

Broncos Journal: Phillip Lindsay debunking narrative of smaller running backs

By Ryan O'Halloran

Denver Post

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Fans of Broncos rookie running back Phillip Lindsay should get used to hearing platitudes about him from opposing defensive coordinators.

"Lindsay is a rocket!" Baltimore defensive play-caller Don Martindale told reporters Thursday. "You always have to be aware. Your antennae go up when he's in the game."

Lindsay has made that kind of impact through two games, rushing 29 times for 178 yards entering Sunday's matchup against the Ravens.

A surprising part of the Broncos' 2-0 start is how much Lindsay has been in the game — 54 of 140 snaps on offense (38.6 percent) — and how much he has been involved — 32 total touches.

Lindsay and the Broncos are on the cusp of rare territory, if not already there.

Players of Lindsay's size — he is listed at 5-foot-9, 190 pounds — aren't regarded as bruising backs, capable of carrying a large share of the carries and running between the tackles. The theory is smaller guys take bigger hits and aren't capable of bouncing off defenders to claw for more yards.

Lindsay is changing the narrative.

There are few comparisons to Lindsay, which makes it difficult to project how many touches could be too many.

Using Pro Football Reference, the search included being 5-foot-8 or shorter and 195 pounds or lighter and rushing for 2,500 career yards.

Only four players met the requirement: Joe Morris (5-7/195, 5,585 yards), Justin Forsett (5-8/195, 3,890), Darren Sproles (5-6/190, 3,376) and Buddy Young (5-4/175, 2,727).

Telling about the quartet's career statistics is their average carries per game: Morris 12.8, Forsett 6.7, Sproles 4.0 and Young 5.7.

Lindsay is at 14.5 carries per game. It's unlikely he will keep up that pace since only four players in the NFL averaged that many last season over 16 games (at least 232 carries).

But Lindsay may be on his way to creating a new kind of back. Maybe he is more of a runner than a gadget guy.

My camp theory about Lindsay: He would make the team because the Broncos were using him in too many different situations during practice and the preseason games to not be carving out/creating a role for him.

Where I was wrong: I thought Lindsay would strictly be a change-of-pace player. Motion outside to create a passing game mismatch; someone who would get his carries to the perimeter and outside the basic structure of the Broncos' run game. I thought he'd have a maximum of 4-5 touches per game, figuring offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave would have a special set of plays for him, but little more.

Lindsay is tied with the Giants' Saquon Barkley, Oakland's Marshawn Lynch and Chicago's Jordan Howard — three no-doubt featured backs — for 14th in carries. Lindsay also has three catches. I figured he would be around 10 carries and eight catches through two games. Got that backward.

And here's where we enter the surprising part of the Phillip Phenomenon: Lindsay is being used as if he was a significantly bigger player.

Twenty of Lindsay's 29 rushing attempts can be considered "inside" runs, between the hash marks or the offensive tackles. He has gained at least five yards on 10 of those attempts, including last week's 53-yard run.

The Broncos don't feel Lindsay needs a fullback in front of him. Only four of his carries have included a blocking back. He has been lined up in the I-Formation (quarterback under center, running back seven yards behind the line of scrimmage) on 19 of his rushes.

For sure, Musgrave has kept some of the wrinkles traditionally associated with a player of Lindsay's size and quickness. Against Seattle, quarterback Case Keenum stepped right before pitching left to Lindsay, who gained 14 yards when he beat defensive end Frank Clark to the edge. And Lindsay has had success on delayed plays (including the 53-yarder).

The more Lindsay has been given, the more he has thrived. And it hasn't changed his mindset.

"He's still that same Phil," Musgrave said. "I think he's really focused. In the meetings, he's outstanding — bright-eyed, ready to take notes and retaining the game plans we're installing. He's keeping on, keeping on."

Broncos take early NFL lead in third-down stop rate: “We’re hungry for the ball.”

By Kyle Fredrickson
Denver Post
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The Broncos take some portion of practice each day to address any variety of third-down scenarios, but not until the defense recites a credo. You call it third down. Denver calls it a money down.

“We huddle,” linebacker Todd Davis said, “and let everybody know, ‘This is where we’ve got to win. This is where it counts.’”

Through two games, the Broncos’ pockets are flush with money-down cash.

Opponents attempted to move the chains 22 times on third and succeeded on just five occasions — a measly 22.7-percent success rate, lowest among all NFL defenses entering Week 3. The combination of Seattle’s Russell Wilson and Oakland’s Derek Carr on third went 6-of-13 passing for 51 yards, one touchdown and one interception with a 42.9 quarterback rating. Unsurprisingly, no Broncos’ defender has blown up third better than Von Miller, with three of his four league-leading sacks featured on such plays.

The secret recipe to halting third-down attempts?

“I think just great execution,” Miller said.

Broncos coach Vance Joseph added it’s simply the result of “pass rush and scheme.”

“We have a really good system of coverage versus rush,” Joseph said. “A couple tricks here and there, but we can rush four. If we win first and second down and it’s a longer third down, we can play coverage and rush four. Most teams can’t do that, but we can.”

The critical element is distance to the first-down marker, and for Denver, the longer the better. Here’s the yardage breakdown of opponent third-down conversion success through the Broncos’ first two games. Three-or-fewer yards to gain: 3 of 10. Four-to-seven-yards to gain: 1 of 3. Eight-or-more yards to gain: 1 of 9.

Quarterbacks under pressure are liable to force throws on long money downs, especially when the Broncos can send any combination of Miller, Bradley Chubb, Shane Ray and Shaquil Barrett rushing off the edge with two interior linemen.

“We’re hungry for the ball,” safety Will Parks said. “We look forward to third-and-long because we get to send the dogs.”

Don’t expect Baltimore’s offense to lack confidence Sunday converting its own third downs, either. The Ravens so far succeeded on 13-of-30 attempts (43.3 percent), the sixth-best rate in the league.

Baltimore has also scored on all nine of its trips to the red zone. Denver defensive coordinator Joe Woods said that production stems from one source — quarterback Joe Flacco.

“Obviously, they have a good scheme, but he’s a smart quarterback,” Woods said. “He understands what he’s looking at, he gets rid of the ball on time.”

The one constant for opponent third downs at Mile High is a showering of fan noise unlike anything else during the course of game day. The press box even shakes. It’s what makes each and every money-down payout so memorable.

“That’s when the stadium is really rocking,” Davis said. “We definitely love that energy.”

Broncos Briefs: Offense looks for faster start; Veldheer cleared from concussion protocol

By Ryan O'Halloran

Denver Post

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The Broncos open their road schedule Sunday at Baltimore. Here is a Week 3 whip-around:

Pressing question. Can the Broncos start better than in Weeks 1-2?

The Broncos have punted on their opening possession in both games (seven-and-punt and three-and-punt). They're not alone — 19 teams are also scoreless on their opening drives.

Last year, the Broncos had only one opening-drive touchdown and three field goals.

The Broncos got away with playing uphill in their two home wins. It could be a different story on the road.

Against Seattle, the Broncos converted a third-and-14 on their first drive to reach their 39 before a punt. Against Oakland, the Broncos could not convert a third-and-5.

"Our thought was to run the ball (on Oakland) a little bit and they were pretty stout," offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave said. "We found some more air in the front when we got them to get into a different front (with) different personnel. And then (we) also started throwing the ball down the field rather than just nibbling at them."

That should be on Musgrave's opening script. Get the Ravens into their sub personnel so Royce Freeman and Phillip Lindsay have some "air" to run against. And maybe open with a downfield shot.

Spotlight player. Bradley Roby's journey as the Broncos' No. 2 cornerback has been difficult so far.

Week 1: Seattle was 2 of 2 for 31 yards (20-yard touchdown) against Roby in man coverage.

Week 2: Oakland was 6 of 6 for 46 yards against him in man coverage.

The Ravens' plan should be to run personnel that forces cornerback Chris Harris to the slot and then go after Roby and Adam Jones/Tramaine Brock/Isaac Yiadom outside.

"The thing with Roby is always being consistent," defensive coordinator Joe Woods said. "He has the ability to be a true No. 1 corner and I hold him accountable to that level. I expect him to shut down receivers. I expect him to make big plays. He's doing well — he can just be a little more consistent."

Watch for ...The Broncos ending Baltimore's perfect red zone percentage. The Ravens enter Sunday with nine touchdowns in nine red zone possessions.

Citing statistics, Broncos coach Vance Joseph said Baltimore is the first team in 20 years to be at least 9 for 9 through two games.

“That’s amazing,” Joseph said. “They’re running the football (and) passing the football so it’s going to be a challenge, but we’re looking forward to it.”

Seattle and Oakland went a combined 2 of 4 in the red zone against the Broncos.

“We’ve kind of figured out what we’re good at in the red zone and that’s helped us play better there,” Joseph said.

Against Seattle, Harris and safety Justin Simmons had pass break-ups. Against Oakland, they stopped Marshawn Lynch for a four-yard loss on a third down swing pass.

The Broncos have not called a red zone blitz this season.

Injury report. The Broncos listed four players as questionable to face the Ravens: Jones (thigh), right tackle Jared Veldheer (concussion), linebacker Brandon Marshall (knee) and safety Dymonte Thomas (abdomen).

Joseph said Veldheer is “totally cleared from the (concussion) protocol and ready to go,” and he is “OK” with Jones and Marshall playing even though they missed practice time this week.

“They know our system,” Joseph said. “Their health is the most important (thing). It’s only Week 3 so we’re being smart with our guys so we don’t lose them long-term.”

If Jones is inactive, the Broncos will have a new punt returner. Special teams coordinator Tom McMahon was mum about a replacement although Lindsay and receiver DaeSean Hamilton caught punts during training camp.

“We feel good about what our plan is,” McMahon said. “We got it all handled.”

Broncos Game Plan: How Denver matches against Baltimore, injury report and predictions

By Kyle Fredrickson

Denver Post

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GAME PLAN

WHEN THE RAVENS RUN

The Ravens will split carries between running backs Alex Collins and Buck Allen following an injured-reserve designation for running back Kenneth Dixon. Collins, who has been dealing with an illness, has big-play potential each time he touches the football. However, Baltimore's ground game has averaged only 3.3 yards per carry and 91.5 per game. The Broncos held Seattle running back Marshawn Lynch to just 65 yards on 18 carries. Denver's physicality up front should bode well for stopping the run. Edge: Broncos

WHEN THE RAVENS PASS

Baltimore quarterback Joe Flacco threw 55 times in an 11-point loss at Cincinnati last week as the Ravens failed to climb out from a large early deficit. He finished with 376 yards passing and two touchdowns, but also had two interceptions and completed less than 60 percent of his passes. Flacco can't do it all, especially with a retooled wide receivers room featuring Michael Crabtree, Willie Snead and John Brown. Keep an eye on rookie tight end Mark Andrews as another downfield threat. Denver has clear issues with cornerback depth outside of Chris Harris Jr.; Raiders quarterback Derek Carr mostly shredded the Broncos' secondary with the quick game last week. Edge: Even

WHEN THE BRONCOS RUN

Rookie running back Phillip Lindsay burst onto the NFL scene with 178 yards rushing in his first two games. Now is when it gets interesting. Opposing teams will better game-plan against Denver's shifty hometown hero moving forward. How will Lindsay respond? We'll begin to find out against a Ravens rushing defense that in Week 1 shut down Bills running back LeSean McCoy (7 carries, 22 yards), but found less success against the Bengals' combination of Joe Mixon/Giovani Bernard (27 carries, 111 yards). Even if Baltimore manages to cool Lindsay's hot hand, though, fellow rookie running back Royce Freeman appears more than capable of being the Broncos' bellcow. Edge: Broncos

WHEN THE BRONCOS PASS

Quarterback Case Keenum's performance through two games landed somewhere between late-game hero and turnover liability. Keenum threw four picks, but also used his arm to manufacture comeback victories. Wide receiver Demaryius Thomas must fix his drop issue (five total), Emmanuel Sanders must stay hot (16.5 yards/pass) and rookie Courtland Sutton is a breakout game waiting to happen. Plus, the Ravens will be without their top cornerback, Jimmy Smith, who is on the third of a four-game suspension for violating the league's personal conduct policy. Keenum has not been perfect, but he has plenty of weapons to thrive with Sunday should he take care of the football. Edge: Broncos

SPECIAL TEAMS

Like Denver, the Ravens turned to an undrafted rookie free agent, Janarion Grant, to handle kick return duties and he's averaged 28 yards per attempt. Also like Denver, the Ravens have an exceptional kicker, Justin Tucker (3-for-3). The Broncos should feel confident in their advantage at punter with Marquette King. And, don't forget about linebacker Shaquil Barrett's blocked extra point against Oakland. The Broncos are enjoying early momentum on special teams.

Edge: Broncos

THREE THINGS TO WATCH

1. Cornerback depth. Denver's pass defense is quickly losing its "No Fly Zone" reputation. Cornerbacks Chris Harris Jr. Bradley Roby, Tramaine Brock and Adam Jones each faced their share of troubles in coverage after two games and Baltimore quarterback Joe Flacco is more than capable of exploiting similar lapses. A consistent Broncos pass rush would certainly help the secondary's cause.

2. Ravens trickery. Don't be surprised when Baltimore trots out a two-quarterback set, Flacco alongside 2016 Heisman Trophy winner Lamar Jackson, as an unpredictable wrinkle. Baltimore has yet to hit the big play with Jackson on the field, but his acumen for highlight-reel moments in college went unquestioned. The Broncos' defense must stay disciplined.

3. Keenum's connections. Broncos quarterback Case Keenum's favorite target through two games: wide receiver Demaryius Thomas (21). But will that trend continue with DT's drops? Wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders has been dominant nearly every time he's touched the football and rookie Courtland Sutton continues to show promise. Let's see how that chemistry develops in Week 3.

INJURY REPORT

Broncos: Questionable (four) — LB Brandon Marshall (knee), RT Jared Veldheer (concussion), CB Adam Jones (thigh) and safety Dymonte Thomas (abdomen).

Baltimore: TBD

STAFF PREDICTIONS

Mark Kiszla

Ravens 18, Broncos 17

Can't erase the memories. Broncos have nasty habit of getting their butts kicked in Baltimore (five losses since 2000, by average margin of 17 points).

Record: 2-0

Ryan O'Halloran

Broncos 26, Ravens 22

Case Keenum plays turnover-free for the first time in three games, Royce Freeman eclipses 100 yards rushing and Bradley Roby posts an interception.

Record: 2-0

Kyle Fredrickson

Broncos 31, Ravens 28

Courtland Sutton gets his first NFL touchdown on a critical fourth-quarter red zone fade route from Case Keenum. Von Miller sacks Joe Flacco twice.

Record: 2-0

Denver Post Week 3 NFL Picks

By Ryan O'Halloran
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Game of the week

San Francisco (1-1) at Kansas City (2-0)

The 49ers are a 6 1/2-point underdog. Kansas City opens its home season after wins at the Chargers and Pittsburgh. Quarterback Patrick Mahomes has taken the NFL by storm (10 TD, 0 INT). The Chiefs' offense warms up for their trip to Denver in Week 4 by winning a shootout (38-33) over the 49ers.

Chiefs 38, 49ers 33.

Record: 1-1.

Lock of the week

Dallas (1-1) at Seattle (0-2)

The Seahawks are a 1 1/2-point home favorite. More importantly, they are a desperate team after starting with road losses at Denver and Chicago. They haven't started 0-3 since 2002. A key for Seattle is leaning on running back Chris Carson, who was limited to only six carries in Week 2.

Seahawks 27, Cowboys 17.

Record: 0-2.

Upset of the week

New Orleans (1-1) at Atlanta (1-1)

The Saints are a three-point underdog and were upset at home by Tampa Bay in Week 1 and needed multiple missed kicks to squeak by Cleveland in Week 2. We like this matchup for the Saints, specifically receiver Michael Thomas (28 catches) against Atlanta's defense.

Saints 30, Falcons 23.

Record: 2-0.

Vance Joseph: "Last year is dead and gone"

By Mike Klis

9 News

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Comparisons almost always involve last year, maybe because it's easy.

It takes a little more research to compare these 2018 Broncos to the 1991 Broncos, but it's worth it.

In 1990, the Broncos were 5-11. The next year, they went 12-4 and made it to the AFC Championship Game.

The 2017 Broncos were 5-11. The next year, which is this year, the 2018 Broncos are off to a 2-0 start. Instead, all the focus this week has been on how the Broncos' ship began to sink at this time last year.

The Broncos are 2-0 and are about to play their first road game in week three.

They were 2-0 last year when they played their first road game in week three.

From there it gets ugly. The Broncos lost their first road game at Buffalo last year and finished 5-11.

Among the differences this year is the Broncos have Case Keenum at quarterback, Bill Musgrave at offensive coordinator and the Baltimore Ravens as their week 3 road opponent.

"Last year's team is dead and gone," said Broncos head coach Vance Joseph. "We're a new team, we have different players, we have a different culture and we have a different mindset. We're coaching different. Last year is last year and this year is this year."

"It's going to be a challenge for us to win that game on Sunday, but again, we're looking forward to it. We haven't played our best ball yet. We're 2-0 and it's come down to two game-winning drives, so we're looking forward to playing better football Sunday. We'll see what happens."

Jones misses practice again; Veldheer cleared

The Broncos listed four players as questionable for the game Sunday, none of them Keenum. The four: Starting right tackle Jared Veldheer (concussion), starting linebacker Brandon Marshall (knee), No. 3 cornerback/punt returner Adam Jones (hamstring/thigh), and backup safety Dymonte Thomas (oblique strain).

Veldheer has been completely cleared from the concussion protocol so it looks good for him playing Sunday. Marshall should also play, although rookie linebacker Josey Jewell will get plenty of defensive snaps.

The players listed as questionable who are seriously in question are Jones and Dymonte Thomas because they didn't practice Friday. The Broncos are expected to dress rookie cornerback Isaac Yiadom for the first time this season. The question is who would replace Jones as the Broncos' punt returner.

The options would be, in no particular order (although maybe): 1. Have Jones play and limit him to punt returns; 2. Promote Isaiah McKenzie from the practice squad; or 3. Insert one of two rookies, Phillip Lindsay or DaeSean Hamilton, for their first punt return test.

Broncos ready for Ravens' red-zone 'challenge'; Vance Joseph keeps backup punt return option secret

By Nicki Jhabvala
The Athletic
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In late April, less than a week before the 2018 draft, the Broncos padded the contract of cornerback Chris Harris Jr. to give him an extra \$3 million in incentives.

"He deserved it," general manager John Elway said, because of the way he played through some difficult seasons and because of what would be asked of him in 2018, as the true No. 1 corner of the Broncos' secondary.

The bulk of the incentives were tied to performance — interceptions, all-pro honors, playing time, wins, the postseason — and Harris didn't want it any other way.

"Last year was unacceptable as a team," he said. "This year I'm putting that in my contract to make sure these guys are on the same page as me, how I think on the field and prepare them for games."

Harris, never one to sugarcoat his assessment of his team or others, would go on to say he spent the majority of his offseason pissed off and angry about the Broncos' 5-11 finish in 2017. He would go on to say how he planned to get the young players in the defensive backfield on the same page because often they weren't last season. And he would go on to say that the defense had plenty of room to improve, despite finishing among the top five in total yards, passing yards and rushing yards allowed.

"It was our red-zone defense," he said. "You see us on the field, you see us on third down, we were tough. We still finished top five in a lot of categories, but our red zone was terrible. We gave up too many passing touchdowns, guys weren't on the same page, we just panicked a lot in that red zone. If we can fix that and continue to play a high level inside the field, like we were first, second and third (downs), and tighten up our red zone we'll get back to being dominant."

Through two games this year, the Broncos' red-zone defense is tied for 12th in the league, allowing opponents to score on 50 percent of their red-zone drives. But they face their biggest test to date in Baltimore on Sunday.

The Ravens are one of only two teams, with Kansas City, to score a touchdown on every drive inside their opponent's 20. But where the Chiefs have six red-zone touchdowns, the Ravens have nine.

"What I'm seeing is good players," Baltimore coach John Harbaugh told local media earlier this week. "I think we have guys making plays, and we ran the ball in a few times, and that's big to our running backs and our offensive line. But man, you don't want to start patting yourself on the back. This league is too tough."

The Ravens have scored five passing touchdowns and four rushing touchdowns in the red zone from seven different players.

But the Ravens' red-zone success really dates back to last season. Over their last seven games, they've scored 23 touchdowns on 29 trips to the red zone.

Broncos defensive coordinator Joe Woods believes it starts with one guy.

"(Joe) Flacco. Obviously they have a good scheme, but he's a smart quarterback," Woods said. "He understands what he's looking at, he gets rid of the ball on time. I think a big thing is just him — just execution."

So far this season, Flacco has completed 8-of-11 passes (72.7 percent) for 55 yards and four touchdowns when in the red zone.

The Broncos' defense has allowed two touchdowns and two field goals on four red-zone trips by opponents. The first was a 15-yard completion by Seattle tight end Will Dissly, who scored on the first play after an interception by Case Keenum in the first quarter.

The second was a 1-yard touchdown run by Oakland's Marshawn Lynch, which was spurred by a Broncos penalty on an earlier third down.

"We've kind of figured out what we're good at in the red zone the last two weeks and that's helped us play better there," coach Vance Joseph said. "Obviously, (the Ravens are) 9-for-9. It's the first team in 20 years to be that way in the first two games. That's amazing. They're running the football, they're passing the football, so it's going to be a challenge, but we're looking forward to the challenge."

Game status updates

The Broncos head to Baltimore with four players questionable to play: right tackle Jared Veldheer, who suffered a concussion last Sunday against Oakland; linebacker Brandon Marshall (knee); cornerback Adam Jones (thigh) and safety Dymonte Thomas (abdomen).

Veldheer cleared the concussion protocol, Joseph said, and practiced Friday, an indication he could be given the OK to start Sunday.

"Three of these guys are veteran players, so to play without practice for Adam or even B-Marsh, I'm OK with that," Joseph said. "It's experienced football players, they know our system. Obviously their health is most important. It's only Week 3, so we're being smart with our guys so we don't lose these guys long-term. We're just being smart. If they're ready to go on Sunday, we'll see."

The Broncos have been reluctant to reveal their backup option should Jones be unable to play and return punts. Phillip Lindsay is listed as the backup punt returner on the depth chart, but he is also the starting kick returner and, through two weeks, the Broncos' most valuable rusher.

"Right now I'm the only option," special teams coordinator Tom McMahon joked. "We don't know. We're going to have to just go find one, I guess. No, we have plenty of options. We'll be fine."

With Lindsay's contributions on offense, Joseph said they would monitor his workload to see if warrants reducing his play on special teams. As of now, though, his status as the No. 3 back, starting kick returner and gunner on coverage remain in place.

“We’ll see how much his workload increases. We’ll see,” Joseph said. “Right now, it’s really three backs that are working for us. Who’s hot that day gets more reps. The game plan determines who gets more turns, but right now I think we’re comfortable with him being a gunner, being an L5 on kickoff and also being a runner for us. We’ll see as the season progresses how much his workload increases to how much he plays on teams.”

Milestone watch

Notable figures to know as the Broncos prepare to face the Ravens

– The Broncos are looking to hold an opponent to 300 or fewer net passing yards for the 37th consecutive game, which would be the longest streak by an NFL team since the Colts (52) from 2005-08.

-Should Adam Jones play, he needs 68 punt return yards to become the 39th player in league history to reach 2,000 for his career.

-Quarterback Case Keenum needs only one passing touchdown to hit 50 in his career.

-Receiver Emmanuel Sanders (317 catches as a Bronco) needs 10 catches to tie former Broncos WR Brandon Marshall for ninth place on the franchise’s all-time receptions list.

-Linebacker Von Miller (87.5) needs 1.5 sacks to tie Ken Harvey (89) for 47th place on the NFL’s all-time sack list. Miller needs 10.5 sacks to pass Simon Fletcher (97.5) and become the Broncos’ all-time leader.

-The Broncos have the league’s best third-down defense (22.7 percent) through the first two weeks of the season.

-The Broncos are 2-0 for the sixth consecutive year, the longest active streak in the NFL.

-The Broncos are 109-56-3 (.659) in the month of September since the 1970 merger. It’s the second-best win percentage in the NFL in that span, behind only the Cowboys (108-54, .667)

-The Broncos have a 32-game win streak when winning the turnover battle. The streak dates back to 2012 and is the longest such streak in the NFL since Green Bay won 34 consecutive games (2009-13).

-The Broncos lead the league with 15 big plays (20 yards or more) so far this season.

-Denver’s 157 average rushing yards through the first two weeks rank second in the league, behind Houston’s 157.5.

Rookies pay dividends for Broncos in fast start

By Troy Renck
KMGH
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The ghost class left it impossible to believe the illusion of adequacy.

The Broncos drafted athletes in 2017, taking chances on raw players who lit up stopwatches and possessed measurables. It backfired, leading to a philosophical shift. Last spring, the Broncos removed players with red flags, stayed away from projects. They leaned on players with layers of experience and clear leadership qualities. Every drafted player but one served as a captain. And their top undrafted prospect, Phillip Lindsay, served as the heartbeat for the University of Colorado for several seasons.

The strategy paid off.

With a disciplined group on and off the field, the Broncos have microwaved the development of their rookies. It's too early to say they mirror the New Orleans Saints' 2017 haul, but the contributions remain noteworthy and show no signs of diminishing.

It starts with Lindsay. He ranks third in the NFL in rushing. And he represents the first undrafted free agent to eclipse 100 yards from scrimmage in each of his first two games. He symbolizes the rookies who arrived with their heads down, voices quiet and sleeves rolled up.

"We understand each other. I think we all kind of come from the same backgrounds. We've been captains on teams. And it's an older rookie class," said Lindsay, who has 178 yards rushing. "We enjoy each other. And we enjoy the grind."

Therein lies the difference. This class puts in the work and eschews the attitude of entitlement. As a result, the rookies have meshed well with veterans, earning their trust, something largely absent a year ago.

Lindsay has earned respect with his tenacity and humility.

"I walk by him and I am like, 'Hey Big Stuff, how's it going?' I try to pump him up a little bit," All-Pro Von Miller said. "And it's just another day in the park. It's definitely refreshing to have guys like that on the team."

The players realize the spotlight has found Lindsay. There is no jealousy given his path to success.

"There's a lot of rave about him, and rightfully so. The kid has worked hard from the first day he got here," safety Justin Simmons said. "He's a Colorado guy, so I know everybody in Colorado is pulling for him. And we are pulling for him."

The Broncos' rookie impact goes deeper than Lindsay. Starting running back Royce Freeman has 99 yards on 23 carries. Bradley Chubb owns a half sack, and has been sound in rush defense. Courtland Sutton has three catches for 54 yards. Inside linebacker Josey Jewell played 13 snaps last week, including

a chunk in the fourth quarter, and could see even more time as Brandon Marshall attempts to return from a sore knee. And undrafted free agent Tim Patrick set up the game-winning field goal.

In all, nine Broncos have made their debut this season, among them tight end Jake Butt (he sat out last season while recovering from knee surgery) and linebacker Keishawn Bierria.

Footnotes

Cornerback Adam Jones (quad) missed his third straight practice with quad tightness. He remains hopeful of playing, but could be a game time decision. Tramaine Brock will serve as the top nickelback if Jones is unavailable. ... Linebacker Brandon Marshall (knee) practiced on a limited basis. He told Denver7 he will be ready to play. However, the team could decide to sit him to avoid a lingering injury. It is an issue that demands watching given how Jewell began to see more time last week. ... The Broncos have not declared a punt returner if Jones is sidelined. They haven't ruled out using Lindsay, who continues to embrace special teams work. "He's had the same attitude. I am going out on a limb, but I think 10 years from now Phil is going to be the same guy he was as a rookie. He has a gift of knowing himself, trusting himself. He's very comfortable in his own shoes. I respect the heck out of that."

Keenum and Thomas haven't found a rhythm yet

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
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As a combo, the Denver Broncos' two highest-paid players aren't exactly money yet.

Although Demaryius Thomas caught the winning touchdown pass from Case Keenum in their opener, the pair making a combined \$27 million this season have 10 missed connections so far.

That's almost as many connections — 11 for 81 yards — as they've made together.

Calculating incompletions where he got both hands on the ball, Thomas leads the league with five drops so far.

Thomas had two early drops in the opener but bounced back to catch a 4-yard dart from Keenum to beat the Seahawks in Week 1. Thomas dropped three passes against the Raiders last week, when he had five receptions for 18 yards. Only four times has he had fewer yards in a game since becoming a starter in 2012.

His biggest drop last week came with Denver at midfield, trailing by two points with 22 seconds left. Thomas sprinted up the right sideline and deked his defender into leaving him wide open. Keenum delivered a pass on target and on time, but the ball sailed through Thomas' hands.

On the next play, Keenum hooked up with Tim Patrick for his first NFL reception, a 26-yarder that set up Brandon McManus' 36-yard field goal that beat the Raiders 20-19.

Thomas' early-season troubles are reminiscent of 2015, when he dropped eight passes before November, then added five drops against New England in a game when his sole catch proved crucial to Denver's win in overtime that helped propel the Broncos to the Super Bowl 50 title.

Thomas said his only focus this week was on trying to help his team out Sunday when the Broncos (2-0) visit Baltimore (1-1), and his latest bout of drops apparently hasn't alarmed his coaches.

"He's OK," coach Vance Joseph said, adding that the coaching staff can provide a boost by calling his number early and often.

"It's our job to get him going early and to get him his confidence early," Joseph said. "When guys go through a whole half and have one attempt or two attempts, that's tough for receivers. If he has his first attempt and he drops it or it's a bad ball, that's a mind war. It's our job to get him going early. It's his job to play with confidence, and he will."

Offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave said he believes that corrections need to be made in the flow of the game without regard to a specific player who might be struggling with catches or confidence.

"We're just trying to give everybody the ball," Musgrave said. "We don't want to start worrying about one guy here ... We've just got to let the ball find everybody in the system, whether it's handing off or throwing it. If we do a good job, I think everybody will get their touches."

Keenum sees any hiccups right now as the inevitable crimps that will dissipate as the offense develops.

"The team that you are in September is always very different then the team you are in December," Keenum said. "I think that's why you come out every day and practice. You grind away at those little itty-bitty details, mechanics and footwork, routes and protections, so that you can keep building this library, keep building this trust, keep building this chemistry with these guys with the offensive line, the running backs, the receivers.

"All so you can trust on that when it comes down to December, January, and hopefully February."

ROUGHING RULE

Joseph said he understands why the league is emphasizing roughing calls on quarterbacks this season.

"They want the quarterback not to be punished. Back when I played, that was the key to the game: How much can you punish the quarterback? But it's changed," Joseph said. "They want you to sack the quarterback and turn your body and not put your full body weight on the guy."

Joseph said he concurs with the league's efforts to keep QBs safe.

"I don't want Case hit that way. So, it goes both ways with the players. So, I agree with it," Joseph said. "We haven't had a play yet that has cost us. So, I don't have a problem with it. That could change in two weeks. But it's for the safety of the position."

Under the Headset: Zach Azzanni

By Zach Pereles
DenverBroncos.com
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Zach Azzanni's been all about wide receivers his entire football career. After playing the position at Central Michigan from 1994-98, he started his coaching career with the wideouts at Valparaiso University. As a college coach, the St. Louis native worked with wide receivers at Bowling Green, Central Michigan, Florida, Western Kentucky, Wisconsin and Tennessee. Last season, Azzanni made the transition to the NFL and worked with the Chicago Bears. This year, he brings his wealth of experience to Denver, hoping to help rejuvenate the team's passing game. We talked with Azzanni about his transition to the pro level, how he's built the relationship between his veteran pass catchers and his rookies, and what he's learned over his nearly two decades as a coach.

Zach Pereles: This is your second year coaching in the pros. What's the biggest difference you've noticed going from the college game to the pro game?

Zach Azzanni: "There are a couple of differences. Number one is time. Time is different. We get more time with these guys than we do in college. It's all football. There's no talk of academics or study hall or anything like that. It's just Football 101 every day, which is a big change from college because you're not making recruiting calls at night. You're working on third downs and how to scheme red zone and those things. On the field, it's smaller numbers. How you practice is a little bit different. You can't wear these guys out. It's a long season. You don't have 12 scholarship wideouts. You've got five if you're lucky. [We're] really, really specific on what we do during practice and how we do it."

ZP: You came here this offseason with a couple veterans in place in Emmanuel Sanders and Demaryius Thomas. How do you think they helped your transition out here?

ZA: "Football's football. How they've helped is just being great leaders and great examples to the young guys and just buying into a guy they don't know: me. I couldn't appreciate them more for their attitudes and their effort and how they're being leaders in that room and having my back. Even for some things that they might not have ever done before, they're giving it a try and jumping in. I've got a great amount of respect for those guys. They've caught a ton of balls in this league. The give and take on 'Hey, what do you think works?' on both sides is outstanding."

ZP: Emmanuel Sanders has talked about how your relationship has developed. From your standpoint, how do you think it's come together over the offseason and into the regular season?

ZA: "You know what, it's come a long way, and relationships are built through good and bad, whether it's family — brothers and sisters, mom and dads with their kids, cousins, whatever it is, friends. It's not just all lollipops and puppy dogs. This is football. We're all competitive. I have a certain way I like to do things, and he has a certain way he likes to do things. So together we've come full circle and said, 'Hey, we're in this together, and he can help me and I can help him.' We've gotten to know each other — not just football, just about each other. And that's how relationships are built and trust is built. It's built over time. It's not built overnight. Again, I couldn't say more great things about those two guys and our room. It's been great."

ZP: You have those veterans, but you also have a lot of youth in that room, too. Have you noticed guys like Courtland [Sutton] and DaeSean [Hamilton] taking the advice of those older guys, and how do you think that relationship has grown?

ZA: "It's a really unique group. I'm not sure there's another room like it in the NFL. When I say that I mean two ... vets that have been to Super Bowls and Pro Bowls and two complete rookies who don't know anything about the NFL, so there's really no in-between. And then you throw Tim Patrick in there, who kind of bounced around on the practice squad. So it's a very unique gap right there, and it's been really neat because I have to focus on the specifics for the young guys, and it's made the old guys go back to the fundamentals and back to the basics and really hone in on those little things you take for granted when you get a little bit older because you've done it so much. And they've been great helping those young guys and teaching them those specifics and details."

ZP: You've been around a lot of pretty accomplished coaches, especially during your college coaching years. Is there any specific coach that's had the biggest impact on your coaching style or your coaching path in general?

ZA: "I've been very, very blessed and fortunate. They've all had a thumbprint on how I coach for sure. Starting out with Coach [Urban] Meyer through Coach [Butch] Jones and Coach [Bret] Bielema and Willie Taggart and the list goes on — Coach [John] Fox last year. I've taken good from all those guys, taken things that I like. They've all helped my style of coaching. To say one guy's had one thing more than the other, probably not. I've taken a little bit from everyone because they're all so great in their own regard. I've been a sponge with each one of them."

ZP: This team's had a couple of down years, but you have the veterans who have been in the playoffs and the Super Bowls before. Do you notice a hunger and a focus and a drive around this group and especially those veterans this offseason?

ZA: "Absolutely. I can't comment on last season; I wasn't here. [But] since I've been here, there's been a big-time hunger. You can tell there's a chip on their shoulder. We've got some new young blood in here, too, with all the rookies, and I think they bring a level of energy and excitement, and that kind of heightens it as well and gets those older guys going, too. They get going and they all feed off each other. I think there's a definite hunger. I don't think anyone likes what they've had the last couple of years, and they're competitors, man. They want to go win a Super Bowl."

Broncos Injury Report: Denver lists four players as questionable for Sunday's game vs. Baltimore

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

Sept. 22, 2018

On their final injury report of the week, the Broncos listed tackle Jared Veldheer (concussion), linebacker Brandon Marshall (knee), cornerback Adam Jones (thigh) and safety Dymonte Thomas (abdomen) as questionable for Sunday's game against the Baltimore Ravens.

Marshall and Veldheer, who were on the practice field during the media-viewing period, were both limited participants during Friday's practice. Thomas and Jones did not participate.

"Three of these guys are veteran players, so to play without practice for Adam or even B-Marsh, I'm OK with that," Head Coach Vance Joseph said. "They're experienced football players. They know our system. Obviously their health is most important. It's only Week 3, so we're being smart with our guys so we don't lose these guys for the long term."

Aaron Rodgers has a somewhat surprising take on NFL's new quarterback protection rules

By John Breech
CBS Sports
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If there's anyone out there who you think would be on board with the NFL's new rules this year that give quarterbacks more protection, it'd be Aaron Rodgers. After all, one of the new rules is basically named after him.

After Rodgers broke his collarbone last season following a hit from Minnesota's Anthony Barr, the NFL implemented a new rule for 2018 that banned the type of hit that Barr had made on the Packers quarterback. Basically, quarterbacks now have more protection than ever and it's making it harder for defenders to tackle them.

Rodgers got a first-hand look at the new rules in Week 2 when a controversial penalty on Clay Matthews cost the Packers a win in their 29-29 tie with the Vikings. Late in the game, Matthews was called for roughing the passer on a play where Kirk Cousins threw an interception.

Although Rodgers didn't have much to say about the hit after the game, he definitely had more to say this week. After watching the replay, the Packers quarterback believes it should've been an easy no-call.

"There's a goal to limit these hits, but they're pretty obvious when you see them: A guy picking somebody up and full weight on them," Rodgers said. "What do you say to Clay? His head is out of it, his hand is on the ground, that's not roughing the passer."

Now, before you call Rodgers a homer, the Packers quarterback said he also felt the same way about a roughing the passer penalty that was called on Minnesota's Eric Kendricks in the game. Even though Rodgers got rocked on the play, he didn't think the hit warranted a flag.

"Same thing with Kendricks. What do you say to him on that?," Rodgers said. "I didn't get up off the ground thinking, 'Where's the penalty?' I saw a late flag and couldn't believe there was a penalty on the play."

Even Cousins seemed a little surprised at the Matthews' penalty. After the game, the Vikings quarterback admitted that it was probably a "generous call."

As for Rodgers, he doesn't seem to be a big fan of all the new safety elements being added to the game. The Packers quarterback even said he believes that the NFL is headed in the "wrong direction" with some of its rule changes.

"I'm a traditionalist, I've watched the game and loved the game for a long time and some of the rules I think help, but some of the rules, maybe are going in the wrong direction," Rodgers said. "They're trying to think about the progress of the game and the safety and stuff, but it's still a collision sport, and those to me are not penalties."

Although the NFL has said it's going to use Matthews' hit as a "teaching tape" to show other defenders what they're doing wrong, the league couldn't have been that upset with the hit, and that's because Matthews didn't get fined. According to ESPN.com, the Packers linebacker won't have to pay any fines for the hit or his postgame comments where he ripped the officiating crew for throwing a flag on him. According to NFL.com, Kendricks also avoided a fine for his hit on Rodgers.

Week Three injury report roundup

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
Sept. 22, 2018

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

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

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

Saints at Falcons

Saints DT Tyeler Davison (foot) and LB Manti Te'o (knee) are both out and make up the team's entire injury report this week.

RB Devonta Freeman (knee), DE Takkarist McKinley (groin), LB Corey Nelson (calf) and DE Derrick Shelby (groin) have been ruled out by the Falcons.

Broncos at Ravens

The Broncos didn't rule out any players this week. CB Adam Jones (thigh), LB Brandon Marshall (knee), S Dymonte Thomas (abdomen), and T Jared Veldheer (concussion) are considered questionable to play.

The Ravens got LB C.J. Mosley (knee) back at practice Thursday, but he sat out on Friday and was listed as questionable. CB Anthony Averett (hamstring), DT Willie Henry (abdomen) and TE Hayden Hurst (foot) were ruled out. LB Matt Judon (hamstring), DT Michael Pierce (foot) and T Ronnie Stanley (elbow) also drew questionable tags.

Bengals at Panthers

Bengals RB Joe Mixon (knee) and C Billy Price (foot) will not play this weekend. LB Preston Brown (ankle) and DE Michael Johnson (knee) were listed as questionable.

TE Greg Olsen (foot), WR Curtis Samuel (medical illness), S Da'Norris Searcy (concussion) and G Trai Turner (concussion) will miss this Sunday's game for the Panthers. WR Damiere Byrd (knee) and CB Donte Jackson (groin) were listed as questionable.

Giants at Texans

The Giants ruled out CB Eli Apple (groin) and LB Olivier Vernon (ankle).

CB Kayvon Webster (Achilles) is out for the Texans. WR Sammie Coates (hamstring), WR Keke Coutee (hamstring) and TE Jordan Thomas (hip) are considered questionable to play this Sunday.

Titans at Jaguars

Titans coach Mike Vrabel said he'll make a call in the next 24 hours about QB Marcus Mariota (right elbow). T Jack Conklin (knee), LB Kamalei Correa (back) and S Kendrick Lewis (foot) are also questionable while RB David Fluellen (groin) and T Dennis Kelly (illness) are out for the Titans.

G A.J. Cann (triceps), RB Leonard Fournette (hamstring), CB D.J. Hayden (toe), CB Jalen Ramsey (ankle) and RB T.J. Yeldon (ankle) have been listed as questionable this week.

49ers at Chiefs

49ers G Joshua Garnett (toe) was ruled out on Friday. WR Marquise Goodwin (quadricep) and S Jaquiski Tartt (shoulder) are listed as questionable.

It looks like another week with no S Eric Berry (heel) for the Chiefs. He was listed as doubtful along with LB Ben Niemann (hamstring). RB Spencer Ware (knee) is likelier to play after being listed as questionable.

Raiders at Dolphins

DT P.J. Hall (ankle) remains out for the Raiders. CB Nick Nelson (hamstring) is listed as questionable.

The Dolphins only listed S Reshad Jones (shoulder) on this week's injury report. Jones is questionable to play.

Bills at Vikings

RB LeSean McCoy (rib) is questionable after a week of limited practices for the Bills. CB Phillip Gaines (elbow), CB Taron Johnson (shoulder), RB Taiwan Jones (head), and WR Ray-Ray McCloud (knee) are also listed as questionable while DE Shaq Lawson (hamstring) is out.

RB Dalvin Cook (hamstring), DE Everson Griffen (knee), TE David Morgan (knee), and CB Marcus Sherels (ribs) were ruled out by the Vikings.

Colts at Eagles

The Colts had a big group of players ruled out on Friday. DT Denico Autry (ankle), T Anthony Castonzo (hamstring), TE Jack Doyle (hip), RB Marlon Mack (foot, hamstring), DT Hassan Ridgeway (calf) and CB Quincy Wilson (concussion) will all miss the trip to Philly. S Clayton Geathers (knee, elbow) and CB Chris Milton (concussion) are questionable.

Running backs Jay Ajayi (back) and Darren Sproles (hamstring) are out and Corey Clement (quad) is questionable, so the Eagles have some injury issues in their backfield. LB Kamu Grugier-Hill (groin), WR Alshon Jeffery (shoulder) and T Jason Peters (quad) are also questionable, although Eagles coach Doug Pederson said Friday that Jeffery has yet to be cleared.

Packers at Washington

Packers QB Aaron Rodgers (knee) is listed as questionable and set to practice on Saturday. LB Oren Burks (shoulder), CB Davon House (biceps) and S Josh Jones (ankle) drew the same listing while CB Kevin King (groin) has been ruled out.

S Troy Apke (hamstring) and G Shawn Lauvao (calf) will not be in the Washington lineup this week. LB Zach Brown (oblique), WR Maurice Harris (concussion) and WR Paul Richardson (shoulder, knee) are listed as questionable.

Chargers at Rams

T Joe Barksdale (knee) and DE Joey Bosa (foot) will miss the battle for Los Angeles. WR Travis Benjamin (foot), TE Antonio Gates (illness) and RB Derek Watt (thumb) are all listed as questionable.

Rams K Greg Zuerlein (groin) is out and LB Mark Barron (ankle) is unlikely to play given his doubtful tag.

Bears at Cardinals

The Bears have ruled out CB Marcus Cooper (hamstring) and S DeAndre Houston-Carson (forearm) for this Sunday.

Cardinals WR Larry Fitzgerald (hamstring) returned to practice on Thursday and drew a questionable tag on Friday. S Rudy Ford (ankle), LB Dennis Gardeck (ankle), DE Markus Golden (knee), and TE Jermaine Gresham (achilles) are also questionable for the home team. DT Olsen Pierre (toe) and T Andre Smith (elbow) have been ruled out.

Cowboys at Seahawks

Cowboys DT Maliek Collins (knee) and C Travis Frederick (illness) will be out this Sunday. WR Cole Beasley (ankle), LB Sean Lee (hamstring) and S Xavier Woods (hamstring) all drew questionable tags.

WR Doug Baldwin (knee), G Ethan Pocic (ankle) and LB K.J. Wright (knee) have been ruled out by the Seahawks. C Justin Britt (shoulder) and LB Mychal Kendricks (ankle) will be game-time decisions after being listed as questionable.

Patriots at Lions

WR Josh Gordon (hamstring) is considered questionable to play in his first game since being traded to the Patriots. TE Jacob Hollister (chest) has been ruled out and two others — S Patrick Chung (concussion) and DE Trey Flowers (concussion) — are set to miss the game after being listed as doubtful. T Marcus Cannon (calf), CB Keion Crossen (hamstring), S Nate Ebner (hip) and CB Eric Rowe (groin) join Gordon in the questionable category.

The Lions ruled out T Andrew Donnal (knee). DE Ziggy Ansah (shoulder), LB Eli Harold (hip), WR Marvin Jones (ankle), G T.J. Lang (back), TE Michael Roberts (knee) and CB Darius Slay (concussion) are questionable for Sunday night's game.