro Football Hall of Fame, we'll ask: Who was the better kicker—Vinatieri or Justin Tucker? "Justin Tucker hits 55-yard field goals as casually as I start my car." Great line, Will Brinson.

m. Two games, four sacks for Von Miller. Quite a start. You're catching up, Myles Garrett, but you're not there yet.

n. Pretty nimble, Matt Ryan.

o. If Philip Rivers' weapons stay healthy, the Chargers will make the playoffs. Book it.

p. How scary is the Kansas City offense at full strength? The weaponry is just so diverse and so good, a defense can't devote itself to stopping any one player.

q. Jon Gruden had to have gotten on the plane last night in Denver and said to himself, "This is what I came back for? And now I gotta back on the plane this weekend to go play the 2-0 Dolphins?"

r. Incredible to think the Browns could be 2-0 with a reliable kicker.

s. Houston shouldn't be worried. Concerned, yes. The Texans just lost to Blaine Gabbert, outgained the Titans by 154 yards, got embarrassed on a trick special-teams play, and sacked the quarterback only one time. This team's better than that—or should be at least.

t. Brandin Cooks, 12 catches for 246 yards, a 20.5-yard average through two games. Sean McVay is euphoric.

u. Michael Thomas, 28 catches (in two weeks!) for 269 yards. Sean Payton would be euphoric about that if he weren't so concerned about his drab team.

v. I didn't think the Lions would have allowed 78 points in the first two games, that's for sure.

w. Congrats to Frank Reich, who won his first NFL game as a head coach about 10 miles from where he played college football (FedEx Field to College Park). That's a much better defensive team than we thought in Indy.

3. I think you probably know if Le'Veon Bell holds out till Week 10—the last point at which he can report to the Steelers and still become a 2019 free-agent—he saves the most wear-and-tear on his body heading for the free market next March. That's the only way this holdout, now, makes any sense. Blowing \$853,000 per week by not reporting ... man, that is one luxurious way to go by Bell. Imagine: Bell has to be thinking he's going to make almost \$8 million more next March by not playing the first half of this season than he would by playing through Week 9 and putting up his typical rich numbers. What a weird holdout.

4. I think I'm not trying to be Mr. Negative here, but the Giants looked so bad Sunday night, and so incapable of protecting Eli Manning and blocking for Saquon Barkley, that I could see them starting 0-7. On the docket the next five weeks: at Houston, where the 0-2 Texans will be a desperate team in the home opener; New Orleans at home; at Carolina, with a formidable rush; the Eagles and their deep defensive front on a short-week Thursday at home, and then at Atlanta on a Monday night.

5. I think I want to know who among you had the Bucs as the most explosive team in the NFC with Ryan Fitzpatrick at quarterback after two weeks. Come on. Who?

6. I think the ticky-tack, overly generous, totally field-tilting penalty of defensive pass interference reared its head again Thursday in Cincinnati. Joe Flacco, from the Bengals' 32-yard line, threw a rainbow ball to John Brown in the end zone, and Bengals corner Dre Kirkpatrick grabbed Brown's jersey. Lightly grabbed would be a better term. He certainly didn't impede Brown from making a catch. Mike Pereira, the FOX rules analyst, said in the booth he'd never have thrown the flag: "There was a slight grab, but it didn't affect his ability to get to the pass." And for this marginal call, the Ravens got a first down at the Cincinnati 1-yard line ... and soon had a touchdown before the half, cutting a 21-point deficit to 14.

7. I think even 15 yards, in this case, would have been excessive. But 31? Just way excessive. There are two or three of these every week, and the league refuses to change the rule because the old-timers think defensive coaches would abuse the rule by coaching up corners to grab receivers or tackle them whenever defenders are clearly beaten downfield. Then give back judges the freedom to make flagrant DPI a spot foul; if an official sees a defender tackling a receiver downfield, call the flagrant foul and place the ball at the spot of the foul. But I can tell you this: Last year, I asked Stanford coach David Shaw about whether he sees coaches abuse the rule in college football—which does not have DPI be a spot foul. He said he doesn't see it much at all.

8. I think, finally, for all those who will say leave well enough alone or there's not any real reason to make this change, I'll ask you the same question I asked when the NFL was discussing moving the extra-point ball-placement line from the 2-yard line (where teams were about 99-percent accurate on PATs) to the 15-yard-line. I asked: If you were inventing a game, would you include a play with 99-percent certainty of scoring a point? Of course not. Same in this. In inventing football, would you make the maximum offensive pass-interference call a 10-yard penalty and leave open the penalty yardage for defensive pass

interference—so the same degree of interference on defense could be 55 yards while it maxes out at 10 yards for the offense? You wouldn't do that, if you had any sense of competitive fairness.

9. I think it's pretty interesting and slightly surprising to read this polling number. A Quinnipiac University poll of 1,038 registered voters asked: "Regardless of whether or not you approve of the protests, do you think NFL players have the right to protest in this way or not?" Yes: 67 percent. No: 30 percent. People 18 to 34 were 84 percent in favor; people 65 and over were 57 percent in favor. That says to me the average American is more tolerant about the Kaepernick effect than the public might think. I also realize 30 percent means three out of every 10 people are against the protests. I just thought it would be more than that, based on the hue and cry.

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

a. Magazine Cover Story of the Week: Time with a stunning and smart cover and story on the plight of teachers in America ... including this sad gem from one teacher: "I have a master's degree, 16 years of experience, work two extra jobs and donate blood plasma to pay the bills. I'm a teacher in America."

b. Read these tales from the classrooms of America. They might make you cry, but we need to acknowledge how some of most valuable citizens are valued by their communities across the country.

c. Classic story of the Week: by Tom Junod, for Esquire, "The Falling Man: An unforgettable story." The story goes into painstaking detail about the photo of a man who jumped from the top of one of the Twin Towers when it was hopeless and before the tower fell on Sept. 11, 2001. Just great reporting and empathetic story-telling by one of the American masters today, Junod.

d. Radio Story of the Week: I love "StoryCorps," the five-minute weekly piece airing on NPR's "Morning Edition" every Friday. The series has normal Americans record the stories of their lives, archives them for posterity, and NPR chooses the most compelling and airs them to get us all emotional and feeling. On Friday, we learned about the life and death of Balbir Singh Sodhi, an Indian immigrant who owned a gas station in Arizona. Four days after 9/11, a man drove by the service station, saw Sodhi, wearing a turban, and, apparently assuming Sodhi was Muslim, shot and murdered him. It is a harrowing and emotional tale—one with humanity that will surprise you.

e. I had to play Connect Four with Saquon Barkley on Wednesday. I first had to find out what Connect Four was.

f. How many of you just spat out your coffee?

g. Before Tuesday—when I learned I would be challenging the self-proclaimed GOAT of Connect Four—I did not know what the game was.

h. I heard from several on my NBC crew that this is entirely pathetic.

i. Class move by the Colgate football program, and coach Dan Hunt, after its football game at Furman (in Greenville, S.C., in the path of Hurricane Florence) had to be called off Saturday. "We immediately gave up our hotel rooms so that more rooms are now available to those coming inland," Hunt said. "But we still bought the meals we were going to have and requested that the hotel serve those meals to the people who have been relocated, on us."

j. Anthony Rizzo of the Cubs did something fun the other day. The Cubs had a one-game road makeup at Washington on Thursday, in between home games Wednesday and Friday. So when Rizzo left the clubhouse at Wrigley on Wednesday night for the bus to the airport and the flight to D.C., he brought no clothes. He wore his road gray uniform on the airplane, then to the hotel, then in the hotel, then on the bus to the ballpark in Washington, then while batting leadoff and playing first base in the 10-inning game, then back on the bus to the airport, then on the airplane back to Chicago, then back in Chicago. I am just guessing, but I will guess Rizzo did not wear his uniform to bed. Either at the hotel in Washington or the home back in Illinois.

k. I don't think Boston is the best team in baseball as of this morning—I'll take Houston—but the Red Sox will certainly have a good shot as the team with home-field edge in the American League. I do enjoy following the Red Sox this year, a lot. And not just because of the first 100-win season for the franchise since 1946. It's because of players like utility man Brock Holt. I had a conversation with Sean McVay in training camp about Holt. I told him Cooper Kupp reminded me of Holt—a versatile guy who'll play any role for the team his coach asks.

l. Watched "All The President's Men" the other night for the fifth or sixth time. Seemed appropriate. What a great and inspiring movie.

m. Coffeenerdness: Big fan of the Starbucks Almond Protein Blended Cold Brew, FWIW. Sweet, but not too.

n. So I take it if Villanova beat Temple by two, Temple beat Maryland by 21, and Maryland beat Texas by five, then Villanova (in football, mind you) would beat Texas by four touchdowns.

o. Last two weeks: Foes 107, Rutgers 17 ... and the second drubbing was administered by Kansas. The Big Ten has to be thrilled with the Scarlet Knights. That New York TV market! What an addition!

Monday, Monday

Chicago 27, Seattle 16. But the Bears are going to have to work for it, if only because of the field-position game. Did you see what rookie freak punter Michael Dickson did for the Seahawks last week in his NFL debut at Denver? His six punts went for 60, 59, 46, 69, 57 and 63—with as combined return of nine yards on the six punts. Net punting average: 57.5 yards. Dickson might have a chance in this league. But the bigger story tonight, unless you're Rich Eisen or Chris Kluwe, is going to be whether the Seahawks can find a way to keep Khalil Mack (in his Soldier Field debut), Akiem Hicks, Leonard Floyd and Roy (Where Did He Come From) Robertson-Harris out of Russell Wilson's face. I doubt they can.

The Week Ahead

Thursday ... New York City. Today marks Day 120: Commissioner Held Hostage. Since Roger Goodell spoke at the NFL spring meetings May 23, he has not made a public pronouncement of any sort, from what I can tell. No fan forums (he always does these things, in season and in training camp), no training-camp confabs with teams or reporters, nothing on opening night (though he was in Philly for it), nothing on the day earlier this month when his tenure entered its 13th season. This is very unlike Goodell, who, despite being the most booed commissioner in modern sports, has always faced the music regularly. I can't recall him being in hiding this long, ever.

Thursday ... Cleveland. Be still, all Namathian hearts. The New York Jets, on the first day of Week 3, Anno Domini 2018, could be 2-1. Jets at Browns, 8:20 p.m. See, Joe Buck and Troy Aikman? You thought you'd just be doing a crappy September Thursday-nighter, knocking two not-ready-for-prime-timers off the NFL's list (the league likes to give all 32 teams at least one prime-time window) before the records got too garish. Now? Time to make Sam Darnold famous.

Sunday ... Detroit. Yikes. The NFL thought it was doing the Lions a favor by putting their opener on Monday night football and their second home game on Sunday night football ... against the Patriots and Matt Patricia's mentor, Bill Belichick. Want a do-over, Howard Katz? Lions, 0-2. First two games: Foes 78, Lions 44.

The Adieu Haiku
Roughing the passer
is really out of control.
QBs: china dolls.

NFL sets new mark for early-season ties

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
September 17, 2018

Ty Webb may have had a lot of nice ties, but there's no such thing as a nice tie in football.

The NFL has had two not-so-nice outcomes in each of the first two weeks. It's the first time since 1971 that the NFL opened a season with a tie in Week One and a tie in Week Two.

Back then, games tied at the end of regulation ended in a tie. Starting in 1974, the NFL added an overtime period. For more than four decades, the extra session lasted 15 minutes. In 2017, the NFL reduced overtime to 10 minutes.

Last week, the Steelers and Browns tied at 21. On Sunday, the Vikings and Packers tied at 29. Forty-seven years ago, the Dolphins and Broncos tied at 10 in Week One, and the Falcons and Rams tied at 20-20 in Week Two.