

Kickin' it with Kiz: Let's make a deal! Broncos swap Demaryius Thomas for lightly used defensive back. Good idea?

By Mark Kizsla
The Denver Post
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Broncos receiver Demaryius Thomas has too many drops. Denver should follow the Patriots' Way and trade him for a high draft pick. Keep Courtland Sutton and Emmanuel Sanders for the future.

Peter, San Diego

Kiz: The Broncos have too many receivers and not enough defensive backs. Are you old enough to remember the late, great Monty Hall? John Elway is. Let's make a deal. One problem: What NFL team would trade for a receiver that carries a \$12 million salary-cap hit but drops the football?

What's the biggest difference between the Case Keenum we see this year in Denver and the Keenum we saw last year in Minnesota? Coaching! Put the blame where it belongs.

Mark, coaching 'em up

Kiz: When in doubt, blame Vance Joseph. That's what we do around here, right? Here's an alternative view: What if Keenum is an adequate NFL quarterback that enjoyed a career year for Minnesota in 2017? Maybe what we're seeing is what the statistical nerds at Kickin' It Headquarters like to call regression to the mean.

Sometimes, I think the CSU Rams should change to alfalfa and pumpkin as their primary uniform colors.

Kyle, CSU alum

Kiz: Colorado loves a football team in an orange uniform. CSU should wear its Aggie heritage proudly. Every game. Now, a farming question: Mares eat oats and does eat oats. Do little Rams eat alfalfa?

ESPN has made "Monday Night Football" irrelevant with bad management, greed and forgettable announcing teams. It's too bad all that great "MNF" history is now just that. History.

Kevin, North Vancouver, British Columbia

Kiz: There's a great appetite for the NFL, but not enough juicy match-ups for all the prime-time games. Thursday? Sunday? Monday? The NFL is on more often than reruns of "Friends." The Monday night game now is what it is: The last refuge for desperate gamblers and fantasy football players.

Jon Gray shouldn't be a Rockies pitcher. He's proved time and again he's consistently inconsistent.

J.V., calling the bullpen

Kiz: Maybe it's time for the Rockies to admit Colorado's thin air has messed with Gray's head. A change of scenery might be good for everybody.

If Rockies third baseman Nolan Arenado wants to play for a winner, he should play like a winner.

Bill, loyal but cynical fan

Kiz: Arenado is a winner. With only one more season remaining on his contract, he will soon become a living, breathing trade rumor. Unless they sign Arenado to an extension, the Rockies will have to consider dealing him. Think Colorado has trouble scoring runs now? I shudder to think about the lack of pop in the batting order without him.

And today's parting shot is a double-dog dare to tackle Elway.

You wrote a pretty straight to the point column on Arenado's slump. I long for the day when you grow the courage to write a negative column about Elway. After the Broncos miss the playoffs for a third-straight season, you will still look at John's autographed photo on your desk and sing his praises.

Matt, blitzing the old QB

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

By Kyle Fredrickson
The 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 Oakland 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

Butt on pace for rare first-season comeback

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 23, 2018

Gradually, Jake Butt is turning the question mark about his knee into an answer for the Broncos' offense.

Through two games, the Broncos' second-year tight end in his first action in nearly two years has six catches for 77 yards, or a 16-game pace of 48 receptions and 616 yards.

For a player who spent his rookie season rehabilitating from his second ACL surgery, Butt is on schedule.

"The main thing I'm happy about is that we're 2-0," Butt said during a sit-down interview with 9NEWS this week. "Winning cures a lot of sickness. It cures all sickness, I'd say.

"I think I've done some things well. I think I've caught the ball well, I've run good routes. But there's a lot I need to clean up. This is a tough league so it's something you've got to focus on every single day.

"You look at this last game, I was targeted twice on third down and I came up a yard short (both times). That's something I take pride in is moving the chains, being a guy you can count on on third down and that's just one of many things.

"I've got to clean up my blocking. That's where I'm grateful to have our room and our coaching staff and be surrounded by other great players who are pushing me, and I'm pushing them every single day. We're not going to be complacent with just a good game."

Game 3 is today against a Baltimore Ravens' team coached by John Harbaugh, brother of Jim Harbaugh, who was Butt's head coach at Michigan for his final two years. Putting the connections together, any chance Butt called Jim Harbaugh to get some tips about how to play against John's Ravens?

"Man, I thought about it," Butt said. "I'm going to reach out to my tight end coach Jay Harbaugh (Jim's son) as well. He was an ops guy there in Baltimore a little bit so I'm thinking about reaching him but I know how the Harbaughs get down. I think the secrets will remain secrets but it doesn't hurt to try."

The Butt Army will be in attendance at M&T Bank Stadium today. Papa Butt and at least three other family members will make the trip.

"The Butt Army travels well," Jake said.

They've heard all the puns and word plays on their last name. Like, gee, Jake Butt is no joke. Or, Jake's not a Butt, he's a good guy.

"I love them all," Jake Butt said. "I welcome them all. I welcome new, I welcome old. It's all about the expansion of the Butt Army. We want to make somebody feel involved. We're really growing in numbers daily and it's an extreme movement right now. It's building so much momentum that I really don't see it slowing down. We're having a lot of fun."

The addition of Butt, the type of tight end who is consistently capable of hurting defenses with the intermediate route, rookie receiver Courtland Sutton and speed rookie Phillip Lindsay are big reasons why the Broncos' offense has opened up this year. Oh, and quarterback Case Keenum, too.

"It's been awesome. It's been awesome really for everybody on offense," Butt said of Keenum. "Just his leadership and the command he has in huddle, pre-snap, post-snap.

"And just seeing his resiliency. His commitment to battling to the very last snap. With our backs against the wall last week – we didn't do much in the first half and we come down on score four straight drives. Every time we touch the ball in the second half we score when we needed it most. He's really been a big addition for us."

Although Butt has overcome much – his knee injury in his senior season bowl game at Michigan, his subsequent fall in the 2017 NFL draft from second round to fifth and sitting out his rookie season – to enjoy early success as the Broncos' 1B tight end behind Jeff Heurman, he admits he has a ways to go.

Namely, the next step from "receiver" tight end who blocks some of the time to starting, in-line, No. 1 tight end who would block most of the time.

"Yeah, absolutely, he can get there," Heurman said. "Jake's a helluva player. I think our combination works really well together. He creates a lot of mismatches for defenses."

Tight end is the one position that fantasy players have all wrong. In fantasy leagues, Butt is the Broncos' No. 1 tight end. In real life NFL, Heurman is No. 1. Can Butt expand his game to become the No. 1 tight end?

"I think it's something that I've got to work on," Butt said. "I think it's something that I can reach one day. But I think it's something that I'm going to need to focus on, I'm going to need to continue to work on. I've been catching the ball but, Jeff has actually been a really good model for somebody who's doing both. The work that doesn't get complimented very much is his blocking. He's a real beast in pass pro, in-line, moving him around and then you see what he does in the passing game. He ran that Hank route (a curl route in the flat to convert a third down on the Broncos' game-winning scoring drive) and went down and got a big catch for us, so really trying to model my game off some of the things he does, some of the things other tight ends do. We're just going to continue to keep getting better every day."

Klis List: How the Broncos can prevail at Baltimore in first road test

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 23, 2018

They are a 2-0 team. But are the Broncos a serious playoff contending team?

Because the Broncos have so far won home squeakers against opponents who are 0-2 – the Seattle Seahawks and Oakland Raiders – there remains question as to how good Denver really is.

We'll have a better idea after their next two games starting with their first road test Sunday against the Baltimore Ravens. Beating them would set up an AFC West showdown the following Monday night against the Kansas City Chiefs at Broncos Stadium at Mile High.

First things, first. Here's a Klis List of things for the Broncos to follow if they are to beat the Ravens at M&T Bank Stadium.

*Best from Case

OK, Case Keenum. You've had your two-game break in. And you've won 'em both with terrific fourth quarter comebacks.

But this has to be your best game. By best, we mean no turnovers. You don't have to throw for 300 yards and three touchdowns. A nice 225-yard, 1 TD, 0 pick performance will do on the road.

It's OK to move around in the pocket – that's when you are at your best. But given your sore knee, better start finishing off those scrambles with a slide.

*Pressure Flacco

There are two sides of the ball and the Denver D will also have to play its best game. The Ravens' offensive line has struggled at the tackle positions. Ronnie Stanley is not off to a great start at left tackle and right tackle James Hurst is no match for Broncos' pass rusher Von Miller.

Flacco stands tall in the pocket but he's not mobile and because he likes to throw the ball downfield to the likes of John Brown, he'll hang on to it a tick longer than Oakland's Derek Carr did last week.

*Keep the Ravens' running game grounded

Baltimore has solid backs in Alex Collins, Javorius Allen and Kenneth Dixon, but they are only averaging a combined 3.0 yards per carry. Denver's D is only allowing 3.6 yards per rush.

*Get Demaryius going

The Broncos' offense eventually will need better production from Demaryius Thomas, their No. 2 all-time leading receiver. Even if Emmanuel Sanders is now the team's No. 1 receiver, Thomas must do better than his 5 catch-18 yards-2 drops stat line from last week against the Raiders.

Thomas was out working extra after practice this week, which is not unusual whether in good times or bad.

"I've been in this league 9 years," Thomas said. "It's what I do."

An early screen and short hitch in the first series or two could get his confidence going.

*Keep up in the kicking game

Baltimore's Justin Tucker has been the NFL's best kicker for going on seven seasons. He's 10 of 10 in kicks so far this season, including a 55-yard field goal. Brandon McManus has been nails so far this season, going 9 for 9 including field goals of 53 and 51 yards.

Placekickers are the difference in tight games and if the Broncos are to win on the road, they'll probably have to win another close one.

Baltimore also has one of the more consistent punters in Sam Koch, who has a 53.3-yard gross average with a 45.4-yard net that ranks in the top 5 in each category.

Denver's Marquette King is 16th with a 47.1-yard gross average and 11th with a 43.3-yard net.

*Not now John Brown

After four up-and-down seasons in Arizona, Brown signed a one-year, \$5 million deal with the Ravens and the speedster is off to a fine start with seven catches at 19.4 yards per with two touchdowns.

The secondary has emerged as the Broncos' top concern.

*Feed Phillip and the playmakers

Phillip Lindsay is the early NFL Rookie of the Year leader as has 178 yards rushing to 134 for the Giants' Saquan Barkley. Lindsay was undrafted; Barkley was the No. 2 overall pick.

Lindsay, rookie receiver Courtland Sutton and veteran receiver Emmanuel Sanders could be mismatches against the Ravens' secondary that features 32-year-old cornerback Brandon Carr and 33-year-old safety Eric Weddle.

Week 3 NFL score predictions: A guide to best games, fantasy help, more

By STAFF

ESPN

September 23, 2018

New Orleans Saints at Atlanta Falcons (1 p.m. ET, Fox)

Point spread: ATL -3 | Matchup quality: 63.6 (of 100)

Mike Triplett's pick: I had this projected as a loss for the Saints every time we published our schedule predictions this offseason. But the Falcons are so banged up right now with the losses of LB Deion Jones, S Keanu Neal, RB Devonta Freeman and G Andy Levitre that it feels like much more of a toss-up. I'll stick with the Falcons since New Orleans hasn't put together a clean performance yet, with a defensive flop in Week 1 and an offensive dud in Week 2. Falcons 27, Saints 26

Vaughn McClure's pick: This one has the potential to be a high-scoring affair with Matt Ryan and Drew Brees going head-to-head. The Saints are giving up more than 10 yards per catch. If Julio Jones (calf) is healthy, Ryan spreads the ball around like he did against the Panthers and the Falcons establish Tevin Coleman in the running game, they should have enough firepower to withstand the Saints at home. Falcons 35, Saints 31

FPI win projection: ATL, 64 percent. With Tampa off to a surprising 2-0 start, the stakes for this early-season NFC South matchup are raised, particularly for the Saints. If New Orleans were to fall, FPI would give the Saints a 5.9 percent chance to rally for the division crown. Atlanta has a little more room for error in FPI's estimation, as a loss would only drop the Falcons to a 23.6 percent chance.

Indianapolis Colts at Philadelphia Eagles (1 p.m. ET, Fox)

Point spread: PHI -6.5 | Matchup quality: 57.4 (of 100)

Mike Wells' pick: Colts quarterback Andrew Luck could have continued success through the air, as the Eagles have allowed an average of 309 yards passing in two games. It's uncertain which Carson Wentz will show up for the Eagles, as the quarterback is playing his first game since tearing his ACL in December. These haven't been the same Eagles so far, but they get the edge because of Wentz's return. Eagles 28, Colts 20

Tim McManus' pick: It's easy to forget just how good Wentz was last season in every situation. He boasted the best QBR in the red zone, on third down and outside the pocket, per ESPN Stats & Information data, and was deadly against the blitz, throwing for 13 touchdowns and zero interceptions. There might be some rust, but Wentz's return will raise the Eagles' play to another level. Eagles 30, Colts 17

FPI win projection: PHI, 73 percent. Through two weeks, Luck has the second-fewest air yards in the league, ahead of only Derek Carr. It's a small sample, but that's not where he has been in past seasons.

Cincinnati Bengals at Carolina Panthers (1 p.m. ET, CBS)

Point spread: CAR -3 | Matchup quality: 55.2 (of 100)

Katherine Terrell's pick: The Bengals are going to be without their starting center and running back, and that means a lot of pressure on quarterback Andy Dalton to put the game on his shoulders. Defensively, they struggled to contain some of the underneath routes against the Ravens, and the Panthers will try to exploit that with Christian McCaffrey. This is a winnable game if the Bengals can continue to force turnovers, but there might be too much to overcome on the road this week. Panthers 24, Bengals 20

David Newton's pick: Coach Ron Rivera challenged his defense after Sunday's loss to Atlanta, calling "terrible" the effort that saw a league-best 21-game streak of an opposing running back not topping 100 yards end. The Panthers also didn't collect a sack after having six in Week 1. The Bengals rank second in sacks allowed and 17th in rushing offense, so look for the Panthers to make this a one-dimensional game and put everything on Dalton. Panthers 27, Bengals 17

FPI win projection: CAR, 58 percent. The Bengals are already up to a 57 percent chance to make the postseason with their 2-0 start and could climb to better than a two-thirds chance if they win to get to 3-0. Carolina can't stake quite as strong a claim with a victory, but can still improve to better than a one-in-three chance to make the playoffs should it prevail.

Green Bay Packers at Washington Redskins (1 p.m. ET, Fox)
Point spread: GB -3 | Matchup quality: 54.9 (of 100)

Rob Demovsky's pick: The Packers were 1-of-5 in the red zone in Week 2. It's hard to imagine an Aaron Rodgers-led offense coming up that short again, especially against a Redskins team that's tied for 25th in red zone defense, allowing touchdowns on 80 percent of opponents' possessions inside the 20-yard line. Packers 27, Redskins 23

John Keim's pick: The Redskins allowed 9 of 16 third downs to be converted and managed just 5 of 15 themselves. They were 0-for-2 in the red zone and allowed 3-for-3 by the Colts. The real culprit was the running game, where their backs managed a combined 21 yards on 15 carries. They're also getting banged up and that's a big concern, especially along the offensive line. Packers 24, Redskins 21

FPI win projection: WSH, 52 percent. Comparisons between the first two QBs taken in the 2005 draft will always be present, but who comes out on top when they play head-to-head? Rodgers leads the series 2-1 and has a 70.9 Total QBR to Alex Smith's 44.2. Even with that, FPI has this as the tightest game of Week 3, slightly favoring the home Redskins.

San Francisco 49ers at Kansas City Chiefs (1 p.m. ET, Fox)
Point spread: KC -6 | Matchup quality: 51.9 (of 100)

Nick Wagoner's pick: Niners quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo has a chance to get on track against Kansas City's league-worst pass defense (allowing 430 yards per game), but San Francisco is banged up in the secondary and the Chiefs boast the type of weapons that create matchup nightmares all over the field, especially for a Niners defense that struggles to generate consistent pass rush. Chiefs 37, 49ers 31

Adam Teicher's pick: With both teams toward the bottom of the league in total defense (49ers at 23rd, Chiefs sitting in 32nd) and scoring defense (49ers tied for 20th, Chiefs at 29th), expect an offensive shootout. The 49ers don't have the arsenal to keep up with the Chiefs in Kansas City's home opener. Patrick Mahomes is second in the NFL in passer rating (143.3) and Garoppolo is 26th (77.4). Chiefs 34, 49ers 28

FPI win projection: KC, 65 percent. There was a fear before the season that the Chiefs' defense would be a major liability. It's easy to forget in the midst of Mahomes-mania, but so far, the defense has been a problem, ranking 30th in unit efficiency.

Denver Broncos at Baltimore Ravens (1 p.m. ET, CBS)
Point spread: BAL -5 | Matchup quality: 50.2 (of 100)

Jeff Legwold's pick: The Broncos were 2-0 in 2017 when they made their first road trip of the season to Buffalo -- and lost. They went on to lose 10 of the next 13 games and were 1-7 on the road when all was said and done. So this is a bit of a maturity test for the remade Broncos and a roster with 10 rookies on it. But their offense is improved and their defense has the NFL sacks leader in Von Miller. Broncos 27, Ravens 23

Jamison Hensley's pick: The Ravens lead the NFL with 24 interceptions since the start of the 2017 season, and Broncos quarterback Case Keenum has been picked off 31 times in 43 games (including a league-leading four this season). Baltimore will use turnovers to bounce back and improve its home record in September under John Harbaugh to 17-2. Ravens 23, Broncos 13

FPI win projection: BAL, 78 percent. After blowing the doors off of Buffalo, the Ravens came back to earth a bit in losing to the Bengals, but are still favored at home against Denver. Part of the reason? FPI still doesn't buy into the Broncos' offense. It's great to have a pair of late comebacks in the short term, but what FPI would like to see for long-term success is an offense that is good in all four quarters, not just the final one.

Buffalo Bills at Minnesota Vikings (1 p.m. ET, CBS)
Point spread: MIN -16.5 | Matchup quality: 49.2 (of 100)

Mike Rodak's pick: Kirk Cousins threw for four touchdowns and had a 153.7 quarterback rating in his previous game against the Bills, the fourth-highest passer rating by an opponent with at least 10 attempts in Bills history. Only one defensive player (defensive end Jerry Hughes) and no defensive coaches remain from that Bills-Redskins game in 2015, but there is little evidence so far this season that Buffalo's latest group will fare better. Vikings 30, Bills 10

Courtney Cronin's pick: The Vikings are heavy favorites coming off Cousins' late-game performance in which he threw for 223 yards and three touchdowns in the fourth quarter and overtime in Green Bay. He likely won't have to stage a comeback this week against a Buffalo team that gave up 47 points in its last road game, at Baltimore. Vikings 35, Bills 10

FPI win projection: MIN, 91 percent. Things can quickly go from bad to worse for the Bills; after this matchup in Minnesota in which FPI is giving them only a 9 percent chance to win, they follow it up with a trip to Green Bay in Week 4 (14 percent chance to win).

Tennessee Titans at Jacksonville Jaguars (1 p.m. ET, CBS)
Point spread: JAX -6.5 | Matchup quality: 47.1 (of 100)

Turrón Davenport's pick: The Titans got good news Thursday when Marcus Mariota (elbow) showed in practice he can push the ball down the field. The quarterback's chances of playing seem to have improved,

which will make the Titans' offense less reliant on the running game and deliver an early lead as they pull out a surprise victory. Titans 17, Jaguars 14

Mike DiRocco's pick: The Jaguars have lost four of their past five meetings to the Titans and are still stinging from being swept last season. After beating the Patriots, linebacker Myles Jack said the Jags are "1-0 on the Payback Tour," which means there won't be any letdown. The Jaguars are optimistic they will have running back Leonard Fournette (hamstring) back. Jaguars 21, Titans 16

FPI win projection: JAX, 77 percent. Currently FPI is splitting the difference between Mariota and Blaine Gabbert starting for the Titans. If it is Gabbert, the Jaguars' chances to win would jump even higher, to 82 percent.

New York Giants at Houston Texans (1 p.m. ET, Fox)
Point spread: HOU -6 | Matchup quality: 44.4 (of 100)

Jordan Raanan's pick: It's hard to feel good right now about a Giants offense that has scored touchdowns on 9 percent of its possessions this season. It seems unrealistic to expect it to improve Sunday, either, on the road against a Texans team with a talented defensive front. J.J. Watt and Jadeveon Clowney against the right side of the Giants' offensive line won't be pretty, and Houston will expose a thin secondary to avoid an 0-3 start. Texans 21, Giants 18

Sarah Barshop's pick: The Texans enter Week 3 with the NFL's top rushing game behind Lamar Miller and Alfred Blue, with some help from mobile quarterback Deshaun Watson. They should have even more success on the ground against the Giants, who rank 29th in run defense, allowing an average of 137.5 rushing yards per game. Texans 21, Giants 13

FPI win projection: HOU, 69 percent. Watson posted an impressive Total QBR of 83.5 in his abbreviated rookie season. So far, it has been a sophomore slump. The former Clemson quarterback has a QBR of 44 through two games this season.

Oakland Raiders at Miami Dolphins (1 p.m. ET, CBS)
Point spread: MIA -3 | Matchup quality: 35.8 (of 100)

Paul Gutierrez's pick: As hard as it is to pick the new-look Jon Gruden Raiders to win a game before they show they can close someone out -- Oakland has been outscored by a combined 43-7 in the second half thus far -- it is just as hard to see Gruden's Raiders falling to 0-3. Derek Carr and the offense clicked as he completed 29 of 32 attempts in Denver, and that confidence carries over to Miami. Barely. Raiders 24, Dolphins 23

Cameron Wolfe's pick: This screams trap game for the 2-0 Dolphins hosting a struggling 0-2 West Coast team. With Ryan Tannehill and Carr showing high-accuracy and low-air-yard passing attacks, expect the defense that can jump more of those routes to secure a victory. The Dolphins are tied for the NFL lead with five interceptions, and they'll add to that total Sunday. Dolphins 26, Raiders 20

FPI win projection: MIA, 66 percent. Miami somewhat surprisingly leads the league in defensive efficiency through the first two weeks, making up for the fact that Tannehill ranks 27th in the league in Total QBR, the lowest of any of the 2-0 quarterbacks. Oakland has the lowest pressure rate in the league.

Los Angeles Chargers at Los Angeles Rams (4:05 p.m. ET, CBS)
Point spread: LAR -7 | Matchup quality: 73.7 (of 100)

Eric D. Williams' pick: Per ESPN Stats & Information research, the Bolts are 11-3 in Philip Rivers' career against the spread -- with five outright wins -- when listed as an underdog of at least seven points (including playoffs). Defensively, for a third consecutive week, the Chargers will have to figure out how to overcome the absence of Joey Bosa. Rams 30, Chargers 27

Lindsey Thiry's pick: The Rams are averaging 33.5 points per game and the Chargers 29.5, so this game will be decided by defense. The Rams' defense has posted six consecutive shutout quarters, allowing only 13 points this season, and can't wait for the challenge of facing Rivers, who is completing 73 percent of his passes. Rams 28, Chargers 17

FPI win projection: LAR, 73 percent. It helps to have star players, but so far defensive coordinator Wade Phillips is getting it done. His Rams have allowed the fewest expected points per passing play of any team in the league, so a rough day could be in store for Rivers.

Dallas Cowboys at Seattle Seahawks (4:25 p.m. ET, Fox)
Point spread: SEA -3 | Matchup quality: 54.5 (of 100)

Todd Archer's pick: Seattle opened the season with back-to-back road games and will hope friendly confines serve it well. The Cowboys are 12-5 on the road with Dak Prescott but have scored more than 20 points in just one of their past five away games, including just eight in the season opener at Carolina. A fast start is a must, but so is consistent offensive success. That has been an issue lately. Seahawks 23, Cowboys 16

Brady Henderson's pick: As flawed as the Seahawks have looked at times during their 0-2 start, both losses have been on the road and amid some challenging circumstances, including altitude in Denver and the absence of five starters Monday night in Chicago. They'll have middle linebacker Bobby Wagner back Sunday at CenturyLink Field, where they've won 14 of their past 15 home openers, including an NFL-best nine straight. Seahawks 21, Cowboys 17

FPI win projection: SEA, 54 percent. In Week 2 it was Khalil Mack. In Week 3 it is DeMarcus Lawrence. The Cowboys (30 percent) haven't pressured the QB at quite the same rate as the Bears (32 percent), but Russell Wilson should be on the run again.

Chicago Bears at Arizona Cardinals (4:25 p.m. ET, Fox)
Point spread: CHI -4 | Matchup quality: 13.7 (of 100)

Jeff Dickerson's pick: The Bears haven't been above .500 since Week 3 of the 2014 season, but the drought should end Sunday. The Cardinals appear destined for another very frustrating season. The only intrigue left in Glendale is when Arizona pulls the plug on quarterback Sam Bradford in favor of rookie Josh Rosen. Chicago's defense is strong enough over the winless Cardinals. Bears 26, Cardinals 14

Josh Weinfuss' pick: Arizona enters Sunday's game with a trimmed playbook. In theory that should help but the Cardinals welcome a Bears defense that is scary with the addition of Khalil Mack. Chicago has the league's eighth-best defense, is fourth against the run and ranks second in sacks per pass attempt. Arizona has the worst passing offense and second-worst run defense. Bears 28, Cardinals 14

FPI win projection: CHI, 55 percent. Some upside for the Cardinals after their miserable start: They have a projected draft slot of 3.8 and the second-highest chance at the No. 1 overall pick. Only the Bills are more likely.

New England Patriots at Detroit Lions (8:20 p.m. ET, NBC)
Point spread: NE -6 | Matchup quality: 52.4 (of 100)

Mike Reiss' pick: The Patriots' running game was a disappointment in Week 2, unable to deliver consistent results even when in what should have been advantageous matchups (e.g., big personnel vs. nickel), but there's a solid chance for a turnaround against the Lions. In a grind-it-out type of game that could be a coming-out-party for rookie RB Sony Michel, look for the running game to rebound. Patriots 30, Lions 20

Michael Rothstein's pick: The Lions have obvious holes in their defense, particularly defending outside runs, and Bill Belichick & Co. are going to exploit that often. Belichick has a sterling record against his former assistants (11-4), and there's no way New England overlooks a winless Detroit team both because of that connection and the double-digit Week 2 loss to Jacksonville. Patriots 35, Lions 20

FPI win projection: NE, 62 percent. The Patriots rank 16th in offensive efficiency so far this season. Let's just say FPI doesn't think that side of the ball is going to be a problem. Matt Patricia, watch out.

Pittsburgh Steelers at Tampa Bay Buccaneers (8:15 p.m. ET, ESPN/WatchESPN)
Point spread: PIT -2.5 | Matchup quality: 54.4 (of 100)

Jeremy Fowler's pick: The Steelers' pass defense inspires little faith heading into a matchup with the league's leader in passing yards. If the Steelers need to win a shootout, the road is not the place to do it. Ben Roethlisberger hasn't thrown for more than two touchdowns away from Heinz Field since Week 12 of 2016. Buccaneers 27, Steelers 24

Jenna Laine's pick: The Bucs' offense has been on fire, averaging 482.5 yards per game, tops in the NFL, and 37.5 points per game, second only to the Chiefs. Tampa Bay also shouldn't have much of a problem against a Steelers defense that has looked slow. The defense also did a much better job in Week 2 at preventing some of the explosive plays that plagued the Bucs in Week 1. Buccaneers 32, Steelers 17

FPI win projection: PIT, 53 percent. Before Week 1, FPI gave the Buccaneers a 5.7 percent chance to start 2-0, lowest in the league. But behind an explosive offense led by Ryan Fitzpatrick, here they are. Deep passing could be the key to this one, as the Steelers have allowed the second-most completions of passes that travel 15 yards from the line of scrimmage in the league, and the Bucs have hit on a league-best 13.

Breaking down the five most intriguing NFL games of Week 3

By STAFF

The Athletic

September 23, 2018

Breaking down the five most intriguing NFL games of Week 3

Week 3 of the NFL season will give us The Battle of L.A., a true road test for the 2-0 Broncos, a dramatic Monday night showdown between Fitzmagic's Bucs and the Steelers (because everything surrounding the Steelers is dramatic right now), and what should be a captivating matchup between the surprisingly hot Bengals and Cam Newton's Panthers.

But first, we must start at Mercedes-Benz Stadium, the site of this year's Super Bowl, where yet another showdown between the Saints and the Falcons will take place. As Michael Lombardi wrote in his Friday column, nine total points have decided the outcome of the past four games between these NFC South rivals. We expect this one will be yet another tight one.

New Orleans Saints at Atlanta Falcons

Sunday, 1 p.m. (ET)

From the Saints' side (by Larry Holder)

What I'm Watching

The Saints drafted cornerback Marshon Lattimore for games like this one. Lattimore will once again shadow Falcons wideout Julio Jones all over the field. Jones might have produced some big numbers in the last meeting, with seven receptions for 149 yards. But Lattimore and the Saints came away with the last laugh as Lattimore intercepted a Matt Ryan pass and the Saints won 23-13 in Week 16. The cornerback also picked off Ryan in the Saints' Week 14 loss at Atlanta. Lattimore came out of the gate sluggish, though, struggling to hang with the Bucs' Mike Evans in Week 1. The 2017 Defensive Rookie of the Year expects the spotlight on him every week. It's coming again in Week 3.

The Saints Win If ...

New Orleans must pressure Ryan. The Saints have struggled to pressure the Falcons quarterback for a few seasons before the 2017 campaign. The Cam Jordan-led unit improved significantly against Ryan in their last meeting. The Saints parked Ryan to the turf for five sacks. Jordan led the team with two sacks and four quarterback hits. A Saints pass rush has been absent for much of the team's first two games this season. New Orleans barely breathed on Ryan Fitzpatrick, leading to the start of "Fitzmagic 2018." The rush cranked up near the end of the Week 2 win over the Browns, with Jordan piling up two sacks and Sheldon Rankins adding one. If the Saints can't disrupt Ryan, the Falcons passer can still pick apart a defense.

Super Bowl Meter

Losing to Tampa Bay and narrowly escaping with a win against Cleveland at home over the first two weeks have dampened the Super Bowl-or-bust expectations surrounding the Saints. That's not to say that the

Saints aren't capable of another party with the Lombardi Trophy. But the highly audible banging on the Superdome walls in frustration during games has certainly increased.

Game Prediction

Saints 27, Falcons 24. I really can't believe I'm picking the Saints here. The absence of Falcons defenders Deion Jones and Keanu Neal will make the difference for the Saints. Jones has continually pestered Drew Brees since being drafted by the Falcons, with three interceptions off the Saints quarterback. The Saints' defense remains shaky but will slow down the Falcons enough for the win.

From the Falcons' side (by Jason Butt)

What I'm Watching

When the Saints have the ball, it will be imperative for the Falcons to have their eyes on Alvin Kamara on each play he is in the game. Against Carolina, the Falcons allowed Christian McCaffrey to catch 14 passes and sometimes lost sight of him coming out of the backfield. When Kamara is in the backfield, he could very much be used as a receiving target. He will also frequently line up at receiver. How the Falcons game plan against Kamara will be key in limiting the potential for big plays in New Orleans' offense. As it stands, it looks like the responsibility of covering Kamara out of the backfield could fall on Duke Riley and Foye Oluokun.

When the Falcons have the ball, a key focus will be on whether Atlanta will be able to run the way it did against Carolina. The Falcons totaled 170 yards on the ground. That was a stark contrast to how they opened the year against Philadelphia. Tevin Coleman got loose for 107 yards on 16 carries, with Ito Smith adding nine carries for 46 yards. Through two games, the Saints rank 17th against the run by allowing 102.5 rushing yards per game. It would seem the Falcons have an opportunity to continue their ground game success from the Carolina game.

The Falcons Win If ...

They are able to have the same, or at least similar, red-zone success as they did against the Panthers, while rushing for over 120 yards. I do think this game will wind up in the high 20s or early 30s in scoring. Atlanta will look to put forth another balanced attack offensively — it had 32 carries and 28 passes against the Panthers — to keep the Saints' defenders guessing.

Super Bowl Meter

It's Atlanta. Almost everyone assumes the worst around here.

Game Prediction

Falcons 34, Saints 31. I think the Falcons take advantage of what New Orleans gives them on the ground, which leads to some big plays in the play-action game. I also think the Saints move the ball with some success as Atlanta's defense continues to figure itself out without Keanu Neal and Deion Jones. Home-field advantage should help, with the Falcons making one or two more plays than their rival to come away with a hard-fought victory.

Cincinnati Bengals at Carolina Panthers

Sunday, 1 p.m. (ET)

From the Bengals' side (by Jay Morrison)

What I'm Watching

Joe Mixon's absence with a knee injury is going to affect more than just the run game for the Bengals as quarterback Andy Dalton has had great success when using play action the first two weeks. If the Bengals aren't able to get Giovani Bernard going early, which in itself could be a challenge with Trey Hopkins making his first career start at center for injured rookie Billy Price, it's going to hamper the effectiveness of the play fakes. Mixon also is the third leading receiver for the Bengals. And while that's an area in which Bernard excels, it's still going to be important for Dalton to get tight end Tyler Eifert and wide receiver John Ross more involved than they've been through the first two weeks when they've combined to catch seven passes for 78 yards.

The Bengals Win If ...

Their linebackers can limit the short passes to Carolina running back Christian McCaffrey to short gains. The same goes for limiting Cam Newton's designed runs and scrambles. Nick Vigil has taken a huge step in his third season, while backups Jordan Evans, pressed into action for the suspended Vontaze Burfict, and Hardy Nickerson, playing for the injured Preston Brown, also have played well. But keeping McCaffrey from breaking free is going to be a much bigger challenge than limiting Jordan Wilkins and Javorius Allen was in Weeks 1 and 2. The Bengals can rush up front and cover in the back as well as any team in the league, so it seems unlikely Newton will beat them down the field with his arm. The linebackers are going to author this outcome.

Super Bowl Meter

The Bengals are definitely bound for Atlanta ... next week. As for a return trip to Mercedes-Benz Stadium in February, that still seems like a long shot, although maybe not quite as long as it was two weeks ago.

Game Prediction

Panthers 24, Bengals 20. I just think the loss of Mixon and Price is going to be too much to overcome on the road against a quality team.

From the Panthers' side (by Joe Person)

What I'm Watching

Panthers third-year cornerback James Bradberry is in the midst of a tough, three-game gantlet against some of the league's best receivers. He passed the first test last week by holding Atlanta's Julio Jones pretty well in check, but the sledding gets no easier against A.J. Green on Sunday and the Giants' Odell Beckham Jr. on Oct. 7. The 6-foot-1 Bradberry isn't as tall as Green, but he has long arms and is seldom out of position. Where it could get tricky for the Panthers is when Green lines up in the slot, an alignment that produced his three TDs last week against Baltimore. Green would have a much bigger size advantage over nickel back Captain Munnerlyn (5-9), although the Panthers at times have moved outside linebacker into a "big nickel" package.

The Panthers Win If ...

Here's what was crazy last week at Atlanta: The Panthers' patchwork offensive line actually outplayed the team's more-hyped defensive line, which was gashed by the Falcons' wide-zone blocking scheme. The Panthers' defense is at its best when it's stopping the run and forcing opponents into obvious passing situations, allowing pass-rushers Mario Addison, Kawann Short and Julius Peppers to go to work. That's

what the Panthers need to do Sunday while facing a Bengals rushing attack that is missing the injured Joe Mixon. If the front four plays better and gets Andy Dalton off his spot in the pocket, that bodes well.

Super Bowl Meter

No one in the Panthers' locker room was too torn up after the loss to the Falcons last week, the sign of a veteran team that knows there's a lot of football still to be played. This team was built with a win-now mentality, and that hasn't changed despite injuries to tight end Greg Olsen and offensive tackles Matt Kalil and Daryl Williams. This is an interesting, early-season test against an improved Bengals team that has done a good job in the early going at taking the ball away.

Game Prediction

Panthers 27, Bengals 24. Cam Newton is completing 69.0 percent of his passes, a figure well above his career mark and one boosted by the arrival of offensive coordinator Norv Turner. Newton has done a good job not forcing throws into coverage, checking them down instead to RB Christian McCaffrey (20 catches, second best in the NFL). But Newton's running will be the X-factor against the Bengals' pass rush, and the Panthers eke out a home win.

Denver Broncos at Baltimore Ravens

Sunday, 1 p.m. (ET)

From the Broncos' side (by Nicki Jhabvala)

What I'm Watching

The Broncos' first two games were won on fourth-quarter comebacks. Against Oakland last week, the Broncos turned in a dud of a first half — on both sides of the ball — but made up for it in the second with adjustments on the defense and scores on each of their four possessions.

Cleaning up the mistakes won't be easy on the road and against the Ravens' defense, but eliminating or at least reducing the turnovers will be critical for Denver. So, too, will correcting the issues in the secondary. Coach Vance Joseph said the Broncos played too soft in the coverage against the Raiders, a response after getting gashed on big plays by Seattle. The Broncos' defense is predicated on its pass rush and man coverage in the backfield, and a return to what they do best will be necessary at Baltimore.

The Broncos Win If ...

They win the turnover battle. Denver has won a franchise-record 32 consecutive games when winning the turnover battle (dating back to 2012) for the longest active streak in the NFL. In Week 1, Case Keenum threw three interceptions, but the defense had three takeaways. Against Oakland, the Broncos had one turnover to the Raiders' zero. A blocked extra point attempt by Denver LB Shaquil Barrett made all the difference.

The Broncos enter this game tied for 21st with a -1 turnover margin. The Ravens are tied for 25th with a -2 mark.

Super Bowl Meter

Easy now. The Broncos are 2-0, but they were 2-0 to start last year before the bottom fell out. This offense looks much improved on paper and in live games — it ranks fourth in net yards and second in rushing — but it's far from a Super Bowl contender yet. The defense that either led the league in passing yards

allowed or ranked among the top five over the last three years doesn't look as stout. In fact, it ranks 15th in net yards allowed (339.5 per game) and 21st against the pass (261.5).

They're still loaded with talent, though. These Broncs have the pieces for a playoff run, but they need a clean game and to pass their first major test on the road first.

Game Prediction

Ravens 27, Broncos 23. Week 3 also happened to be the Broncos' first road game of last season, too. In the 2017 season, they started 2-0, flashed a much improved offense and had a top-five defense in net yards and rushing yards allowed. But then they lost at Buffalo and exposed some of the weaknesses that would crater their season, such as the four turnovers on their last four possessions.

Although Broncos players and coaches have found solace in the team's resilience the first two weeks this year, their first road game has the potential to be a turning point. I think the Broncos will be competitive, but ultimately fall short of starting the year 3-0.

From the Ravens' side (by Jeff Zrebiec)

What I'm Watching

The Ravens were pushed around by Geno Atkins, Carlos Dunlap and the rest of the Cincinnati Bengals' defensive front last week and now they have to deal with Von Miller and the Broncos' cadre of talented edge rushers. The Ravens figure to try to regain some offensive balance after Joe Flacco threw the ball 55 times last week, the third most in his 11-year career. That means a much heavier dose of running back Alex Collins and the play-action passing game that should allow Flacco to take some deep shots. However, it will all start with making sure Miller, who has four of Denver's seven sacks, is contained. The Ravens used the sixth-overall pick in 2016 on left tackle Ronnie Stanley. He's been solid but slightly inconsistent and now he's dealing with a right elbow injury. The Ravens need Stanley to hold his own against Miller.

The Ravens Win If ...

Their defense harasses Case Keenum and forces a few turnovers. When the Ravens are at home, the defense tends to feed off the crowd, and it can create a snowball effect that leads to some lopsided games. Against the Bengals, the Ravens didn't have a sack or a turnover. With a perennially inconsistent offense, the Ravens aren't going to be able to consistently win games without the defense creating turnovers and opportunities. With the franchise's longtime defensive leader, Ray Lewis, set to be honored before Sunday's game and again at halftime, it certainly would be a good time for a turn-back-the-clock dominant defensive performance.

Super Bowl Meter

Dropping fast. By now, the fervor surrounding the season-opening 44-point win over the Buffalo Bills has subsided as everyone realizes the Bills are the worst team in football. Last week's loss to the Bengals brought back all the concerns about the Ravens, from a mistake-prone quarterback to an overmatched offensive line to a defense that struggles against decisive veteran quarterbacks. With a matchup against their longtime measuring stick, the Pittsburgh Steelers, looming, the Ravens need a quality performance Sunday.

Game Prediction

Ravens 20, Broncos 17. The Ravens' defense has not played well over the last couple of years when either cornerback Jimmy Smith and middle linebacker C.J. Mosley are not on the field. With Smith serving a four-game suspension and Mosley dealing with a knee injury, they might be without both players Sunday. However, they still match up relatively well against the Broncos' offense. Combine that with home-field advantage, the extra rest off of playing last Thursday and the right leg of Justin Tucker and they should be able to take care of business in a close one.

Los Angeles Chargers at Los Angeles Rams
Sunday, 4:05 p.m. (ET)

From the Chargers' side (by Sam Fortier)
What I'm Watching

Quite a few things!

- Philip Rivers vs. Marcus Peters: This is an easy one, because during his career in Kansas City, Peters intercepted Rivers four times, tied with Kurt Coleman and Brent Grimes for the most in Rivers' career. We know the LA quarterback will have no qualms about going after Peters' side of the field — that's why Peters respects him and said "I f*cking love Philip Rivers" — but it's still an important matchup to note because reportedly, through two weeks, Peters and the Rams' other starting cornerback, Aqib Talib, who's also familiar with Rivers, have allowed 37 passing yards combined this season. If the Chargers want to get moving, Rivers needs to sling it against some stiff competition.
- Rams' run game vs. Chargers' defensive line: It never became a glaring hole in either of the first two games, but the Chargers' depleted unit up front hasn't yet proved it can stop the run. Now, with a veteran offensive line blocking for one of the NFL's best running backs, the spotlight swings to the defenders up front. This should be one of the first real challenges for what the unit can do without injured starter Joey Bosa and suspended starter Corey Liuget. Todd Gurley can catch passes out of the backfield, but his days usually get going with his legs, so this will be an important matchup to watch.
- Derwin James vs. everyone: By everyone, I mean the offense and himself. In James' first two games, the Chargers safety has lined up high and in the box, made acrobatic pass breakups, delivered two sacks, whiffed on tackles and mixed up assignments. James knows he's been impressive yet imperfect in his first two games, and facing the Rams' offense in an environment like this is his biggest stage yet. How Chargers defensive coordinator Gus Bradley deploys him, Rams coach Sean McVay defends against him and James himself performs will be a fascinating subplot to a high-stakes game Sunday.

The Chargers Win If ...

They disrupt the Rams' tempo offense, avoid turning the ball over and stiff-arm self-defeatist tendencies (all a big ask!). The Chargers know the Rams are stocked with elite talent and are coming off a 34-0 win over Arizona, where they excelled in all three phases. Derailing them is a tough challenge, but it's not impossible.

Super Bowl Meter

Tepid, at best. The preseason hopes that this might be a Super Bowl roster nose-dived in Week 1, when the Chiefs outfoxed the Chargers, who helped by beating themselves in classic fashion. Since then, star edge rusher Joey Bosa hasn't returned and no one has tossed any coals in the engine of the Super Bowl hype train. Chargers fans just want to get through this weekend; they're not thinking about February.

Game Prediction

Rams 34, Chargers 28. The Rams' talent will most likely overwhelm the Chargers, and many expect that, so the most interesting thing about this game is seeing the barometer for where the Chargers are. It's unclear what we can glean from a sloppy loss against Kansas City and an odd, unsatisfying win over Buffalo (because, well, Buffalo), so this should be a true yard-marker for what the Chargers can do. There's always a chance, but the Rams are too strong with their offensive versatility and defensive front to be taken down this early.

From the Rams' side (by Vincent Bonsignore)

What I'm Watching

Honestly, this is a game I wish I had a few different sets of eyes for. There is so much to pay attention to. Rest assured I'll rewatch it a few times. But, in real time, I'm definitely watching Marcus Peters against whomever he's defending, and how many times Philip Rivers goes in that direction. Peters told me this week he has tremendous respect for Rivers because he isn't afraid to challenge him — some quarterbacks stay away — and that the competitor in him can't help but like that. That will be a really fun matchup.

I'm also looking at Andrew Whitworth and Rob Havenstein, the Rams' tackles, dealing with Chargers OLB Melvin Ingram. The Rams' offensive line has been really good so far keeping Jared Goff clean, and walling off Ingram will be the key to that Sunday.

You can go in any direction on the Rams' wide receivers vs. the Chargers' secondary, and it's on the Chargers to figure out a way to slow down Brandin Cooks and Robert Woods and Cooper Kupp. But that's a tough challenge, especially with Jared Goff seeing the field the way he does and throwing as accurately as he has been.

The Rams Win If ...

They take care of the ball. I know, I know, such a cliché. But it's true. They have shown they're such a complete team that I'm beginning to think it will take a combination of their own errors and another very good team taking advantage to beat them. If those two things don't happen in unison, the Rams are going to get you one way or another.

Super Bowl Meter

As Fat Joe and Remy Ma said: I'm all the way up!

Game Prediction

Rams 31, Chargers 14. I'm sure at some point the No. 1 team in The Athletic's Week 2 Power Rankings will trip up a little bit and someone will take advantage. But if they avoid any costly mistakes, it won't be this week.

Pittsburgh Steelers at Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Monday, 8:15 p.m. (ET)

From the Steelers' side (by Mark Kaboly)

What I'm Watching

The same thing everybody else is going to be watching Monday night and that's Antonio Brown. It's been well documented over the past week that Brown hasn't been happy with the results of the first two games. He has taken that frustration out on offensive coordinator Randy Fichtner and receivers coach Darryl Drake a couple of times. Even once it appeared that Ben Roethlisberger said "what a baby" in Brown's direction after a play when he didn't target the All-Pro. And then, of course, there was this week's drama, in which Brown tweeted "trade me let's see" to a former staffer who suggested Brown's numbers were inflated because of Roethlisberger, followed by a Brown no-show for a team meeting Monday.

There's no doubt the Steelers will try to force the ball to Brown more than usual even if that means more than the 16.5 targets he's averaging per game so far this year. While Brown's sideline demeanor will be monitored, his ability to put up "AB-like" numbers could determine the outcome.

The Steelers Win If ...

They have to prevent the splash play from the Bucs. Ryan Fitzpatrick has been able to hook up on some chunk plays with DeSean Jackson and O.J. Howard and the Steelers have allowed way too many, especially with Joe Haden on the sidelines. This defense can't afford to give up easy yards like they did last week against the Chiefs. Being a little less specific on the topic, they need to play better defense all around. Their communication was awful last week. At one point, one side of the secondary was playing one defense and the other half another. It resulted in an easy Travis Kelce touchdown. So, to recap, no big plays plus good communication will allow the strengths of their defensive line and outside linebackers to have an impact on the game.

Super Bowl Meter

Probably better than it feels. Tying the Browns and getting run over roughshod by the Chiefs aren't results that will get many people to believe this team has what it takes (defensively) to get to the Super Bowl. The offense, though, has been solid all the way around even though you probably wouldn't know that by Antonio Brown's reaction. They are averaging 29 points per game, can seemingly throw at will, have one of the better offensive lines, aren't even missing Le'Veon Bell that much and have a quarterback who, at 36 years of age, is still as dangerous with the football as ever. But that defense. Ugh!

Game Prediction

Steelers 31, Bucs 28. The Steelers aren't as bad as their record indicates and the Bucs aren't as good as theirs says they are. This game means a little more to Pittsburgh than the Bucs after a drama-filled week. Plus, the Steelers have typically rebounded from said drama-filled weeks with pretty solid performances (they had enough practice with that last year).

From the Bucs' side (by Greg Auman)

What I'm Watching

Pittsburgh has the NFL's No. 30 rush defense, giving up 152 yards per game, but I'm still more intrigued to see how Ryan Fitzpatrick and the Bucs try to continue their prolific downfield passing from their first two wins. Jarvis Landry went for 106 yards when the Browns tied Pittsburgh, and Kansas City had three players with at least 90 receiving yards in last week's win. If I'm tight end O.J. Howard, I'm encouraged by Travis Kelce getting open for 109 yards and two touchdowns against the Steelers. If Pittsburgh can get veteran Joe Haden back from a hamstring injury, that helps with containing Mike Evans and DeSean Jackson.

The Bucs Win If ...

Their defense can step up and compete at the same level the offense has in the first two games. I think Tampa Bay will be able to score against Pittsburgh's defense, at least into the mid-20s, but I don't know how the Bucs will contain Ben Roethlisberger after seeing them score 37 on Kansas City. Getting cornerback Brent Grimes back healthy is a huge step in that effort, giving them a proven, established player to work to try to neutralize Antonio Brown as much as any one defender can.

Super Bowl Meter

It's not quite as crazy as it felt answering this last week, when the Bucs still only had a single win under their belts. If they pull this one off under the enormous spotlight of "Monday Night Football," a 3-0 Bucs team will be the best story in the NFL for September. Once you're 3-0, there's every expectation of being a playoff team, which is in itself a major step for a team that hasn't been there in 10 years and hasn't won a playoff game since the Super Bowl in 2003.

Game Prediction

Bucs 31, Steelers 27. The hardest thing to anticipate is how well the Steelers respond to being against the wall of a potential 0-2-1 start. If the Bucs can limit their turnovers as they have in the first two games, they'll score in the passing game against a struggling Pittsburgh defense. Vegas says you could have gotten 30-to-1 odds picking the Bucs to open 3-0, but I think they can pull it off.

Broncos' 7 keys to victory over Ravens

By Troy Renck

KMGH

September 23, 2018

The Broncos were undefeated last season when doom first appeared. Against a Buffalo Bills team begging to lose on a field hotter than the sun's surface, the Broncos played ugly. Trevor Siemian threw clumsy interceptions, Emmanuel Sanders failed to convert a big play and Von Miller's fake handshake to Tyrod Taylor led to a silly taunting penalty, clearing the way for a Bills victory.

At 2-1, it seemed like a mole on freckle-free skin. It turned out to be a rash. The Broncos won only three more games the rest of the season, including one on the road at Indianapolis.

Fast forward to Saturday. The Broncos again sit 2-0, holding serve at home against teams they had to beat, Seattle and Oakland. Road games create real impressions. Can the Broncos pull off the upset at Baltimore where they are 5.5-point underdogs and have only triumphed once in five tries?

My Denver7 keys to a Broncos victory:

1) Cold Case no more

Forget Slim Shady, will the real Case Keenum please stand up? Keenum sprinkled pixie dust in the fourth quarters of the wins, completing 14 of 20 passes for 176 yards, no turnovers and one touchdown. He has thrown three first half interceptions, making his comeback grit necessary. Keenum threw five interceptions with 14 touchdowns in eight road games last season. He must protect the ball in a similar fashion, while looking to take chances on big strikes to Sanders.

2) Von snaps streak

The Ravens represent one of four teams Von Miller has never posted a sack against. If that streak continues in his third attempt, the Broncos will lose their first game. He poses a mismatch against left tackle Ronnie Stanley and right tackle James Hurst, a converted guard. Neither has allowed a sack this season, but the pair has yielded nine hurries. Miller seeks to strip the ball, and a turnover creating a short field could be the difference.

3) Run like the wind Bullseye

The easiest way to make a rowdy crowd sit on its hands is to run the ball. It gorges clock like Ms. Pacman does dots, and creates frustration in the opponent. The Broncos rank first in yards before contact, a testament to the improved offensive line. Phillip Lindsay, Royce Freeman and Co. must post 140 yards on the ground to secure the win, especially if star linebacker C.J. Mosley is limited in his return from a bone bruise in his leg.

4) Chris Cross

The onus can't fall on Von Miller to make the big play every week. Star cornerback Chris Harris Jr. is capable of creating havoc. He has played well against Baltimore, and embraces the idea of Joe Flacco trying to fit

the ball into tight windows for Willie Snead (14 targets in two games) or Michael Crabtree. Bradley Roby will be tested by speedy John Brown, who was targeted six times on mid-to-deep passes against Cincinnati.

5) Field goal flurry

Field goals lead to road losses. That's if you are kicking, not holding the home team to them. The Ravens are 9-for-9 in the red zone with five passing scores and four on the ground. Denver ranks tops on third downs, allowing only five conversions in 22 attempts. The Broncos have allowed two red zone scores. The issue is real: Can the Broncos' Tramaine Brock excel in coverage since he will likely be targeted even if Adam Jones plays?

6) Form a road block

The Ravens lament not using runningback Alex Collins more. He has 16 carries and four receptions in two games. Don't be surprised if Baltimore looks to exploit him in space against linebacker Todd Davis and Josey Jewell, who could see more time in nickel packages even if Brandon Marshall (knee) suits up. With pressure likely, Flacco could rely on Collins for checkdowns. The Broncos backers must be sound tacklers in space.

7) Start fast

Let's not forget the obvious. For the Broncos to win, they must start fast, and avoid first half turnovers. The Broncos lost seven times on the road last season, outscored by an average of 13.2 points per game overall in visiting parks. The outcome was decided by halftime on multiple occasions. Start fast, stay close, and let Brandon McManus trot out late.

RENCK PREDICTION: Ravens 24, Broncos 21.

Three Keys to Broncos-Ravens

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
September 23, 2018

The 2018 Broncos already have two more fourth-quarter comebacks than last year's team did. Even though the last two editions of the Broncos have the same number of wins after two weeks -- both at home -- those two rallies represent the most dramatic evidence of the difference between this season and 2017.

Case Keenum's leadership provides an intangible -- and crucial -- reason behind the Broncos' clutch capability. But another is their league-pacing ability to move with big plays, rather than a series of small ones.

Last year, the Broncos averaged 6.1 explosive plays per game (runs of 15 or more yards and passes of 20 or more yards). This year, their average is up to 8.5 per game, which is tied for first with the Los Angeles Chargers. Two of those gains came on last week's game-winning drive to a 36-yard Brandon McManus field goal.

No wonder the offense steps onto the field filled with the belief that it can put together scoring drives in high-leverage situations.

"Every time we step on the field, we know we have the potential to go and score. We don't step on the field and say, 'Hey, let's go three-and-out right here,' or 'Hey, we're going to kick a field goal,'" wide receiver Courtland Sutton said.

"We step on the field as an offense and say, 'We're going to go put six [points] on the board right now.' We have the weapons to do that in every aspect of our offense ... and that's one thing we see in the offense as a whole."

What are the keys to the Broncos extending their strong start to the season Sunday in Baltimore?

Stay balanced on offense

As one of two teams with at least 12 completions of 20 or more yards and three runs of 15 or more yards, the Broncos' balance extends to their ability to generate yardage in big chunks, rather than small bites.

As a result, the Broncos' last two weeks saw them extend their streak of wins in games when they ran for at least 140 yards and passed for at least 200 to 21. Their last loss when hitting those two mileposts came on Oct. 17, 2010 to the New York Jets.

"We have so many weapons, in the running game and the passing game," Sutton said. "And we go hand-in-hand off each other. When we're running the ball really well, we're passing the ball really well."

If the Broncos' balance allows them to consume yardage in gulps rather than sips, they can replicate the success that Cincinnati had against Baltimore's defense last week.

Don't let Baltimore establish the run

In the past five seasons, the Ravens have run for 10 or more first downs eight times, including 11 rushing first downs in their Week 1 thrashing of the Buffalo Bills. Baltimore is 7-1 in these games, with two of the wins coming in their last five regular-season contests.

During that same span, the Broncos have allowed at least 10 rushing first downs just four times -- three of which came during the 2016 season. They lost all three times. Denver hasn't allowed double-digit rushing first downs since Dec. 25, 2016 at Kansas City.

The Broncos come into the game leading the league with just four rushing first downs allowed. Their rate of one first down allowed every 10.8 carries also paces the NFL. If they maintain this, they can force Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco to fire deep, keeping him in the pocket longer, which will allow Denver's edge rushers to impact the game as they did in Week 1 against Seattle.

Don't be burdened by recent history

Denver is 1-9 in its last 10 road games, including four losses in games played at 1 p.m. in the Eastern Time Zone. This is the Broncos' worst road stretch since they lost 11 of 12 road games from December 2009 through October 2011.

Reversing that skid means winning in a stadium in which the Broncos are 1-5, including the postseason. Denver's only win over the Ravens in Baltimore came in 2012, when a second-quarter surge capped by a 98-yard Chris Harris Jr. interception for a touchdown silenced a crowd that is usually among the league's most raucous.

Keenum should help the Broncos' chances in that daunting environment. Last year, the Vikings won five of seven regular-season road games started by the unflappable Keenum, including five of the last six after a Week 2 defeat at Pittsburgh.

The key to success? Don't think about the history or the fans. Just play your game.

"Yeah, the crowd's going to be loud, or, yeah, we're going to have to change some things with how we communicate offensively," Sutton said. "But we're playing the game, and if you know the game plan and you go and execute it, there shouldn't be any worry of, 'Oh, we're playing on the road; they're going to be loud.'

"You shouldn't have to worry about those things because you're able to play fast when you know what you're supposed to be doing."

Mason's Mailbag: Comparing Case Keenum and Jake Plummer

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
September 23, 2018

@mrjoshua97

#AskMase Mase, are we going to see the old school '80s/'90s uniform again? The last time I remember seeing them was against Dallas in about 2001?

You're right on the last time you saw them -- Thanksgiving Day 2001. The Broncos defeated Dallas 26-24 in a rare (for that time, anyway) color-on-color matchup in which the Broncos wore orange jerseys and the Cowboys wore blue.

Do not expect to see these uniforms again until/unless the NFL changes its one-helmet-shell policy. As has been noted in this space before, that rule prevents the Broncos from having a lighter-blue helmet shell that such a throwback would require. Few things would make me happier for the 2019 season -- the NFL's 100th campaign -- than for the one-helmet-shell rule to be struck down, allowing for teams to commemorate the NFL's centennial season with true throwbacks, throwing all rules on the number of possible uniforms aside for one year.

Imagine if the Broncos could play a pair of games in brown and yellow, two more with the "crazy horse" logo of the 1960s (last seen during two throwback weeks during the NFL's 75th season of 1994), two in the classic orange-and-light-blue uniforms with the famous "D" logo and two in the blue jerseys and white pants that were unveiled for the 1997 season, with the rest of the season played in the primary current uniforms. For football-history nerds like myself, this would be glorious.

In the meantime, the Color Rush uniform with the old "D" logo and block numerals is as close as you will get at this time to a throwback. The Broncos will wear this uniform against Pittsburgh, and despite my general disdain for monochromatic uniforms, this uniform is my personal favorite of the Broncos' current ensemble.

@UKDenverBroncos

Do you think we will see more of Courtland Sutton this week after only registering one catch last week?
#AskMase

I don't know if we will see more overall plays from him; against Oakland, he played as many snaps as Emmanuel Sanders (54 of a possible 66, 81.8 percent). Case Keenum targeted him six times, but he finished with a single reception and a dramatic near-touchdown in the third quarter.

In the future, one-catch games for Sutton will be the exception, not the rule.

@ivantintor

Is Jordan "Sunshine" Taylor still on the team? If the answer is yes, do you believe he can be part of the 53-man roster? #AskMase

He's on the physically-unable-to-perform list as he completes his recovery from two hip surgeries, which means he is not eligible to return to the 53-man roster until Week 7. What Taylor gives the Broncos, at minimum, is an insurance policy. If one of their five wide receivers is injured, they could insert Taylor into the lineup and maintain the quality of their depth.

Taylor can fit on multiple special-teams units, as well, and his work as a punt returner late last season demonstrated that he can easily slide into that role if needed.

@TRSpidey

#askmase Care to compare Jake Plummer and Case Keenum?

Both came to Denver having guided their previous team to one playoff win and one playoff loss in their tenures. Both were selected as second-team All-Americans by at least one outlet in their college careers. (Keenum was a first-team selection in 2009 by the College Football News.) Both joined the Broncos in their seventh season after their first pro training camp. (Keenum is considered a six-year veteran because he spent his rookie season on the practice squad.)

Both threw three interceptions in their first Broncos start, but still guided the team to victory. Both threw three touchdown passes in their first two games with the Broncos -- both of which ended in wins. Both earned justified praise for their leadership, presence in the huddle and ability to get the team on the same page.

If I'm adding "Both took the Broncos to the playoffs in their first season as Denver's starter" in four months, I think you'll be pleased.

@gmaine10

What do you see the outcome of the Broncos-Ravens game to be? #askmase

Broncos 24, Ravens 23, as I told Steve Atwater and Ryan Edwards on "First and Ten at Ten" on Friday. Keenum and the offense have a fourth-quarter touchdown drive on their ledger in each of the first two games. I think they'll make it three in dramatic fashion.

Player Q&A: Domata Peko Sr.

By Ben Swanson

DenverBroncos.com

September 23, 2018

Domata Peko Sr.'s personality is as big as his play on the field. During a brief break in his schedule, he sat down with us to share some of the roots behind his personality, his NFL dreams and how he takes those roots and shares them with the locker room and his teammates.

Ben Swanson: For you and the rest of the defensive line, how do you ensure you can stay consistent and remain as one of the league's best defenses against the run?

Domata Peko Sr.: "Consistency is big, brother. For me, being consistent is going out there play after play and just grinding it out and going out there day by day and just trying to improve and never being complacent or content, just trying to get better. That's how you're consistent — if you never think you're there yet. You're always trying to prove, always trying to get better. ... You don't know if we're coming into this thing, coming in hot ready to go and ready to be one of the best defenses in the league."

BS: What is it you enjoy most about playing in the NFL — both big things and little things?

DP: "Me, man, I just love the life. Living the NFL life, because when I was a little kid, I dreamed about playing in the NFL and being able to live it — to live my dream — is amazing. That's what keeps me going, knowing that I'm living my dream every day."

BS: How long have you been dreaming about being an NFL player?

DP: "Since I was a little kid. I remember watching Junior Seau and Jerry Rice, back in the day, and Steve Young, and just saying, 'Man, I wish I could do that one day!' It's been a while. I've been dreaming about it since I was a little kid, and I've been living my dream for 13 years now, thank God."

BS: The Samoan nickname "uso" has become popular in the locker room because of you. What does it mean, and what bond does it signify?

DP: "It's cool. 'Uso' means 'my brother' in Samoan. It's really cool that you'll walk around the locker room and hear a lot of people saying it. Everyone's like, 'What's up, uso?' It's really cool, man. It's just a family vibe. Just showing others, 'Yeah, you're my brother. You're my friend.' That's what the team's about. It's not about yourself or me; it's about we, it's about us and it's about team. That's what I love about the word uso. It just really brings everyone together."

BS: What are other ways you stay connected to your Samoan roots?

DP: "I love listening to Samoan music and not only that, just the way I was raised, my mom and dad raised me being able to go back home to Samoa. They took me there when I was little and I learned my culture, learned my roots. All those teachings just stuck in my heart, man. I was able to just try to teach those same teachings to my kids, and those teachings are: respect, love, treating others how you want to be treated, respecting your elders and just always trying to compete and be hungry."

BS: I know music holds a lot of meaning in your life. How did that come to be the case in your family?

DP: "I think just being an islander, we're big reggae music guys. We love island music, and we love music, period. It's just being an islander. Music is a big part of our life. When you go to Samoa and you go to the islands, on Sunday ... the island just kind of shuts down. Everyone goes to church, everyone's singing, praising God and [doing so] through music and instruments, and stuff like that. Music, God, religion [are] real big in Samoa."

BS: This may be a little philosophical, but how do you describe the connection between music and personal expression and religion?

DP: "Well, I know a lot of times in church and worship, when you're worshipping God, you're worshipping Him through music, you know? That's why music is really big. For me, that's one of my favorite parts of church, going to worship and lifting my hands up to give thanks. It just gets me to a place where I feel peace and where I feel God's comfort and his love. That's why music is big for me, too."

Bud Light's Free Beer Fridges Weren't Quite as Smart as Promised

By Andrew Cohen
Sports Techie
September 23, 2018

Thirsty Cleveland Browns fans were treated to free Bud Light after Thursday night's win over the New York Jets. The Browns hadn't won a game in 635 days dating back to the 2016 season. But even in victory celebration, nothing is ever easy for Cleveland fans.

Before the start of the 2018 NFL season, Bud Light installed 10 "smart" refrigerators across the Cleveland metropolitan area. Stacked with free cans of beer, they were due to be unlocked when—and if—the Browns won a game.

Sounds like easy free beer, right? Maybe not. Cleveland fans have seen their hopes crushed too many times before. Remember 2012 Heisman winner Johnny Manziel? (Currently the second-string quarterback for the Montreal Alouettes.) Remember the 4-0 2017 preseason campaign? (Followed up by a 0-16 regular season.) Even the first game of 2018 was frustrating. (A stirring comeback from 21-7 down to the Steelers ended in a 21-21 tie, and no beer.)

When the Browns finally snapped their 19-game winless streak, defeating the Jets 21-17, "there was some difficulty getting them open," said Nick Harley, a Browns fan who attended the game and postgame celebration. "People thought they were gonna open like right away. There were large crowds of people chanting to get them open as the bar staff is fumbling to get [the smart fridges] open.

"But they opened, that's what matters."

Harley added that Bud Light charged interested bars \$1,500 up front to install the smart fridges, which included a free supply of roughly 200 tall boys. (A Bud Light tall boy retails for around \$2, meaning 200 might cost around \$400.) The hefty price tag along with the fact that customers would be receiving copious amounts of free beer meant many small local establishments elected to not purchase a smart fridge. Harley's family owns a bar in a Cleveland suburb, and could not afford to install one of the fridges.

Bars that did, couldn't quite get the free beer out fast enough. "They were supposed to pull the magnet off and a chain was just supposed to fall off, but from what I saw it didn't go off like that," said Colin Valencic, a friend of Harley's who was also at the game.

But though the fridges might not have been the sweetest deal for bars, and might not have been quite as "smart" as promised, they have secured their own special chapter in the history of Cleveland sports.

"It's officially a part of Cleveland lore," said Valencic. "The drought is over and that [beer fridge opening] was a symbol of the drought ending."

Weekly officiating video has become officially worthless

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
September 23, 2018

When Dean Blandino served as the NFL's senior V.P. of officiating, his weekly officiating videos were appointment viewing. Now, it's not clear why the league even bothers.

I bit my tongue on the topic after watching the video disseminated by the league after Week One. Now, with everyone debating the wisdom of the league's protection of quarterbacks and the accuracy of referee Tony Corrente's decision that a pair of plays that didn't look like roughing the passer were ruled roughing the passer at Lambeau Field last Sunday, the second regular-season installment completely fails to address the topic.

Some would say that the league avoided the topic because the league has decided to stay away from calling out officiating errors. Sunday Night Football rules analyst Terry McAulay, who spent 17 years as an NFL referee, explained this week on the #PFTPM podcast that the officials weren't fans of Blandino pointing out mistakes "every single week."

"The more he seemed to pile on the less credibility officiating had because here's the Vice President of officiating going on every week saying, 'Yep they screwed up again,'" McAulay said. "It affects morale. I know a lot of people really don't care about that but it is important. It affects that and it affects the credibility of the officiating program in general."

Of course, given that the league plans to use the roughing call against Packers linebacker Clay Matthews as a teaching tool, Riveron presumably would have been applauding the call. Either way, the omission of any reference to the roughing the passer issue underscores the fact that the league may as well go ahead and omit the officiating video in its entirety. As currently constituted, it's a waste of time to make it, and it's a waste of time to watch it.