

Kiszla: During beatdown in Baltimore, Broncos QB Case Keenum and coach Vance Joseph look like wrong guys for the job

By Mark Kiszla
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Here was another painful reminder why the Broncos have lost their way without the guidance of franchise owner Pat Bowlen. On the morning after a loss as ugly as this 27-14 beatdown in Baltimore, the boss needs to ask tough questions.

Does Denver have the right coach in Vance Joseph? And is Case Keenum the answer at quarterback?

While it's too early to declare definitely, I will offer two hints to those two difficult questions.

No! And no!

On a damp-and-dreary Sunday, Denver looked suspiciously like the same quarterback deficient and ineptly coached football team it was in 2017.

Let's start with Joseph. He has learned to demand more from the Broncos. But do players, who treat the coach with the respect of a substitute teacher, listen to Joseph? All the yellow laundry scattered across the field at M&T Bank Stadium shouted: No!

"Self-inflicted penalties," Joseph said. "A lot of penalties really were guys losing their composure. You're playing a tough Baltimore team on the road, and you have 13 penalties for 120 yards, and it really, honestly cost us 20 points. So that obviously killed us."

The cramped Denver locker room was filled with far too much frivolous laughter in defeat, especially after the Broncos blocked a punt and pounced on the Ravens with a 7-0 lead a mere 89 seconds into the first quarter, then spent the rest of the game singing a scarecrow's song: "If I only had a brain."

Give the Broncos credit for creativity in their stupidity. They were penalized for 12 men in the huddle, a punch at the bottom of the pile and a shove from a player standing on the sideline.

Yes, after Broncos safety Justin Simmons blocked a field goal in the second quarter, a 58-yard scoop-and-score by teammate Chris Harris Jr. was taken off the board. A touchdown that would have given Denver the lead was nullified.

"For nothing," said Harris, understandably disappointed with a ticky-tack call for a block in the back. "That wasn't nothing."

Point well taken, Mr. Harris. In fact, those were seven critical points taken away from Denver.

But if Broncos Country believes officiating cost Denver this victory, I'm afraid everyone who bleeds orange will have to open a vein for the remainder of this season. Joseph mismanaged the clock at the end of the first half, begged for a replay review not allowed by rule in the second half and generally looked like the same mystified coach John Elway nearly fired after a 5-11 disaster last year.

Well, this loss re-introduced déjà vu to all over again.

The No Fly Zone has been reduced to spare parts and broken hearts. When cornerback Adam Jones, who turns 35 years old in less than a week, reported too lame to suit up, a confused Broncos secondary got dressed down by Baltimore quarterback Joe Flacco, who completed 25 of 40 passes for 277 yards.

"We've got to figure out a way to try to confuse quarterbacks ... We're making it too easy for them," Harris said.

Trick somebody? Remember Super Bowl 50, when the Denver defense swaggered onto the field and picked a fight with Carolina quarterback Cam Newton? Now that same defense is reduced to smoke and mirrors. Worse, the cumulative stats of Seattle's Russell Wilson, Oakland's Derek Carr and Flacco suggest any NFL quarterback can look like the a MVP against the Broncos.

Those three QBs have completed 69.5 percent of their passes for five touchdowns, 863 yards and a 102.2 QB rating. Want context? Tom Brady posted a 102.8 QB rating in 2017. Either something changes in pass defense, and changes in a hurry (preferably before the Patrick Mahomes Air Show hits Denver), or the Broncos are going to miss the playoffs for a third year in a row.

Speaking of quarterbacks, will Elway regret not trading up for Sam Darnold of USC or taking Wyoming's Josh Allen in the 2018 NFL draft?

Keenum is as tough as barbed wire. But he's just another ranch hand. There's a reason he drifted from job to job in his NFL career. He held the football far too long in the pocket against the Ravens, like a QB that would rather do nothing than pull the trigger and misfire. In three games, Keenum has thrown three TDs and five picks, with a quarterback rating of 71.6 that's more Siemian-esque than Brady-esue.

Despite engineering seven consecutive drives that ended in a punt, Keenum was down by only 13 points as the Broncos advanced deep in Baltimore territory with more than nine minutes remaining in the fourth quarter. Then Keenum forced a pass into coverage, hoping his prayer would be answered by tight end Jeff Heuerman, but instead was cursed with an interception by Baltimore linebacker Patrick Onwuasor.

What went wrong?

"It," said Keenum, his words as sparse as his passing yards in defeat, "was a lot of things."

Isn't that the thing with bad NFL teams? It's always something, and usually too many things to count, much less correct.

Broncos Analysis: Flaws in secondary exposed in loss to Baltimore Ravens

By Ryan O'Halloran

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In 2015-16, the Broncos' pass defense was first in the NFL in fewest yards allowed. They put opponents in a vise grip with their combination of rush, coverage and ball skills.

Seems like a long time ago, doesn't it?

Opposing quarterbacks making big plays and posting high completion percentages against the Broncos continued to be the norm during Baltimore's 27-14 win over Denver here Sunday.

And besides the 13 penalties, that should develop into the major story-line from the Broncos' first loss: They can't cover on a consistent basis. Their depth, believed to be suspect during training camp and confirmed by the late August addition of 34-year old cornerback Adam Jones, isn't up to the organization's usual standard.

"Our entire back end has to play better vs. the pass," coach Vance Joseph said after the Broncos were denied their fourth 3-0 start in six years. "They couldn't run it, so they threw it."

And threw it and threw it and threw it.

Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco was 25-of-40 passing for 277 yards. He completed 62.5 percent of his attempts. He did not throw an interception. Last week Raiders quarterback Derek Carr completed 91.4 percent of his passes, an NFL record for a player with at least 30 attempts.

"That's two weeks in a row," Joseph said. "We have to shore it up on the back end and play much better."

Play much better or else the Broncos are in trouble.

"It's a collective group effort, but it does start with us," safety Justin Simmons said.

The pass rush is only effective if the quarterback has to survey the field. Last week, the Broncos could defend the lack of a pass rush (one sack) because Carr threw so quickly. But it's not like he was forcing throws. His targets were getting open.

The same kind of thing happened Sunday. The Ravens had several long-developing plays when the protection held up, but Flacco also took advantage of numerous breakdowns in the secondary. He picked on rookie cornerback Isaac Yiadom, inactive in Weeks 1-2, but active Sunday because of Jones' thigh injury and Tramaine Brock's first-quarter groin injury.

Through three games the Broncos have allowed quarterbacks to complete 69.5 percent of their passes and post a 102.2 rating. Compare that to just two years ago — 55.4 percent completion rate and a 69.7 rating.

The Ravens had five “explosive” completions (at least 16 yards), bringing the Broncos’ total to 16 allowed.

So the questions were asked around the M&T Bank Stadium visitor’s locker room: What’s the issue? And can it be solved? Players will always say something is fixable. They are also loath to publicly pinpoint the problem since that means lambasting their teammates.

So I’ll say it. The issue is personnel. This isn’t the Broncos secondary of cornerback Aqib Talib and safety T.J. Ward in their primes. And linebacker Brandon Marshall was limited against the Ravens because of a troublesome knee injury.

Is the game plan an issue? Is it too complex? Is that the reason why players were still directing traffic until right before the snap?

“It’s already very simple,” cornerback Chris Harris said. “It can’t get more simple.”

Harris offered that the Broncos’ defense has become too simple. “They know exactly what we’re in,” he said. “We have to try and trick them.”

Help isn’t on the way — anybody who can cover in a pass-happy league is under contract. And teams don’t trade good secondary players, either. If Jones and Brock are out against Kansas City, Yiadom will again get the No. 3 cornerbacks snaps.

“I just have to get better,” Yiadom said. “I’m not tripping about it. I’m learning every time I get a chance to be on the field. I go into every single game confident. That’s not going to change.”

Maybe the Broncos need to change their pressure man concepts and implement six- and seven-man blitzes to force the issue and ensure that Yiadom and cornerback Bradley Roby don’t have to cover for long. A seven-man pressure on third down against Flacco forced him to throw incomplete. Three games is enough of a sample size for a trend and the Broncos’ pass defense trend is disturbing.

The loss was disturbing and sets up a critical two-week stretch for the Broncos in general and Joseph in particular. Now we get to see how the Broncos get to handle real adversity (a regular season loss) and real problems (penalties).

When undefeated Kansas City arrives next Monday to Mile High, it will bring an undefeated record and star-in-the-making quarterback Patrick Mahomes, who has 13 touchdowns, no interceptions and a sensational 137.4 rating.

Even after a single loss, thinking, “Uh-oh,” isn’t a sign of panic as much as it is acknowledging reality. Average and flawed teams like the Broncos can’t allow quarterbacks to perform with pin-point accuracy.

“Just not playing well right now (against) the pass,” Marshall said. “I don’t think we’re playing with great technique. We have a lot to fix.”

Broncos report card and game balls from Week 3 against the Ravens

By Ryan O'Halloran

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Offense — F

A total debacle. The Broncos capitalized on Joseph Jones' blocked punt to score a first-drive touchdown and then followed with a 70-yard drive capped by Emmanuel Sanders' 35-yard run. And that was it. Ten drives and no points. ... The pass protection, so solid for two games, fell apart. The Ravens had three sacks and nine quarterback hits. Left tackle Garrett Bolles allowed a sack and was called for two holding penalties. ... The downfield passing game was non-existent. Case Keenum's longest completion was 22 yards. ... It is time to get receiver Courtland Sutton more involved (two catches for 37 yards), the same with tight end Jake Butt (two catches for eight yards).

Defense — F

The Broncos have not forced a turnover in two games. ... Playing short on cornerbacks because of injuries to Adam Jones and Tramaine Brock, rookie Issac Yiadom was forced to play as the nickel back and the Ravens rightly targeted him. ... Six Ravens players had at least two catches, which means quarterback Joe Flacco had his pick of who was open on a given play. ... The Broncos played well against the run (2.8-yard average), but that matters little when the rest of their game (stopping the pass, closing on third down and discipline) is so poor. ... In the third quarter, the Ravens converted five consecutive third downs.

Special teams — B

Punter Marquette King's struggles and a semi-phantom Domata Peko block in the back on Chris Harris' return of a blocked field goal by Justin Simmons, which negated a touchdown, kept the special teams from getting an 'A.' Peko appeared to be the guilty player even though referee Ron Torbert announced 77 for Billy Turner. ... The Broncos started the game with a Joseph Jones blocked punt, which led to a touchdown. ... Rookie DaeSean Hamilton did fine as the fill-in punt returner. ... King was again underwhelming, averaging a 39.3-yard net on seven attempts. The hang time and distance just isn't there.

Coaching — D

Only special teams coordinator Tom McMahon's work — blocked punt and blocked field goal — kept the coaches from getting an 'F.' ... An important week coming up for coach Vance Joseph, who saw his team commit 13 penalties and basically give itself no chance at winning. ... The Broncos lacked execution and discipline, a lethal combination. ... Joseph's challenge was a poor decision and he threw the red flag very quickly. He tried to challenge a second play that by rule he wasn't allowed to. ... Defensively, cornerback Chris Harris said Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco knew exactly what the Broncos were running. Not a good sign.

Broncos' block party a lone bright spot in loss to Ravens

By Kyle Fredrickson
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Broncos linebacker Joe Jones understands the reason why he made Denver's active roster. Namely, he is a monster on special teams.

"My goal is to make the Pro Bowl doing this stuff," Jones said.

Jones, a second-year undrafted player from Northwestern, took a step closer Sunday against Baltimore when the Ravens attempted a first quarter punt inside their own 15-yard line. The Denver front shifted to the left, Jones squared up an offensive tackle, and then used film study to break him down in one quick motion.

"Once he went to the outside shoulder, I just ripped inside and it was clear as day," Jones said. "It was just kind of the way it was dialed up."

Jones blocked the punt, Denver gained possession at the Baltimore 6 and running back Royce Freeman ran into the end zone on the next snap. The Broncos weren't done with their special teams block party, either. Baltimore's Justin Tucker attempted a 43-yard field goal midway through the second quarter when safety Justin Simmons made his move.

Simmons jumped through the space between Baltimore's long snapper and left guard. "At that point in time I'm thinking, 'Go make the play,'" he said. That choice paid off with an uninterrupted path to block the football. Had it not been for a questionable block-in-the-back penalty, cornerback Chris Harris' return to the end zone would have given Denver the lead.

"It was just something that we practiced all week," Simmons said. "(Special teams coordinator Tom McMahon) does a great job of self-scouting teams and looking at weaknesses to see what we needed. That was just one of the plays that we needed and executed."

The Broncos lost 27-14 but gained continued momentum for drastically improved special teams play in 2018.

"It means a lot to me," Jones said. "This is what I take pride in. This is what I work on every day before, during and after practice. I'm going to do everything I can to make plays."

Penalties doom Broncos in loss against Baltimore

By Kyle Fredrickson
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Phillip Lindsay firmly believes he did nothing wrong.

It doesn't change what happened here Sunday against the Ravens.

The Broncos trailed by a field goal with two minutes left before halftime when Baltimore linebacker Terrell Suggs strip-sacked quarterback Case Keenum in Ravens' territory. Players jostled for the football when Lindsay dove head first into the pile. A few seconds later he began punching his right arm into the scrum.

"I was on the ground and I went for the ball," Lindsay said. "I went to try and hit it out and I guess the ref saw that I was swinging at somebody. For me, I don't think I did anything wrong. But at the end of the day, that's not my call. So I definitely feel like I let my team down."

The Broncos were penalized and Lindsay was ejected.

Penalties became a common theme for the Broncos in a 27-14 rain-soaked loss.

Denver totaled 13 penalties for 120 yards. You have to go all the way back to Dec. 20, 2015, for a Broncos performance so ugly. In that game the Broncos committed 12 penalties for 127 yards in a loss against Pittsburgh. On Sunday, coach Vance Joseph described his team's many errors as "self-inflicted" and often based on "guys losing their composure."

Here's the Denver penalty breakdown: unnecessary roughness (Lindsay, cornerback Isaac Yiadom and left guard Ron Leary); defensive offside (linebacker Von Miller, defensive end Derek Wolfe); offensive holding (left tackle Garrett Bolles twice, right guard Connor McGovern twice); illegal use of hands (linebacker Todd Davis), neutral zone infraction (Miller), too many men on the field (team) and an illegal block in the back to erase a blocked field-goal return touchdown (offensive tackle Billy Turner).

Few errors were so glaring as the holds called on Bolles. The initial call negated a Broncos first down at midfield late in the third quarter. Denver punted eight plays later. The second call pushed the Broncos from the Baltimore 5-yard line to the 15 early in the fourth quarter. Keenum threw an interception on the next play.

"It wasn't my technique. It wasn't anything. I just didn't play good," Bolles said. "I hurt my team. I take full responsibilities for my actions. It was unacceptable. I didn't protect No. 4 (Keenum), which Mr. (John) Elway brought me in to do and I kept hurting my team. ... I apologize to my teammates and this organization for the way I played. It was unacceptable. You'll definitely see a different No. 72 next week."

Among the Broncos' most painful penalties was their last. Denver faced fourth-and-1 from the Baltimore 6-yard line with under 4 minutes left. The flag dropped prior to the snap for 12 men in the huddle — even as tight end Jake Butt plead his case to the official.

“As soon as I noticed 12 in the huddle, I stepped out,” Butt said. “I’m 5 yards away from the huddle. It’s the same thing as if a quarterback recognizes 12. He steps out and you don’t call it. I stepped out and I don’t see how they can call it.”

The next play was an incomplete pass, all but ending any chance at a comeback.

Back in the Broncos’ locker room afterward, Lindsay donned a blue suit worthy of a 70s disco floor. The problem? He wore it much earlier than expected Sunday. Lindsay’s lasting words reflected the attitude of a team seemingly bit with the penalty bug.

“That’s my fault,” Lindsay said. “It’s something I’m going to learn from that’s never going to happen again.”

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

By Kyle Fredrickson

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The Broncos fell to the Ravens, 27-14, on Sunday. Here are the game's best and worst:

UP: Special teams blocks. The Broncos batted the football down twice. Linebacker Joe Jones blocked the Ravens' first punt attempt deep in their own territory and Denver scored one play after recovering the football. Safety Justin Simmons joined the party in the second quarter with a field goal block when he came clean up the middle.

DOWN: Vance Joseph challenges. The Broncos' coach threw his red flag after an 8-yard Michael Crabtree reception that gave Baltimore second-and-short at the Denver 32 in the first half. Review showed Crabtree maintained possession with a knee and elbow in bounds and the call was upheld. Joseph later attempted a second challenge on the spot of a goal-line Ravens' rush before officials notified Joseph the play in question could not be challenged.

UP: Josey Jewell. The Broncos' fourth-round rookie made his first NFL start at inside linebacker. Jewell finished with six tackles (third-most among all Broncos defenders).

DOWN: Phillip Lindsay's emotions. Denver's breakout rookie running was ejected late in the second quarter after being flagged for allegedly throwing a punch (unsportsmanlike conduct) in a scrum following a sack of quarterback Case Keenum. Lindsay isn't afraid of anyone. He's still got to keep his head cool when thrown into the fire, however.

UP: Bradley Chubb. Denver's No. 5 overall pick recorded his first full NFL sack on the Ravens' second play from scrimmage. Chubb finished with two tackles.

DOWN: More untimely penalties. A whole bunch to choose from here (and plenty from the offensive line). Left tackle Garrett Bolles got flagged twice for holding with the Broncos in scoring position. Center Matt Paradis also received two hold calls. Right guard Ron Leary earned a 15-yard unnecessary roughness call that pushed the Broncos out of field goal range. The most damning Denver penalty, though, occurred late in the fourth quarter with 12 Broncos in the offensive huddle as they attempted to convert fourth-and-one at the Ravens' 6-yard line.

UP: Broncos uniforms. The all-whites with blue helmets is as fresh as it gets for Denver.

DOWN: Keenum's heroics. The Broncos quarterback led fourth-quarter comeback drives in the first two games but but he couldn't muster the same magic in Baltimore down two possessions. Keenum threw a red zone interception with about 9 minutes left. He had a 67.3 passer rating.

DaeSean Hamilton assumes Broncos' punt return duties in loss to Ravens

By Ryan O'Halloran

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The Broncos' punt return depth chart started Sunday's game against the Ravens minus Adam Jones, who was scratched because of a thigh injury. On Baltimore's first punt, rookies Phillip Lindsay and DaeSean Hamilton were both in return position.

But Hamilton assumed the duties when Lindsay was ejected late in the first half.

Hamilton had three returns for a 10.3-yard average, including a long of 13. Even if Jones is cleared to play next week against Kansas City, Hamilton may have done enough to earn another shot.

"It was something that I was obviously prepared for," Hamilton said. "I do that (punt return) stuff every day in practice. I treated it like it was nothing new. It was cool being out there and contributing any way I could."

Just being back to catch the punt wasn't enough for Hamilton, who is without a catch in three games.

"I'm not the type of person to just be grateful to be in this position," he said. "I'm the type of person who wants more at the same time."

Broncos Briefs: Josey Jewell makes starting debut as Brandon Marshall manages knee injury

By Ryan O'Halloran

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Broncos inside linebacker Josey Jewell made his first NFL start and played in the base and nickel packages in Sunday's loss to Baltimore.

And if Brandon Marshall's knee issue doesn't improve, Jewell may get significant minutes next week against Kansas City. Jewell made six tackles (one for lost yardage) and also had a fine downfield pass break-up.

Jewell played 21 snaps in the first two games, which he said helped "a lot, actually, just being able to get the speed down a little bit and understanding how we play. Practice and games help out a ton, but (playing in the games), you get used to the defense and what the guys in front and behind you are doing."

Inside linebacker Todd Davis said: "He did a great job. He came in, made a lot of plays and I was excited and proud with the way he played."

Marshall was limited to playing in "dime" situations, the only linebacker when the Broncos had six defensive backs. He made two tackles.

"I knew at the beginning of the week I would have this role if I could play," he said. "They're just trying to be careful."

Asked if he's concerned the knee injury will linger, Marshall said: "Absolutely. I'll keep getting treatment so I'll be able to play a full game."

Sanders' play works again. The Broncos' offense was chugging along well when receiver Emmanuel Sanders scored on a 35-yard touchdown run with 7:02 left in the first quarter.

The Broncos would not score again. The offense finished the game with eight consecutive punts, an interception and a failed fourth down play. It was Sanders' first career rushing touchdown and his longest career rushing attempt.

"Same exact play (as in the preseason at Washington) so we're 2 for 2 on that play," Sanders said.

Sanders was held in check as a receiver, his five catches going for only 38 yards (a long of nine yards).

"It's our first loss of the year; last year was last year," he said. "But we have to keep this locker room positive. We have to get back to work, correct the mistakes, keep moving forward and don't point fingers."

MRI next for Brock. Cornerback Tramaine Brock sustained a groin injury in the first half and did not return.

Brock began the game as the third cornerback because Adam Jones (thigh) was inactive.

“It was on one of the third-down stops at the beginning of the game,” Brock said. “I turned out of my break. I don’t know what it was.” Brock said he will undergo an MRI on Monday.

Footnotes. The Broncos have lost 10 of their last 11 road games dating back to 2016. “All those games we lost probably had something to do with penalties and turning the ball over,” receiver Demaryius Thomas said. “Our main thing is doing what we can control. We can control the penalties. We can control the turnovers.” ... Right tackle Jared Veldheer played a week after sustaining a concussion against Oakland and missing practice Wednesday and Thursday. “I felt good going into (Sunday),” he said. “I wasn’t thinking about it. Just going out there and playing to win the game.”

Broncos running back Phillip Lindsay ejected from Ravens game for throwing punch

By Kyle Fredrickson

Denver Post

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Broncos rookie running back Phillip Lindsay was ejected in the second quarter of Sunday's game here for throwing a punch in a scrum at the bottom of the pile.

Lindsay, who finished with 20 yards rushing on four carries, was flagged initially for diving into a pile of players after Broncos quarterback Case Keenum was strip-sacked by Ravens linebacker Terrell Suggs two minutes before halftime. Lindsay, while laid out on his back, engaged with cornerback Marlon Humphrey and threw some jabs.

The Broncos trailed 20-14 at the break and had two running backs left on the roster: Royce Freeman and Devontae Booker. Denver cornerback Tramaine Brock also exited the game with a knee injury.

Kiszla: The long, hard road back to respectability for Broncos must start in Ravens' house of pain.

By Mark Kiszla
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In an NFL city that has left a big purple bruise on the Broncos, traffic came to a standstill Saturday, and everywhere you looked, there were people dressed like Ray Lewis, as a crowd of No. 52s gathered for a parade to honor the Ravens' legendary linebacker.

For a team stuck on a bumpy road for way too long, Baltimore might be the last place the Broncos want to be.

Lewis retired from football six years ago, but remains the beating heart of this proud and gritty city. He will come out dancing on the field Sunday, working the stadium into a frenzy prior to kickoff against the Broncos, then be back at halftime for what's certain to be an emotional ceremony, as Lewis is presented with a ring commemorating his induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

"Our city is about love! Our city is about hope! Our city is about faith! All things are possible," shouted Lewis, preaching to the crowd on the parade route.

"If today is Ray Lewis Day, imagine God smiling right now!"

Heaven help us. Is this really where Denver's comeback on the road begins?

The road is where Vance Joseph almost lost his job. His opening season on the Broncos sideline nearly became his final season as coach, because Denver went 1-7 on the road.

Even worse: The team was not even competitive on the road, being outscored 225-117. (Nobody asked me, but if the Broncos did not win at Indianapolis in December for their lone road victory, I firmly believe Joseph would have been fired.)

The Broncos are 2-0. But they have beaten two weak foes. By a total of four points. At home.

Before Denver can be taken seriously as a playoff contender, this team must prove it has truly buried the nightmare of last season's last-place finish. The best way the Broncos can do it? Win on the road.

On this trip to Baltimore, maybe the Broncos could forget a toothbrush or a change of underwear without it being a disaster. But there is absolutely one thing that couldn't be left out of the suitcase.

"We've got to pack our defense," Broncos cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said. "The defense has to lead the way on the road. We have to be able to come out there and set the tone."

The Broncos lost their reputation as an elite NFL defense on the road. They gave up 28 points per game on the road in 2017. The Eagles shattered the aura of invincibility by scoring 51. But giving up 35 points in Miami? To the Dolphins? Now there was irrefutable proof Denver's defense had misplaced its mojo.

Every time I think of Lewis and the Broncos, it hurts. He retired with 1,336 tackles, and it only seems as if half of them resulted in a Denver player being knocked to the turf in Baltimore.

Lewis started five home games against Denver in his career. The Broncos won in 2012, when he didn't play. Lewis, however, never lost on his home turf to Denver, winning by an average score of 30-7. Ouch.

He won't suit up for the Ravens for this game. But his mere presence on the field will be enough to haunt Broncos Country with some scary flashbacks.

This will be a slugfest. It doesn't figure to be pretty. If the Broncos want to end their futility on the road, the Denver defense better have packed its A game.

On a cloudy morning in Baltimore, Lewis sounded very much like a man running for mayor. He bellowed to the crowd: "Turn to the person you don't know and give 'em a hug! Baltimore, we're a city of love! Yeah, hug each other, baby!"

For the Broncos, this is a city of pain. Please don't hurt 'em, Ray.

Altered offseason routine already paying dividends for Emmanuel Sanders

By Ryan O'Halloran

Denver Post

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The meditation sessions lasted 20 to 30 minutes most mornings during the offseason. Just a small slice of his day. But for Broncos receiver Emmanuel Sanders, they were long enough to reflect on the previous day and reset his mind for the hours ahead.

There was plenty to forget and plenty to think ahead about.

An acknowledgement of how discouraging his 2017 season was because of injury and a quarterback carousel, and acutely aware of how a player's production can decline when they reach his age (31), Sanders rededicated himself this offseason. He stayed in the Denver area instead of returning home to Houston during the six-week summer break and was connected with Resilience Code, a fitness-and-medical facility in Englewood that helped him zero in on his routines.

He embraced, instead of pushed away, the idea of being a leader to rookie receivers Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton. And he put last year behind him.

"Night and day (difference) from when I first got here to now," said receivers coach Zach Azzanni, who was hired in January. "Last year stuck with him. He has a chip on his shoulder and you can tell. It's been fun to watch."

Sanders has been fun to watch during the Broncos' 2-0 start.

He's off to his best start since 2015, when he recorded 16 catches in the first two weeks. He leads the Broncos with 14 receptions for 231 yards and a 16.5-yard average. Although not targeted until the second half of the Oakland game a week ago, Sanders has developed into a trusted option for quarterback Case Keenum.

"I'm back to enjoying football," Sanders told The Denver Post. "Last year was tough, but I feel like with every negative situation, there is a silver lining. This year is my silver lining. I'm re-amped, re-juiced and I'm loving football again."

Maximizing every day

Sanders' 2017 was similar to the Broncos as a whole — a disappointing debacle. After averaging 85 catches for 1,190 yards and 6.7 touchdowns in his first three years with the team, a nagging ankle injury caused him to miss five games and caused his production to sink (47 catches for 555 yards and two touchdowns). It was his worst statistical season since he was a backup for Pittsburgh in 2011.

"It just sucked," Sanders said.

A high ankle sprain is generally considered worse than a broken bone, but his did not require surgery.

When the offseason started, Sanders had two goals: Get healthy and explore new avenues to both return to his previous form and extend his career into a second decade.

"I made up my mind that I was going to be great," he said.

Connecting with Resilience Code was Sanders' big move. Broncos neurosurgeon Chad Prusmack founded the facility in 2016. Athletes such as Sanders receive medical testing (including blood work), performance testing and recovery and dietary suggestions.

"It's a great rehab facility," Sanders said. "They've helped me in so many ways and they're still helping. They helped me understand my body."

Sanders said the blood tests served as a guide for changing his diet and he has "spent a lot of money," on deep-tissue massages. A massage therapist at Resilience Code inspired Sanders to change his diet, stressing how eating better would equal a better mindset.

"If I'm trying to clear my head and get in the right direction mentally, I needed to clean up my diet," Sanders said. "It's not even a diet anymore, it's a lifestyle. No pork. No fried foods. If it's chicken, it's farm-raised. If it's fish, it's wild-caught. It's helped me open my mind and get me out of the cloud and hone in to be great day in and day out."

The new approach includes meditation, which he said allows him to understand how to better maximize every day. Since the season began, Sanders uses his drive to the Broncos' facility to clear and focus his mind.

"I turn off the radio and reflect," he said. "The attitude I have. The leadership skills I want to give. So much self-reflection, which is my way of tapping into some kind of greatness."

Perhaps the biggest change for Sanders came after mini-camp when he decided to stay in Denver to avoid the distractions of home. "In Houston, I have family and I was going out and enjoying myself. But I spent the whole offseason in Denver. ... I spent a lot of quality time just focusing on who I am as a man and as a player."

Said Azzanni: "You can see the difference in him buying into the things that worked on his schedule and on top of that, doing the things I've asked him."

'He's just a competitor, period'

Coach Vance Joseph credits Keenum's arrival as a boon for Sanders.

"Having Case has given him new life and energy," Joseph said. "As a veteran receiver who's played with special quarterbacks (such as Ben Roethlisberger and Peyton Manning), him watching Case work and him watching Case practice has given him a lot of energy.

"I've been really proud of how he played."

Sanders shined during the training camp practices even while his ankle didn't feel totally right.

“I would practice and the last two periods, it would be sore and I would be like, ‘How will I play an entire game?’” Sanders said. “But then one practice, it didn’t get sore and it hasn’t gotten sore since.”

It is natural to connect the drafting of Sutton and Hamilton to Sanders ramping up his urgency level. Sanders’ cap number jumps from \$10.9 million to \$12.9 million in 2019, the final year of his contract.

If Sutton and Hamilton are viewed as top-three receivers next year, it could make Sanders or Demaryius Thomas — or both — expendable.

“That’s not even in the back of my mind,” Sanders said. “I love Broncos Country. I love this organization.”

Said Azzanni: “I don’t think he’s wired that way. He just wants to be the best at what he does. I don’t think it had any bearing — he’s just a competitor, period.”

Part of being a competitor is being a servant leader. After Wednesday’s practice, Sanders worked on a route with tight end Jake Butt. After Thursday’s practice, he pulled Sutton aside to talk about a technique.

The offseason training. The changing of habits. The expanded leadership role. It’s all in the name of Sanders reaching a third Super Bowl and winning a second ring.

“I’m 31, nine years in the league and I know when I say something, it goes a long way,” Sanders said. “I have to be conscious of what I say and my energy around the building because I know players are looking at me and trying to understand how to be a pro.”

Lindsay ejected as Ravens beat Broncos, 27-14 in wild game

By Mike Klis

9 News

Sept. 24, 2018

What a waste. The Broncos not only blocked a punt that led to a touchdown, they blocked a field goal that should have been a touchdown.

Yet, the Broncos didn't win as 13 penalties cancelled out their big special teams plays in a 27-14 loss to the Baltimore Ravens here on a soggy, gloomy Sunday afternoon at M&T Bank Stadium.

The Broncos became only the second NFL team in the last six years to lose while blocking two kicks, joining the Mike McCoy-led San Diego Chargers in a November, 2013 game.

"It probably cost us 20 points today, just self-inflicted penalties," said head coach Vance Joseph. "And a lot of the penalties were about losing our composure. We can't do that. We're playing a tough Baltimore team on the road and we have 13 penalties for 120 yards and it honestly cost us 20 points out there."

The blocked punt by Joe Jones led to a touchdown, but a blocked field goal by a leaping Justin Simmons that had a touchdown return by Chris Harris Jr. called back by a questionable penalty. Baltimore also had an interception return for a touchdown that was called back by penalty.

There were costly penalties, injuries that left the Broncos' secondary shorthanded, a lead change, an alleged punch thrown by Phillip Lindsay that got the Broncos' rookie ejected, strip sacks, thrills, spills, nervous moments and touchdowns.

"I didn't think I did anything wrong," Lindsay said. "It was playing football. And they seen something that they didn't feel was right."

About the only steady element of the Broncos-Baltimore Ravens game here Sunday afternoon at M&T Bank Stadium was the rain. Then again, there wasn't much rain late in the second quarter and in the fourth. A paid crowd of 70,156 – there were far fewer sitting in the wet seats – witnessed a doozy. The Broncos and Ravens are both 2-1 on the season. The Broncos play the 3-0 Kansas City Chiefs and their red-hot quarterback Patrick Mahomes next Monday night in Denver.

Despite a steady downpour that began several hours before the game, there was a wild, entertaining, high-scoring start.

It was 20-14 at halftime, but the Ravens tacked on another touchdown drive with their first possession of the second half. Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco was outstanding in completing 25 of 40 for 277 yards and a touchdown. Broncos quarterback Case Keenum struggled, as he completed 22 of 34 for 192 yards and an interception.

"For me, I've got to do a better job at getting the ball out at the correct time and to the correct receivers," Keenum said. "It was a lot of things for us today. I missed some guys, when they were open, and it seemed to me we had a lot of tipped balls."

A blocked punt by Jones gave the Broncos their first possession at the Ravens' 6-yard line. A handoff to Broncos' starting running back Royce Freeman on the first play was a touchdown as the rookie scooted through a huge hole.

The Ravens came back thanks to a long kickoff return by Tim White and 15-yard unsportsmanlike penalty on Broncos' rookie Isaac Yiadom that started Joe Flacco's drive in Denver territory. Yiadom was on the sideline for the kickoff and said he only made a self-preservation move after White was tackled into his legs.

"The dude, I guess he got tackled out of bounds and he was rolling out of bounds, I was standing right there and he was about to roll into my legs so I jumped and they threw the flag," Yiadom said. "He was going to roll underneath me so I jumped and they threw the flag. It was crazy but I did not push him or nothing."

That penalty may have led to 7 of the 20 points Joseph referred to. A 30-yard catch-and-run from Flacco to wide-open tight end (how many times has that description been read in the past three seasons) Mark Andrews put the Ravens in the red zone. A 6-yard touchdown run by Alex Collins finished another successful red-zone possession for the Ravens.

At that point they were 10 of 10 scoring touchdowns in the red zone.

The action was just getting started. On the Broncos' next drive, they went 70 yards for a go-ahead touchdown. Case Keenum picked up two, third-and-longs during the march. He hit Courtland Sutton for 16 yards to convert a third-and-11 and running back Devontae Booker for 7 yards on third-and-6.

The drive ended with a perfectly executed end-around handoff to receiver Emmanuel Sanders who ran 35 yards through an open prairie of wet grass for a touchdown.

It was 14-7 Broncos with a little more than 7 minutes left in the first quarter.

The Ravens came back on a 52-yard field goal by Justin Tucker and a 12-yard touchdown pass from Flacco to Javorius Allen. That Baltimore up, 17-14 with 8:26 still left in the first half.

"We let 'em off the ropes," said linebacker Brandon Marshall, who didn't start because of a knee injury but played on passing downs. "We didn't stop them enough. They converted too many third downs."

The Ravens were about to go up, 20-14, but Tucker's 43-yard field goal was blocked by Simmons, who leaped straight up the middle. It was reminiscent of when Simmons made a running leap over the line to block an extra point at New Orleans two years ago. The running leap has since been outlawed, but Simmons was lined up at the line.

"As long as I'm considered on the line of scrimmage I'm allowed to jump over him," he said.

What happened next is where the Broncos thought they got jobbed. Chris Harris Jr. recovered for the Broncos and returned it 58 yards for a touchdown. His return was called back on a block-in-the-back penalty on Domata Peko Sr. The referee called out No. 77 Billy Turner for the penalty but he wasn't on the field. Well behind Harris' return, Peko nudged Baltimore's No. 77 -- Bradley Bozeman -- from the side. Bozeman then took a World Cup-worthy dive to draw the flag.

No touchdown for Harris.

"We score there, we win," Harris said. "We go up (20-17 with extra point coming), we've got momentum. It changed the game, man. It changed the game. That's a killer. That's how the game went today. Penalties kept taking it away."

And then it got worse. The Broncos were still hoping to convert the block into points, but Keenum's protection began to break down. Ravens' star pass rusher Terrell Suggs beat Broncos' left tackle Garrett Bolles on the blind side and strip sacked Keenum.

The ensuing pile up for the fumble left Lindsay down on his back, a position from where he was apparently caught taking a swing at a Raven. Lindsay respectfully disagreed.

"I was trying to hit the ball," Lindsay said. "The ball ended up squirting back out during that play. I was going for the ball and they thought I swung at somebody."

The same feistiness that made him the first undrafted rookie in NFL history to have at least 100 yards from scrimmage in each of his first two games also made him the first undrafted rookie to have 100 yards in each of his first two games and get ejected in his third.

"I feel horrible," Lindsay said. "Because I'm not out there for my team. That's my fault. It's something I'm going to learn from and not have happen again."

Tucker ended the crazy first half with another 52-yard field goal – his eighth in a row from at least 50 yards. The Ravens nearly had another touchdown, but an 89-yard interception return by linebacker Patrick Onwuasor was called back when Baltimore defensive lineman Matthew Judon ran into the back of a retreating Keenum.

"We blew it," said Sanders, who besides the first rushing touchdown of his career had five catches for 38 yards. "Plain and simple. We blew it."

Breakdown of how six Broncos penalties caused up to 38 points

By Mike Klis

9 News

Sept. 24, 2018

Not only was Vance Joseph not exaggerating when he said penalties cost the Broncos 20 points, he greatly underestimated the damage.

The Broncos had 13 penalties for 120 yards. That's the bad news. Here's where it gets worse: Six of the penalties impacted up to 38 worth of points. And that's not even including the penalty that got the Broncos' most exciting playmaker, rookie Phillip Lindsay, ejected from the game in the first half.

The Broncos only lost by 13 points – 27-14 to the Baltimore Ravens. So when the Broncos said afterward they committed too many penalties to win, they couldn't have fully grasped the extent.

Here are the six critical penalties that either helped the Ravens score or took scoring opportunities away from the Broncos – to a potentially total value of a whopping 38 points:

***After quickly going up 7-0, the Broncos gave up a long kickoff return to Tim White, who then drew a questionable, 15-yard unnecessary roughness penalty from Isaac Yiadom, who had been minding his own business on the sideline.

The Ravens started their offensive series at the Broncos' 48 from where they needed just five plays to score the tying touchdown.

Vance Joseph can justly state the Yiadom penalty led to 7 points.

***The most devastating call was the block-in-the-back penalty during Chris Harris Jr.'s 58-yard touchdown on a blocked field goal return. The call was made against the Broncos' No. 77, which is Billy Turner, who wasn't on the field.

The official meant to call it on Domata Peko Jr., who nudged Baltimore's No. 77, Bradley Bozeman.

The Broncos got the ball at the Baltimore 49, but they wound up punting. There is a no-doubt-about-it: that penalty cost the Broncos 7 points and arguably 14 points total with the Yiadom penalty.

***Lindsay not only was ejected late in the second quarter, he was assessed a 15-yard penalty for fighting. Lindsay had just got warmed up, too, running for 8 and 7 yards on back-to-back carries just before his disqualification.

Who knows how many points Lindsay is worth? He was the Broncos' best offensive player through their first two games. We won't even count that penalty on the Broncos' wasted point total.

***The most underrated, key penalty of the game was when Denver defensive end Derek Wolfe was flagged for offside on Baltimore's first possession of the second half. The Broncos had just stopped the

Ravens on third-and-4 with an incomplection. The 5-yard penalty gave Baltimore a first down and 11 plays later, it scored a touchdown to make it 27-14.

Joseph has every right to say this 5-yard penalty was worth 7 points, lifting the wasted total to 21 points.

***Midway through the third quarter, the Broncos improbably had a 12-play drive that ended with a punt.

The drive was set back by holding penalties against, first, left tackle Garrett Bolles, then right guard Connor McGovern and finally -- the most damaging -- left guard Ron Leary was called for unnecessary roughness. The 15-yard penalty pushed the ball back on fourth down from the Ravens' 27-yard line -- where Brandon McManus would have had a 45-yard field goal attempt -- to the 42, where Marquette King was brought in for a coffin corner punt.

Call the Leary penalty worth 3 points, or 24 points total wasted.

***With 9:25 left in the fourth quarter, the Broncos had second-and-goal at the 5. A holding penalty on Bolles made it second-and-goal at the 15. The distance pretty much makes it a passing down and quarterback Case Keenum was intercepted.

It can be argued Bolles' penalty cost the Broncos' 7 points, or up to 31 points total.

***Later in the quarter, the Broncos had fourth-and-1 at the Ravens' 6. The Broncos were penalized 5 yards for having 12 men in the huddle. That left a much less manageable fourth-and-6 situation and an incomplection ended the drive. Another 7 points, or 38 points total.

Take away six penalties and the Broncos play pretty well.

Elway looking for corner help; Harris wants better scheme

By Mike Klis

9 News

Sept. 24, 2018

What, you don't think John Elway knows the Broncos need cornerback help?

Elway knows. The Broncos' general manager has been looking for a cornerback. He wants a cornerback. But the way it works with the cornerback position, such a player doesn't become available just because a team needs one.

"We're always looking for somebody out there who can come in and help us," Elway said after his Broncos suffered their first loss of the season, a 27-13 setback to the Baltimore Ravens. "Especially at corner. Everybody wants one and everybody wants one at the right time, but somebody has to be there and someone has to be willing to make a move. So, we'll continue to look at that. It looks like Adam will be back healthy next week so that'll help."

The Broncos need to address cornerback depth after No. 3 cornerback Adam Jones missed the game Sunday with tightness in his hamstring or thigh, and his replacement, Tramaine Brock, went down early in the game against the Baltimore Ravens with a groin strain.

"The groin had been bothering me," Brock said. "But I wanted to play and when I turned to open up to run it grabbed on me."

Brock said he wasn't sure how seriously he strained the muscle and would know more after he undergoes an MRI on Monday morning.

With Jones and Brock down, the Broncos played more than three quarters Sunday with only three cornerbacks – and one, Isaac Yiadom, was making his NFL debut.

Yiadom is a third-round rookie who didn't dress in the Broncos' first two games. Jones and Brock are both on the wrong side of 30. Is Yiadom ready to become a No. 3 corner behind Chris Harris Jr. and Bradley Roby, ready or not?

"One hundred percent," he said. "I study every single week. Even when I wasn't playing I was studying. I go into every single game to compete to the best of my ability and do what I got to do and just try to find a way to win."

Jones is expected to be ready to play Monday night against the Kansas City Chiefs, whose quarterback Patrick Mahomes, has a record 13 touchdown passes against zero interceptions in a 3-0 start.

Jones' return would help, but Harris is more concerned about the scheme.

"It doesn't matter who we have out there," Harris said. "We've got to confuse the quarterback. He knows everything that we're doing. We've got to try and trick him."

See, Derek Carr completing 29 of 32 in week 2. And Joe Flacco 24 of 36 for 280 yards going into the fourth quarter in week 3.

“The quarterbacks are getting the ball out fast, they’re not thinking about where they have to go,” Harris said. “So, we’ve got try to confuse them as a defense. Disguise better as a whole in the secondary and move around. We can’t just be stagnant, sitting ducks. Right now, we’re stagnant, we’re not moving around, we’re not doing anything to confuse the quarterback and it’s very easy right now for them.”

Bronco notes: Suggs gives Bolles tough day at office

By Mike Klis

9 News

Sept. 24, 2018

For 16 seasons offensive tackles tasked with blocking Terrell Suggs wound up having a bad day.

It was Garrett Bolles' turn Sunday.

"Suggs is a helluva football player," said Bolles, the Broncos' second-year left tackle. "But it's nothing I haven't seen, I haven't done. I just let him get to me and that's what happened today. I just didn't play my game. I hurt us."

Suggs was overshadowed by Ray Lewis and Ed Reed most of his career, but he should join them in the Pro Football Hall of Fame one day. To help Bronco fans understand how good he is, Von Miller would need four more good seasons to reach Suggs' 128.0 career sacks that is now tied for 15th all-time.

Suggs beat Bolles for 1 1/2 sacks and drew two holding penalties Sunday.

"I didn't play good," Bolles said. "I made mistakes that hurt my team and I take full responsibility for everything I did out there today. I wasn't myself and that's unacceptable. So, I apologize to my teammates. But I tell you one thing, we continue to battle, we continue to fight through those things and we're going to be all right. Things didn't fall our way today and it's definitely my fault and I take full responsibility."

Jewell starts ahead of Marshall

Broncos' starting inside linebacker Brandon Marshall missed two full practices last week and parts of two others to nurse a sore knee. Rookie Josey Jewell took the defensive snaps during the week and so he got his first NFL start Sunday.

Marshall came in regularly on sub downs.

"They just wanted me to do the basics," Marshall said. "The dime, the nickel."

Jewell was in on six tackles.

"Yeah, some things to clean up," Jewell said.

Jones, Dymonte out

Injuries to No. 3 cornerback/punt returner Adam Jones (hamstring/thigh) and backup safety Dymonte Thomas (oblique) caused the Broncos to adjust Sunday.

Tramaine Brock moved up to No. 3 corner, while rookie cornerback Isaac Yiadom was active for the first time all season. Brock suffered a game-ending groin injury in the first quarter and Yiadom became the No. 3 corner. Rookie receiver DaeSean Hamilton handled the punt return duties.

Dymonte Thomas was replaced by veteran safety Shamarko Thomas.

Bronco Bits

Demaryius Thomas bounced back with a nice game as he led the Broncos with 63 yards receiving on five catches with no drops. He had another 39-yard reception called back by a Bolles' holding penalty. ...

Inactive for a third consecutive game: No. 3 QB Kevin Hogan, inside linebacker Alexander Johnson, defensive lineman DeMarcus Walker, offensive lineman Elijah Wilkinson and guard-center Sam Jones.

Let's play the numbers game after Broncos lose to the Ravens

By Brody Logan

9 News

Sept. 24, 2018

Obviously the most important number in today's loss to the Ravens is the final score: 27-14. But there are a lot of numbers both in and out of the box score that tell the story of the Broncos first loss of the season

This is Broncos vs. Ravens: The Numbers Game

120: the number of penalty yards accrued by the Broncos. It's hard to win on the road in the NFL, it's nearly impossible if you give the home team an extra football field's worth of free yardage and plays. In the first two games of the season, two wins, the Broncos combined for 13 penalties and 95 yards. They racked up a couple games worth in Baltimore today getting flagged 13 times for 120 yards.

20: the number of points taken off the board because of penalties. According to Vance Joseph after the game, penalties cost the Broncos 20 points. Most notably on Chris Harris' grab and go for a touchdown off Justin Simmons leap over the line to block a Justin Tucker field goal. Then with the ball on the 25 yard line, well within field goal range, Case Keenum was sacked, fumbled, and in the ensuing scrum rookie running back Phillip Lindsay was ejected for throwing punches. That drive ended up with a punt from the Broncos 48. Later, Keenum connected with Demaryius Thomas on a 39 yard pass to the 11. That was called back due to a hold by Garrett Bolles. On the same drive, on the 27 yard line, the Broncos were called for unnecessary roughness putting them back on the 42-yard line and another Marquette King punt.

3: punches thrown by Phillip Lindsay. The Broncos best back through 2 weeks was forced to watch the loss to the Ravens from the locker room after being ejected for fighting in the 2nd quarter. Postgame Lindsay said he was trying to punch the ball loose and make a play after a Keenum fumble. The referees didn't see it that way and Denver lost their best home-run threat in the running game. Lindsay was crestfallen when thinking about how he let his team down and vowed to never do something like that again.

35: yards on an end around by Emmanuel Sanders for the first rushing touchdown of his career. It was a beautifully designed play to get Sanders in space with the ball and blockers in front of him paving the way to paydirt. If the play looked familiar, it should. The Broncos ran the same exact run for a touchdown in the preseason against the Washington Redskins. There must be something about Bill Musgrave and calling gadget runs in Maryland.

15: years in the league for Terrell Suggs, but the way he got after Case Keenum he doesn't seem to be ready to call it a career. Suggs got one and a half sacks, 2 official hits on the quarterback, and forced at least two crucial holding calls with his relentless pressure off the edge.

2-1: the Broncos record after 3 weeks. If I told you coming into the season the Broncos would start 2-1 with a chance to tie the Chiefs for the AFC West lead on Monday Night Football, you would have taken

it. Baltimore is a tough place to play, since John Harbaugh has been their coach the Ravens have the third best home winning percentage in the NFL. The real litmus test comes in 7 days with the first place Chiefs and their record breaking quarterback Pat Mahomes coming to Broncos Stadium with the tops spot in the AFC West on the line.

Case Keenum, Broncos suffer first loss of season

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

Sept. 24, 2018

Denver Broncos coach Vance Joseph said this past week the team's dismal 5-11 season was "dead and gone." And then the Broncos went out and resurrected that painful slice of history.

Last season, a 2-0 Broncos team made its first road trip and lost to the Buffalo Bills. And Sunday, the 2-0 Broncos made their first road trip only to once again see their offense and quarterback Case Keenum have their worst day of the young season in a 27-14 loss to the Baltimore Ravens.

"As an offense we've got to get better," wide receiver Demaryius Thomas said. "... Too many penalties, too many mistakes. It's hard to win when you do what we did."

Keenum, who signed a two-year, \$36 million deal in the offseason, had enjoyed the comforts of his new home in the season's first two games. He led two game-winning drives in those games, including a field goal drive last week as the Broncos earned a one-point win over the Oakland Raiders with six seconds remaining.

Sunday, however, in a steady rain for much of the day, neither Keenum nor the Broncos' offense got their footing. Even as the Broncos flashed some quality work in the running game, and Keenum found a sliver of rhythm in the closing minutes, the Broncos consistently had difficulty handling the Ravens' defensive front in pass protection.

Keenum was hit repeatedly and by halftime was a shaky 7-of-12 passing for 56 yards with two passes knocked down, having been sacked three times and fumbling once. By the end of the third quarter, Keenum was just 12-of-21 passing as the Broncos had more penalty yards (90) than net passing yards (85) at that point. He finished 22-of-34 for 192 yards and an interception.

"It was a combination of things," Keenum said. "... Whether it's I missed a guy running wide open -- there's a few I can remember and could see from the pictures we had some guys open -- to whether they schemed up a good blitz that got our protection, whatever the situation is, one thing here or there, couple tipped balls, it just wasn't our day."

Toss in some particularly crushing penalties in one third-quarter drive alone in a penalty-filled day (120 yards in all) -- such as Garrett Bolles' holding penalty that negated a 38-yard completion to Demaryius Thomas to go with an unnecessary roughness penalty on guard Ron Leary that pushed the Broncos out of field goal range -- and it all looked eerily familiar to the week-to-week struggles in 2017.

Because as Keenum sputtered -- he threw his fifth interception of the season in the fourth quarter with the Broncos on a rare venture into Ravens territory, and leading rusher Phillip Lindsay had been ejected just before halftime for throwing a punch in a scrum to recover a fumble -- so did the offense. After an eight-play touchdown drive that gave the Broncos a 14-7 lead in the first quarter, Denver went 17, 3, 9, minus-3, 0, 11 and 33 yards on their next seven drives.

“When we went on our little stretch of not being able to move the ball very well, you just can’t do that for that long in this league, especially on the road,” Keenum said. “It’s definitely frustrating.”

“We can’t do it, it probably cost us 20 points today,” Joseph said of the penalties. “Just self-inflicted penalties. A lot of penalties was just guys losing their composure, we can’t do that.”

The Broncos and Keenum have talked about the importance of bouncing back from the bad things that happen. They will now get their chance to show it with the high-flying Kansas City Chiefs next on the docket.

“We’ve got to get back in the lab and get right for a very good Kansas City team coming in on Monday,” linebacker Von Miller said. “... We definitely have to clean it up.”

Opposing offenses flying the friendly skies against the Broncos

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

Sept. 24, 2018

As a quarterback who looked over the Denver Broncos' once-feared "No Fly Zone" secondary and then spent an afternoon doing most of what he wanted to do, Joe Flacco said the Baltimore Ravens could have done even more damage Sunday had they simply chosen to.

"Honestly, if you really want to say it, this game, we could have thrown the ball 55 times, and I think it probably would have been to our advantage," Flacco said after the Ravens' 27-14 victory over the Broncos.

Oh, where have you gone Aqib Talib?

The Broncos are three games into the season, and it's clear that opposing quarterbacks now think they can do what would have been considered unthinkable two seasons ago. They feel that the best way to win against the Broncos' defense is to throw early and throw often.

Pro Bowl cornerback Chris Harris Jr. believes it's because those quarterbacks know exactly what they're going to get from Denver's defenders.

"We've got to disguise better, we've got to move better, we've got to work together better, and we're not doing that right now," Harris said Sunday. "We're just stagnant, sitting ducks, [quarterbacks] kind of know where to throw the ball at. We've got to get better at confusing them, tricking them, we're not tricking anybody right now. They know exactly what's going on, we've got to trick them and move and disguise better."

Asked how the Broncos could do that, Harris added: "We've got to move and disguise better, try to do whatever we can to do something different ... as a whole, we've got to figure that out. ... We're doing everything we can to get better. We just have to keep working."

Only seven days after Oakland Raiders quarterback Derek Carr set a league completion-percentage record with a 29-of-32 passing performance against the Broncos, Flacco threw for 224 yards and a touchdown in the first half Sunday, as the Broncos did little to unsettle the veteran. Flacco finished the game 25-of-40 for 277 yards and the score.

In three games, opposing quarterbacks have completed 69.5 percent of their passes with five touchdowns and two interceptions, resulting in a collective passer rating of 102.2. This is coming against a pass defense that was the league's best in 2015 and 2016, and the Broncos were fourth in pass defense in their 5-11 campaign last season.

"Our entire back end has to play better versus the pass," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said. "[The Ravens] couldn't run the football, so they threw it. That's two weeks in a row."

Football math should dictate that if the Broncos' defense stops the run, the team's pass rush and secondary should feast against an offense forced into throw-first mode. The Ravens ran for 2.8 yards per carry Sunday and finished with 77 yards rushing overall.

Yet the Broncos rarely made Flacco that uncomfortable in the pocket, registering two sacks, one that came on Flacco's first pass attempt of the game. The Broncos forced the Ravens into third-and-8 or longer nine times in the game. The Ravens converted two of those, and the Broncos' defense had penalties on two others.

Otherwise, the Ravens consistently turned first- and second-down throws into first downs.

"I don't think we got them in a true third-and-long," Broncos linebacker Von Miller said. " ... Altogether as a unit, we had a pass rush, and the DBs weren't there, and then the DBs were there on some plays, and we didn't have a pass rush."

The Broncos have some injury problems to deal with, as cornerback Adam Jones was sidelined due to a thigh injury and corner Tramaine Brock left the game in the first half with a groin injury.

That caused rookie cornerback Isaac Yiadom to be a frequent target of Flacco's, as the Broncos were often forced to use three safeties in their dime package (six defensive backs) in certain pass-first situations.

Those injuries, along with the existing coverage issues, have the Broncos in a tough spot. They get the Chiefs and quarterback Patrick Mahomes -- who has 13 touchdown passes in three games -- next Monday, and the high-flying Los Angeles Rams come to Denver on Oct. 14.

"We have to shore it up in the back end and play much better," Joseph said. "Play better technique and do our jobs."

Phillip Lindsay tossed from Broncos game after throwing punch

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

Sept. 24, 2018

Denver Broncos rookie running back Phillip Lindsay was ejected from Sunday's 27-14 loss to the Ravens as officials said Lindsay threw a punch in the scrum to recover a fumble.

Lindsay said he didn't throw a punch.

"I was just trying to get the ball, the ball ended up squirting back out on that play so ... like I said, I was going for the ball," Lindsay said.

"Something I'm going to learn from. We were playing football, we were playing football, it's physical, and at the end of the day, we're just out there playing. They seen something they didn't feel was right."

Broncos coach Vance Joseph said he was told Lindsay threw a punch under the pile.

"We can't do it, if that's accurate, we can't do it," Joseph said. "He's obviously a big part of what we do offensively, he's a double returner, both our kickoff and punt returner today, so losing him, that's a big deal."

Lindsay came into Sunday's game as the Broncos' leading rusher with 178 yards. Lindsay had 20 yards rushing on four carries before the ejection, which came just before the two-minute warning.

On a second-and-1 from the Ravens' 25-yard line, Baltimore outside linebacker Terrell Suggs sacked Broncos quarterback Case Keenum from behind, knocking the ball free. Broncos right tackle Jared Veldheer was the first player to reach the ball, as several players for both teams, including Lindsay, then piled on.

Lindsay can be seen on replays swinging his arm into the pile. The officials met for several moments before referee Ron Torbert announced that Lindsay had been flagged for unnecessary roughness and ejected for throwing a punch.

As a result of the ejection, Lindsay could face a one-game suspension. The Broncos (2-1) play the Kansas City Chiefs (3-0) on Monday Night Football next week.

Lindsay, a Denver South High School graduate, made the Broncos' roster as an undrafted rookie and has been one of the team's most consistent players on offense.

‘We blew it. Plain and simple.’: Broncos beat themselves in penalty-filled loss to Ravens

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

Sept. 24, 2018

Don't ask about 2017 because the past is the past. Don't compare the Broncos' 2-0 start last year that slowed after their first road loss, in Week 3, and fell apart completely in Week 5.

Don't think about that.

“Last year's team is dead and gone,” coach Vance Joseph said last week. “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.”

But much was the same Sunday.

In a Week 3 road game no less, the 2018 Broncos took their first loss of the season, falling to the Ravens, 27-14, in a way that made the 2017 Broncos infamous.

Their quarterback was pummeled and their secondary gashed — again and again and again. Their punting was head-scratchingly terrible for much of the game, their defensive play-calling questionable at best and — worst of all — their list of penalties was long, with one more bizarre than the last.

“We can't do that,” Joseph said Sunday. “It probably cost us 20 points today. Just self-inflicted penalties. A lot of the penalties really were guys losing their composure. ... That obviously killed us today.”

All told, the Broncos were called for 13 penalties for a loss of 120 yards. Two penalties helped the Ravens score a pair of touchdowns, another — a supposed illegal block in the back on a fumble return — cost the Broncos a defensive touchdown by Chris Harris Jr. And another cost the Broncos Phillip Lindsay. The rookie running back and kick returner was ejected after being flagged for unnecessary roughness, sapping the offense of its biggest spark and producer over the first two weeks.

And that's when the once-undefeated Broncos came unglued.

“We blew it,” receiver Emmanuel Sanders said. “Plain and simple. We blew it. A lot of penalties we can't have.”

Late last season, as the Broncos spiraled to an eight-game losing streak, general manager John Elway called his team “soft” because of its inability to bounce back after mistakes and remain competitive for four quarters.

After two weeks of eking out wins, the Broncos failed to salvage this one. By the end of the first half, they had all but imploded, repeating many of the same mistakes from last year and failing to regroup after each.

Which was odd given their start to the game.

The Broncos opened with two consecutive touchdowns. The defense held Baltimore to a three-and-out, thanks to a sack from rookie Bradley Chubb.

On fourth down, linebacker Joe Jones blocked the Ravens' ensuing punt.

Royce Freeman needed only one carry to punch the ball into the end zone for a 6-yard score.

On their second possession, the Broncos ran the same play that led to a touchdown at Washington in Week 3 of the preseason. Sanders took the handoff on a reverse and ran it in 35 yards for the score.

But the momentum fizzled. Joe Flacco found Buck Allen for a short pass that was ruled a touchdown upon review. And then another big special teams play by the Broncos was called back.

Justin Simmons blocked a Ravens field-goal attempt in the second quarter and Harris scooped up the ball and ran it back 58 yards for the touchdown.

"That was something we worked on all week," Simmons said. "We knew it was going to be there. We put it in our back pocket and we were going to call it when we needed it. It was a gap that was open. We just executed it. The big thing was, we wanted to be able to score off of it."

On the return, the officials flagged No. 77, who is Billy Turner for the Broncos, for an illegal block. Problem was, Turner wasn't even on the field. The No. 77 they saw was Ravens center Bradley Bozeman fall after a nudge from Broncos' nose tackle Domata Peko.

"I couldn't believe it," Harris said. "I think it changed the game. ... I thought my touchdown would have definitely changed the game. We would have been up. We would have had great momentum going into the half and having the ball back. But it didn't work out like that."

The Broncos' next possession was when Lindsay was disqualified. Officials believed he threw punches under a pile after a Broncos fumble.

"The ball ended up squirting back out," Lindsay explained. "Another Raven dude jumped on the pile, so I went there. You're just trying to make a play for your team. We were trying to get the ball out. It looked like I was swinging at somebody."

"I feel horrible. I feel horrible because I wasn't there for my team and that's my fault."

Against Oakland last week, the Broncos corrected many of their issues in the second half, making adjustments in coverage and finding rhythm in the offense.

But against the Ravens, the bad got worse in the second half.

The Broncos were flagged eight times in the last two quarters: defensive offsides by Derek Wolfe, two holding calls apiece for offensive linemen Garrett Bolles and Connor McGovern, an unnecessary roughness penalty for guard Ron Leary, a neutral-zone infraction by Von Miller and then the dagger: The

Broncos, needing two touchdowns to take the lead, stood at the Ravens' 6-yard line on a fourth-and-1 and were flagged for having 12 men on the field.

Where the Ravens stayed perfect in the red zone, the Broncos went 1-and-3, squandering two chances in the fourth quarter.

"Penalties will kill you in close games," Miller said. "The Ravens have a great team. We didn't capitalize when we had chances. When you're playing on the road, against a great team, you can't do that."

The Broncos followed their two scoring drives in the first quarter with seven consecutive punts, an interception and that drive that ended on downs after the 12-men penalty, changing a fourth-and-1 to fourth-and-6, which resulted in an incompleting.

By the end of the third quarter, the Broncos had more penalty yards (90) than net passing yards (85) and barely finished with a better ratio.

Keenum had 192 yards on 22-of-34 passing with zero touchdowns, one interception (his fifth in the last three games) and a 67.3 rating. He also took three sacks, was hit nine times and had three passes deflected.

"For me, I've got to do a better job at getting the ball out at the correct time and to the correct receivers," Keenum said. "It was a lot of things for us today. I missed some guys when they were open and it seemed to me we had a lot of tipped balls."

The other side didn't fare much better.

The Broncos' secondary was without cornerback Adam Jones because of a thigh injury, and it lost Tramaine Brock early because of a groin injury, prompting Flacco to target — and find success against — rookie Isaac Yiadom and even Bradley Roby in coverage.

Flacco completed seven passes of 15 yards or more. Receiver Michael Crabtree, once a nemesis for former Broncos cornerback Aqib Talib, had seven receptions for 61 yards. He kept his chains and got his catches.

"We didn't play up to standard," Harris said. "I think Flacco had a good jump on what we were doing defensively. We gotta figure out a way to try to confuse some quarterbacks. We're making it too easy for them. They already know where to throw the ball, so we got to confuse them."

Keenum came out of his worst (and likely most painful) outing unscathed and, despite all the mistakes and penalties, the Broncos had opportunities to get back in it. But almost every one was quashed by the Broncos' own doing.

The line used by many in the locker room after: "We just killed ourselves."

The Broncos have seen this sequence before and they've said the same four words many times before and they know the next challenge will only be greater. Next up, Denver receives a Monday night visit from divisional rivals and the most prolific offense in the league with the Chiefs.

If the Broncos play their cards wrong, Week 3 will be remembered as the beginning of the end.

“It’s kind of the same sequence,” safety Will Parks said. “We gotta do something different when we go back to Denver. We have to take pride in (how we play) and we must win on Monday. We must win. It was kind of the same thing from last year, but if you do things differently, you’ll get different results.”

Insult to self-injury: Two calls leave the Broncos feeling burned

By Nicki Jhabvala
The Athletic
Sept. 24, 2018

The Broncos didn't need help making mistakes Sunday. They made plenty, with 13 penalties for a loss of 120 yards. But two flags, in particular, thrown in the span of about two minutes in the second quarter, were turning points in a game Denver would like to forget. One cost the Broncos a go-ahead touchdown. The other cost them one of their best offensive players.

With 4:45 remaining in the first half, Broncos safety Justin Simmons leaped over the line to block a Ravens field-goal attempt. Cornerback Chris Harris Jr. scooped up the ball and sprinted 58 yards to the end zone to give the Broncos a 20-17 lead. But a flag was thrown and the touchdown called back because of an illegal block on the back by No. 77 on the returning team.

No. 77 for the Broncos is Billy Turner.

Billy Turner wasn't on the field during the play.

What the tape did show was No. 77 for the Ravens, center Bradley Bozeman, falling after Broncos nose tackle Domata Peko pushed him to the side.

According to the NFL rulebook, a block in the back is one that is "delivered from behind an opponent above his waist." If either hand is on the back, it is a foul.

Watch Peko and Bozeman behind the play:

"I couldn't believe it, man" Harris said. "I couldn't believe it. I thought it was a touchdown. Y'all saw it. I can't speak too much on the refs. I don't want to get fined."

The Broncos took issue with that call, but the Ravens believed Denver might have gotten away with another one. In 2016, Simmons famously blocked an extra-point attempt in New Orleans that Will Parks scooped up and ran back for a defensive two-point conversion. The following year, the NFL changed the rule to ban leapers.

Per the NFL rulebook: "Running forward and leaping across the line of scrimmage in an obvious attempt to block a field goal or kick, or apparent kick, unless the leaping player was in a stationary position on the line of scrimmage when the ball was snapped. A player, who is behind the line of scrimmage before or at the snap, may run forward and leap, provided he does not cross the line of scrimmage or land on players."

"We thought it was leverage," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "We didn't think you could jump over the line there. The official had an explanation for it. It's a new one — I hadn't heard it. I understood what he was saying, so we'll just check that out and see what the rule is on that. Maybe we'll learn something on it."

The nullified touchdown and loss of 10 yards set the Broncos up at Baltimore's 49-yard line. Four plays into the possession, on a second-and-1, Case Keenum was strip-sacked by Terrell Suggs and nearly a dozen players jumped on the loose ball.

Phillip Lindsay was one.

He dove into the pile late to fight for possession, but when the scrum cleared, he was penalized for unnecessary roughness and ejected. Officials thought he had thrown punches at a Ravens player while under the pile.

After the game, Lindsay said the ball came loose and he jumped in to try to gain possession.

"I feel horrible," he said. "I feel horrible because I wasn't out there for my team, and that's my fault. I definitely feel like I let my team down today."

"It's my first time ever getting ejected so, yeah, I'm surprised," Lindsay added. "It's not in my character to be ejected. That's not who I am. I play football, I love the game, but that's just how it is."

The sack for a loss of 10 yards and the 15-yard penalty set Denver back to its own territory for a third-and-28. After an incomplete pass, the Broncos were forced to punt.

The Broncos failed to score for the remainder of the game and amassed nine more penalties before the final whistle.

"We can't beat ourselves. We needed 30 (Lindsay)," Harris said. "(No.) 30 is one of our best players on offense. Him going out, it hurt us today. But everybody as a whole, we have to play smarter."

Broncos' first road test proves difficult vs. Ravens

By Troy Renck
KMGH
Sept. 24, 2018

It was the rare Sunday when everything that went right amounted to a painful tease. Instead of an eye-opening result, the Broncos punctured their hopes with a gaggle of penalties, an underwhelming passing attack until the fourth quarter, frayed defenders and an ejection that left them strapped with a 27-14 loss to the Baltimore Ravens at soggy M&T Bank Stadium.

They finished with one fewer penalty (13) than points.

"A lot of them were really guys losing their composure," coach Vance Joseph said. "Playing against a really tough Baltimore team on the road, it cost us 20 points."

There was nothing wrong with the beginning and zero right when it was over. First to the mess. The Broncos grew undisciplined and, in the officials' view, unhinged after falling behind 17-14 midway through the second quarter.

Like the day itself, the unraveling started with a juxtaposition. Continued special teams excellence kept the Broncos within striking distance. Broncos safety Justin Simmons jumped between the guard and center, batting down Justin Tucker's 43-yard attempt.

"We had it in our backpocket," Simmons said. "It was something we worked on."

It snapped Tucker's streak of 23 straight, and set into motion a dizzying chain of events. Cornerback Chris Harris Jr. returned the block for a 58-yard touchdown. However, it was negated by nose tackle Domata Peko's illegal block as Bradley Bozeman flopped from a one-armed push 20 yards behind the play. The penalty was listed against reserve offensive tackle Billy Turner, but he wasn't in the game on the play.

"It was crazy, that called changed the game," Peko said. "We had some big plays taken away. But we have to play penalty-free. Yeah man, it was crazy. They said it was on 77, but we didn't have a 77 (on the field). Then we asked again and they said 37 (they don't have one). They couldn't clarify it."

Harris struggled to wrap his head around the call. He tried to remain diplomatic.

"I couldn't believe it. I thought it was a touchdown. Ya'll seen it," Harris said. "I can't speak too much on the refs. I don't want to get fined."

The flag became pivotal moments later.

Rookie star Phillip Lindsay was thrown out of the game for entering a pile and throwing a punch. It symbolized a day when the Broncos showed fight, but missed their mark. Denver owned 10 penalties for 100 yards with eight minutes remaining in the game. Officials flagged every lineman, save for center Matt Paradis.

Broncos left tackle Garrett Bolles held Terrell Suggs, negating a 39-yard play by Demaryius Thomas. And left guard Ron Leary was tagged for unnecessary roughness on third down in the fourth quarter, pushing the Broncos out of range when they were gasping for points. Instead of a field goal attempt to shave the deficit to 10, the Broncos punted for the seventh straight possession.

"You can't go in that long of stretch like that in this league," said quarterback Case Keenum, who was 22-for-34 for 192 yards with one interception, no touchdowns, while getting sacked three times. "It just wasn't our day."

Keenum looked hurried and frazzled. He had 56 yards passing midway through the third quarter. He wasn't sharp, but the line did him no favors as he sidestepped relentless pressure. This became an issue given the Ravens' efficiency.

One drive haunted the Broncos more than the rest. Leading 20-14 at half, the Ravens plodded and plowed 82 yards on 14 plays. Not only did they inflate their cushion to 27-14, but it represented their 12th consecutive touchdown in the red zone to open the season.

"We have to do a better job of disguising our coverages," Harris said.

How did it get here, with Denver's eighth road loss in their last nine games?

As fast starts go, Usain Bolt blushed at the Broncos. They might have equaled last year's road highlights in the first 90 seconds. Outside linebacker Bradley Chubb posted his first solo sack, lighting up Joe Flacco like the Vegas strip. Linebacker Joe Jones raced free and blocked the punt, setting up the offense at the 6-yard line. On the first play, Royce Freeman darted in for the score, shoving the Broncos ahead 7-0 with 13:29 remaining in the first.

It proved short lived. The Ravens cruised in for an easy score. The drive featured 35 yards by tight ends. Rookie Mark Andrews produced a 30-yard haul, and Alex Collins tip-toed in for a 6-yard touchdown as Josey Jewell, playing in base defense for Brandon Marshall, became engulfed in traffic. Marshall said after the game that he was on a play count because of his knee.

"It's hard not to be out there more," he said. "But I knew that it was going to be that way going into the game."

The first quarter boasted a bizarro world vibe. The Broncos looked nothing like the team that lost by an average of 13 points per game on the road last season. Keenum connected on third down conversions to Courtland Sutton and Devontae Booker, setting up trickery. Emmanuel Sanders zoomed into the end zone from 35 yards out on a reverse. If the play looked familiar, it's because it was. Sanders scored on the identical call at Washington, down to a key downfield block by fullback Andy Janovich. Denver held a 14-7 advantage, but on this slippery Sunday, they couldn't keep it from sliding through their fingers.

"It starts with me. I have to be better," receiver Emmanuel Sanders said. "We need to stay positive and not point fingers, and keep working to improve."

The Ravens responded with an eight-play drive, capped by Justin Tucker's seventh straight field goal of 50-plus yards. He celebrated with a bow at midfield. Obnoxious? Perhaps. But he is the NFL's best kicker.

And Baltimore isn't exactly providing moments for him to excel. The Ravens continued their scalding hot work inside the 20. When fullback Javorious Allen's reach to the pylon was overturned, Baltimore ran its season-opening streak to 11 straight scores in the red zone. The Ravens led 17-14 with 8:25 remaining in the half.

Following the blocked field goal, the Broncos took over. And took an off-ramp to nowhere.

Ravens linebacker Terrell Suggs slammed into Broncos Keenum for a sack, jarring the ball loose. As players dived into the pile, Lindsay raced in to help. On the ground, he tangled with a Ravens defender and either jabbed to keep the player's hands off him or punched. He was lying on his back. The refs saw a punch -- a questionable call -- leading to Lindsay's removal. He finished with 20 yards on four carries.

Lindsay walked off slowly, a mixture of pride and disappointment. He was by himself. He might as well have been a picture of the team.

"To be smarter," Lindsay said. "That is the lesson."

Footnotes

Cornerback Adam Jones worked for 20 minutes in the pregame, testing his injured quad and hamstring with trainer Loren Landow. With an eye toward the macro view, the Broncos kept Jones inactive, leaving Phillip Lindsay and DaeSean Hamilton to handle punt return duties. Rookie Isaac Yiadom was active, and drew a 15-yard penalty on kick return duty. ... Tramaine Brock watched from the sideline with a towel over his head in the first quarter, ruled out with a groin injury. Yiadom worked as the No. 3 corner. ... Rookie Josey Jewell started at linebacker in place of Brandon Marshall. Marshall was active, but apparently lost his place to Jewell in base defense. ... Joe Jones' blocked punt was the Broncos first since Shaquil Barrett pulled off in a home loss last season to Cincinnati. ... The Ravens' Za'Darius Smith sacked Keenum in the first quarter and celebrated with the Ray Lewis dance. ... Safety Will Parks was evaluated for a concussion, but was fine after the game.

Broncos' Phillip Lindsay ejected for throwing a punch against Ravens

By Troy Renck
KMGH
Sept. 24, 2018

Broncos rookie Phillip Lindsay demands attention. But Sunday, it came for the wrong reasons.

Late in the first half against the Ravens, officials ejected Lindsay for throwing a punch as he joined a scrum during a fumble recovery.

"To be smart. That's the lesson," Lindsay told me. "I have to be smart. I am fighting for my teammates, and I can't do that if I am sitting here in the locker room."

Cornerback Chris Harris Jr. returned a blocked kick for a touchdown moments earlier. However, it was negated by nose tackle Domata Peko's illegal block as Bradley Bozeman flopped from a one-armed push 20 yards behind the play.

"We never got an explanation, really. They said 77 but he wasn't on the field. And then they said 37, and we don't have a 37," Peko said of the penalty that was announced against right tackle Billy Turner, who wasn't in the game. "It's (expletive) tough. But we have to be more disciplined, especially on the road."

The call became pivotal.

Rather than a touchdown, the Broncos took over. And it was over and out for Lindsay.

Ravens linebacker Terrell Suggs slammed into Broncos quarterback Case Keenum for a sack, jarring the ball loose. As players dived into the pile, Lindsay raced in to help. According to multiple players on the field, the incident grew intense because several Broncos felt the whistle had blown with Jared Veldheer recovering the ball. He was hit by a Ravens player, leading to Lindsay's reaction to help.

On the ground, Lindsay tangled with a Ravens defender and either jabbed to keep the player's hands off him or punched. He was lying on his back. The refs saw a punch -- a questionable call -- leading to Lindsay's removal.

He finished with 20 yards on four carries, and no receptions.

"It's my first time ever getting ejected, so yeah I was surprised," Lindsay said. "It's not in my character. That's not who I am. I love the game of football."

Broncos make too many mistakes in 27-14 loss to Ravens

By David Ginsburg
Associated Press
Sept. 24, 2018

The Denver Broncos had a lot of things stacked against them in their quest to open the season 3-0.

They were coming across the country to play a tough Baltimore Ravens team bent on making amends for a blowout loss in Cincinnati last week. To make the task even more challenging, the Broncos were short-handed in the defensive backfield, even before losing cornerback Tremain Brock to a groin injury in the first quarter on Sunday.

Then, another setback: With Denver down 17-14 in the second quarter, rookie running back Phillip Lindsay was ejected for throwing a punch in a scrum following a fumble.

All that, along with a boatload of penalties, were too much to handle in a 27-14 defeat.

"We just got to play better," linebacker Von Miller said. "They got a great team, but there were moments in there where we could have had the game. When you go on the road and play a great team, you got to capitalize. You've got to put the ball in, you've got to get off the field on third down, you've got to do all of those things just to have a chance to win.

"We didn't do any of that stuff and we still had a shot to win until late in the game."

Denver (2-1) took a 14-7 lead in the first quarter. Then, it all fell apart.

The Broncos failed to score over the final 52 minutes, Miller went the entire afternoon without a sack and Denver racked up 13 penalties for 120 yards.

"We hurt ourselves with penalties," Broncos running back Devontae Booker said. "We can't do that when we come into a hostile environment. It's something we need to learn from."

Case Keenum went 22 for 34 for 192 yards, but he threw an interception and was sacked three times.

Twice in the fourth quarter, he moved the Broncos into the red zone. An interception ended the first foray, and a fourth-down incompleting from the Baltimore 11 with three minutes left was his final pass.

"I've got to do a better job at getting the ball out at the correct time and to the correct receivers," Keenum said. "It was a lot of things for us today. I missed some guys when they were open, and it seems to me we had a lot of tipped balls."

Well, seems as if both sides of the ball have a lot to work on this week before the Kansas City Chiefs come to Denver next Monday night for an AFC West showdown.

"We made too many mistakes and had too many penalties," Miller lamented. "When we practice, we don't have all those penalties. We have to clean that up."

Flacco shines as Ravens deal Broncos first loss, 27-14

By David Ginsburg
Associated Press
Sept. 24, 2018

Baltimore's offensive line handled Von Miller, Joe Flacco took care of the football, and the Ravens sliced through Denver's depleted defense.

Flacco found the time to throw for 277 yards and a touchdown, and the Ravens pushed aside the previously undefeated Broncos 27-14 Sunday.

Baltimore (2-1) got 68 yards rushing from Alex Collins, but the line's most ample contribution was giving Flacco time to pass against a defense led by Miller, who came in with an NFL-leading four sacks.

"That's a stout run defense. We kept hammering in there and bled some yards," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "But our pass protection really stepped up and did a great job."

Flacco went 25 for 40 without an interception on a rainy afternoon. He threw 28 passes in the first half alone, when Baltimore took control.

Miller finished with two tackles and no sacks.

"He's able to get in there and make a ton of plays and change a game when you look at him on film," Flacco said. "That was the biggest thing, just not letting him be a factor."

Flacco's success came against a Denver backfield that began the day without injured cornerback Adam Jones (thigh) and lost cornerback Tramaine Brock (groin) in the first quarter. As a result, rookie Isaac Yiadom saw significant playing time at right cornerback.

"I think we kind of made it easy for them," Broncos safety Darian Stewart said. "We gave them a lot of stuff."

Javorious Allen caught a 12-yard touchdown pass and ran for a score for the Ravens.

Baltimore made 20 first downs, totaled 342 yards and converted half its third-down attempts.

"That wasn't the game we had intended for," Miller said. "At times, we couldn't get off the field as a defense."

Denver (2-1) was coming off two home wins, both by virtue of fourth-quarter comebacks. This time, the Broncos could not rally after Allen's 1-yard TD run made it 27-14 midway through the third quarter.

The Broncos were flagged 13 times for 120 yards.

"We probably cost ourselves 20 points today on penalties," coach Vance Joseph said.

Denver's lone turnover was just as costly. The Broncos were inside the Baltimore 5 with 9 minutes left before Case Keenum was intercepted by Patrick Onwuasor, whose 89-yard return for a touchdown was wiped out by a block in the back.

The Ravens took consolation in preventing Denver from getting within a touchdown.

"That was a huge stop," said Harbaugh, who celebrated his 56th birthday in style.

The Broncos' next drive ended at the Baltimore 11, and the Ravens ran out the clock over the final three minutes.

Keenum completed 22 of 34 passes for 192 yards.

Denver got a touchdown after blocking a punt and also swatted away a field goal try. Chris Harris Jr. took the second blocked kick 58 yards for a touchdown, but an illegal block nullified the second-quarter score.

On the ensuing series, Broncos rookie running back Phillip Lindsay was ejected for throwing a punch during the scramble for a fumble by Keenum.

"He's obviously a big part of what we do offensively," Joseph said. "Losing him, that's a big deal."

A wild first half ended with Baltimore up 20-14.

After Denver's Joseph Jones blocked a punt to set up a 6-yard touchdown run by Royce Freeman, Collins ran in from the 6 for Baltimore.

Broncos wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders made it 14-7 with a 35-yard end around, his first career rushing touchdown.

Justin Tucker sandwiched a pair of 52-yard field goals around a 12-yard touchdown throw by Flacco.

Tucker now has six career games with multiple field goals of 50 yards or more, an NFL record. He has also connected on his last eight attempts from at least 50 yards.

LEWIS RETURNS

The Ravens welcomed back linebacker Ray Lewis, who was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in August following a 17-year career with Baltimore.

After the players were introduced, the song "Hot in Herre" by Nelly boomed over the PA.

Lewis emerged from the tunnel wearing his yellow Hall of Fame jacket and performed his trademark dance while the soggy crowd cheered.

Lewis was presented with his Hall of Fame ring during a ceremony at halftime. He was joined by Jonathan Ogden, the Ravens' other HOF member.

INJURIES

Broncos: Stewart left in the second quarter with a shoulder injury but returned.

Ravens: MLB C.J. Mosley was inactive with a bruised knee.

UP NEXT

Broncos: host Kansas City in an AFC West showdown Monday night, Oct. 1.

Ravens: travel to Pittsburgh for a Sunday night matchup between AFC North teams.

Klee's Rapid Reactions: Ravens 27, Broncos 14

By Paul Klee

Colorado Springs Gazette

Sept. 24, 2018

Three of Paul Klee's observations from Baltimore and the Ravens' 27-14 win against the Broncos:

1. Yep, they're still Vance Joseph's Broncos. Who else can draw a flag for too many men in the huddle... on 4th-and-1? Make it 1-8 on the road since Joseph took over as Broncos coach. His Broncos were undisciplined (Derek Wolfe's offsides penalty on 3rd-and-5), uncomfortable (three sacks of Case Keenum in the first half) and unfortunate (Phillip Lindsay was ejected for "throwing a punch" — more on that later). When you think about it, the Broncos getting whacked on the road looked a lot like last season.

2. With roughly 2 minutes left in the first half, Broncos tailback Phillip Lindsay was ejected for throwing a punch. The incident happened after a strip-sack fumble by Terrell Suggs on Case Keenum — and the call was trash. A look at the replay shows at least two Ravens had piled onto Lindsay at the edge of the pile. His lone options were to push back or get buried under a mass of flesh. But that's what the Ravens do to younger players. They push their buttons and teach 'em a lesson. This time the Broncos lost their leading rusher and the offense was never the same.

3. Story of the game: the Ravens trust their quarterback, and the Broncos don't. At the end of the third quarter, the Broncos had more penalty yards (90) than passing yards (85). One of the few passing attempts that traveled more than 10 yards downfield — a long, lovely completion to Demaryius Thomas — was called back because of a holding call on Garrett Bolles. Later in the drive, Ron Leary was flagged for unsportsmanlike conduct — pushing the Broncos out of field position. After flashing a diverse and fun offense in the preseason and in Week 1 against the Seahawks, the Broncos are calling plays as if they don't trust their quarterback to make good decisions. I guess three interceptions in the opener will do that. This was a comedy of errors — with the 3-0 Chiefs up next, on Monday Night Football.

Broncos' Phillip Lindsay ejected from game at Baltimore

By Paul Klee

Colorado Springs Gazette

Sept. 24, 2018

Well, that's a twist no one saw coming.

Broncos running back Phillip Lindsay was ejected from Sunday's game for throwing a punch, according to game officials. The incident happened after Broncos quarterback Case Keenum fumbled on a sack by Terrell Suggs.

Baltimore led the Broncos 17-14 when Lindsay was ejected with 2 minutes left in the first half.

Lindsay, the smallest player on the Broncos' roster at 190 pounds, left the field and entered the tunnel to a serenade from Ravens fans. The NFL's third-leading rusher entering Sunday, Lindsay had four carries for 20 yards for a conservative Broncos offense.

Ravens 27, Broncos 14: Why it happened

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
Sept. 24, 2018

Denver's history of struggles at M&T Bank Stadium persisted like the steady rain that hit Sunday as the Broncos fell to the Ravens, 27-14.

After an opening flourish that saw the Broncos score 14 first-quarter points for the first time since Dec. 20, 2015, little went right for the Broncos, as Baltimore scored 20 unanswered points to hand Denver its 10th loss in its last 11 road games.

The worst aspect of the defeat for the Broncos is that most of their wounds were self-inflicted.

"We beat ourselves more than they beat us today," cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said.

The Broncos racked up 120 yards in penalties -- their highest total in 37 their last regular-season games.

"A lot of the penalties were really guys losing their composure. We can't do that," Head Coach Vance Joseph said. "You're playing a tough Baltimore team on the road and you have 13 penalties for 120 yards and it really honestly cost us 20 points out there.

"That obviously killed us today."

Here are the biggest reasons why the Broncos fell to 2-1:

Because of untimely penalties

It wasn't simply the penalties themselves. It was the timing of them that exacted the deepest toll on Denver's hopes.

First and foremost was an illegal-block-in-the-back penalty during Harris' 58-yard return of Justin Simmons' blocked field goal, a penalty that negated what looked to be a game-turning touchdown.

"I couldn't believe it, man. I think it changed the game. I think the whole game just changed after that play," Harris said.

"We would have been up. We would have had great momentum going into the half and having the ball back, but it didn't work out like that."

Nevertheless, the Broncos rebounded. Phillip Lindsay picked up 15 yards on two carries. A Case Keenum-to-Emmanuel Sanders connection moved the Broncos to the Baltimore 25-yard line before Keenum was sacked by Terrell Suggs, leading to a fumble that caused a scrum in which Phillip Lindsay was flagged for throwing a punch.

The Broncos had lost 12 yards on the sack and fumble, which right tackle Jared Veldheer recovered. Lindsay's 15-yard infraction pushed Denver back 15 more yards to its 48-yard line and cost the Broncos

something more -- Lindsay himself. Referee Ronald Torbert ejected the rookie running back from the game, robbing the Broncos of one of their most potent big-play threats.

"I feel horrible, because I'm not out there with my team, and that's my fault," Lindsay said. "It's something I'm going to learn from. It's never going to happen again."

Despite the absence of the explosive Lindsay, Denver's offense regrouped. Late in the third quarter, the Broncos marched to the Baltimore 27-yard line. Earlier on the drive, they overcame a Garrett Bolles holding penalty, getting out of that with a 22-yard Keenum-to-Demaryius Thomas connection down the right sideline. But two more penalties cost the Broncos any shot at points.

The first, a holding call against right guard Connor McGovern, knocked the Broncos back to second-and-16 at the Baltimore 41-yard line. A Ravens offside penalty and a 9-yard Keenum-to-Sanders undid the damage. But when the officials flagged Ron Leary for an unnecessary-roughness call after a third-down incompleteness, the Broncos had fourth-and-17 at the Baltimore 42, and a 45-yard Brandon McManus field-goal attempt was now a punt.

Because the defense couldn't get the Ravens off the field quickly

Denver's defense had a ferocious start to the game, as a Bradley Chubb sack of Joe Flacco forced Baltimore's offense to the sideline, setting up Joe Jones' block of Sam Koch's punt and Royce Freeman's 6-yard touchdown run one play after that.

From that point forward, the Ravens managed to sustain their drives. Each of their next nine possessions resulted in at least one first down. During that stretch, the only time Baltimore failed to run at least five plays on a series was in the final seconds of the first half when a four-play, 16-yard drive resulted in Justin Tucker's second 52-yard field goal of the game.

Early in the game, second down represented the most damaging scenario. After their first possession, Baltimore averaged 7.5 yards per second-down play for the rest of the first half.

As the contest progressed, third down became the down of doom. Baltimore failed to convert its first three third-down chances, but then converted seven of its next nine, including seven of eight chances from nine or fewer yards.

Penalties also gave the Ravens a pair of first downs.

Because the Broncos lost the red-zone battle

Baltimore came into the game having scored touchdowns on all of its drives that crossed their opponent's 20-yard line. The team sustained its flawless work, converting all three red-zone trips into touchdowns Sunday.

Denver, meanwhile, went 1-of-3 on its red-zone chances, scoring only on the 1-play, 6-yard drive that was set up by Jones' block of a Koch punt early in the first quarter.

The first red-zone failure came when Patrick Onwuasor intercepted Keenum, ending the Broncos' first fourth-quarter scoring threat with 9:01 remaining in the game.

Denver marched downfield once again after forcing a Baltimore three-and-out, but that drive went askew when the Broncos were called for too many men in the huddle, turning fourth-and-1 from the Baltimore 6-yard-line into fourth-and-6. A Keenum attempt to Butt then fell incomplete, ending the Broncos' hopes of a comeback.

Because the passing game didn't sustain momentum until late

In the first three quarters, the Broncos averaged just 3.54 yards per pass play, as Case Keenum went 12-of-21 for 104 yards and was sacked three times for 19 yards in losses.

Keenum went 10-of-13 for 88 yards in the fourth quarter, but both drives ended without points.

"I sat there and said in the huddle, 'Guys, two times seven is 14, and we're only down 13 here. Let's go do something.' And we put together two drives. We got down there inside the 10 and just didn't come away with points at the time," he said.

"To play as bad as it felt at times and still have a chance to be in the ballgame, I think that we can be really good."

Cover 4: Broncos fall to Ravens 27-14

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

Sept. 24, 2018

After a competitive first half, the Broncos failed to make the necessary plays after the break and fell to 2-1 with a 27-14 loss to the Ravens.

Game-changing moment

In a game with as many big plays as Sunday's, it's difficult to choose a first-half moment as the one that swung the result. But it's hard to argue any other moment was as meaningful as one that came with 4:45 to play in the first half. As Justin Tucker attempted a 43-yard field goal to give the Ravens a six-point lead, Justin Simmons broke through the line of scrimmage and blocked the kick. Chris Harris Jr. scooped the ball up off the grass and returned it 58 yards for a score that gave Denver the lead, but a block in the back penalty brought the touchdown back. The Broncos wouldn't score on the ensuing drive, as Case Keenum took a sack that pushed Denver out of field-range and then couldn't make up the necessary ground. The Broncos also lost Phillip Lindsay on the drive, as he was ejected for throwing a punch. Denver had several chances in the second half, but no play swung momentum as much as that touchdown that wasn't.

Top performers

Simmons and Joe Jones both earn nods here as they each blocked kicks that gave the Broncos key opportunities. Jones blocked the Ravens' first punt of the game, which set up a 6-yard Royce Freeman touchdown. The aforementioned Simmons block took Baltimore points off the board — but it unfortunately didn't make the difference it appeared it would at first. Emmanuel Sanders and Demaryius Thomas also earn recognition. Sanders scored the 35-yard rushing touchdown, and Thomas rebounded to catch five passes for 63 yards. He would have had more if a 39-yard reception wasn't called back in the third quarter.

Defining statistic

Thirteen for 120.

The Broncos made enough plays to win on Sunday against the Ravens. The problem? Not enough of them counted. Repeatedly, the Broncos made big plays that were erased by untimely penalties. Twice on the Ravens' first drive, the Broncos were called for penalties that pushed Baltimore 20 more yards down the field. In the second quarter, a block in the back penalty nullified the 58-yard Harris touchdown that came when he scooped up a blocked field goal. Lindsay was flagged on the ensuing drive when he threw a punch in a pile, which led to his ejection and a penalty that pushed the Broncos out of field goal range. A Derek Wolfe offsides penalty gave the Ravens a first down after Denver made a stop — and the Ravens would go on to score a touchdown on that drive. A holding penalty nullified a 39-yard pass to Demaryius Thomas that would've given the Broncos a first down at the Baltimore 11-yard line. And, with the Broncos in the red zone with a chance to cut the lead to six points, Denver was again called for a holding penalty that moved the team from the 5-yard line to the 15. Keenum threw an interception on the ensuing play.

Memorable highlight

As the Broncos' offense clicked early, the team took a 14-7 lead with 7:02 to play in the first quarter. Emmanuel Sanders took a reverse handoff and headed 35 yards to the end zone, aided by a big Andy Janovich block on Ravens safety Eric Weddle. The play was nearly identical to one the Bronco showed off in Week 3 of the preseason, when — again led by a Janovich block — Sanders ran 27 yards to the end zone. This time, the play counted for a lot more. Sanders, a ninth-year veteran, had never before scored a rushing touchdown. He became just the fourth Broncos receiver to do so, joining Javon Walker, Rod Smith and Anthony Miller.

Phillip Lindsay accepts responsibility after first-half ejection vs. Ravens

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
Sept. 24, 2018

Sitting alone in the visitors locker room at M&T Bank Stadium and watching his team try to claw their way back from a moderate deficit in the fourth quarter, Phillip Lindsay was where he least wanted to be.

In a calamitous sequence of events in the second quarter as the Broncos tried to retake the lead, Lindsay had chased a loose fumble and dove into a dogpile hoping to recover the ball to keep the Broncos on the cusp of driving into the red zone. In the chaos, the referees saw Lindsay's arm swinging in a punching motion. They flagged him for unsportsmanlike conduct and disqualified him from the game.

And so as the Broncos' fortunes faded, Lindsay could do nothing but watch.

"I definitely feel like I let my team down," Lindsay said after the game.

However, Lindsay maintains that he did not throw any punches in the pile. Rather, the swinging motion of his arms was him trying to free the ball from the scrum.

"The ball ended up squirting back out. Another Raven dude jumped on the pile, so I went there. ... You try to make a play for your team, but we're right there on the 34-yard line, and once I tried to hit the ball out, it looked like I was swinging at somebody."

As Head Coach Vance Joseph said in his postgame press conference, the impact was severe particularly because of the role Lindsay has not only on offense, but also on special teams.

"He's obviously a big part of what we do offensively," Joseph said. "He's our double-returner today — our kickoff and punt returner today. So in losing him, that's a big deal, plus the penalty yards after that."

And regardless of the reason why the incident occurred, Lindsay said he still feels disappointed in the outcome his actions caused.

"I feel horrible," Lindsay said. "I feel horrible, because I'm not out there with my team. And that's my fault. That's something I'm going to learn from. It's never going to happen again."

The lesson from this unfortunate episode, Lindsay said, is that he must have more awareness.

"The lesson is to be smart, to understand that it is about being smart," he said. "I'm fighting for my teammates, and I can't do that if I'm sitting here in the locker room."

More Mahomes Magic, a Buffalo Stunner, and QBs Coming and Going—A Week 3 Roller-Coaster

By Albert Breer

MMQB

Sept. 24, 2018

Chiefs receiver Chris Conley still hadn't seen a clip of the play when I talked to him, at 4:07 p.m. CT from the Kansas City locker room. But he'd certainly heard the buzz about what his quarterback, Patrick Mahomes, went through to get him the ball in the back right corner of the end zone, giving the home team one of the most spectacular 4-yard touchdowns you'll ever see, and a 21-7 lead.

Though he'd yet to see the replay, Conley knew exactly how and why it happened. It wasn't an accident.

"That's just an example of how a play is never dead, and when guys just work a little bit extra, it pays off," Conley explained. "Pat was able to keep the play alive with his legs, and guys just started to scramble. It became a scramble drill, and he threw a laser of a ball in there. And the rest is history."

Mahomes is making a lot of that these days.

His 13 touchdowns through three games are an NFL record, breaking a mark set five years ago by Peyton Manning. He's posted passer ratings of 115.5, 154.8 and 127.5 through three games. He still hasn't been benched. His yards per attempt (10.58), projected over a full season, would be the highest in the Super Bowl era.

Yet until Sunday, what he was best known for in the Chiefs building—the high-wire circus plays he pulled off in practice—was largely kept under wraps, and for good reason. Mahomes was playing so well within the confines of Andy Reid's offense that his improvisational skills weren't necessary.

"I think people had the perception that it was going to be the Brett Favre early years, the gunslinging, the highs and lows, and that it'd look different," right tackle Mitchell Schwartz told me on his way home from work last week. "But he just operates coach's offense really well. Playing the Week 17 game with him last year, that was the most impressive thing. It's a road game, it's in Denver, it was Week 17, but those are always tough games regardless. And the operation was really smooth."

"He ran the offense really well. It wasn't like he just scrambled around and chucked it up and hoped for something to hit."

Chiefs staffers kept practice footage on Mahomes on their phones, just to prove to people that what they had been bragging about was real. And on the fastball to Conley on Sunday, Mahomes showed them and everyone else that it was. First he bailed to his left. Then he reversed field to his right, sprinting to the sideline before sidarming a scorcher right into Conley's hands.

"I haven't had a chance to look at it yet," Conley said. "But that's definitely one I'm going to take a look at, because I remember on the field, just how tight a window it was. Just a great play by him."

So much to get to in this week's MMQB, and we're going to touch a lot of bases:

- Carson's Wentz's gut-check of a 17-play, 75-yard game to get his first win in nearly 10 months.
- The Bills going from national punching bag to Rocky Balboa, taking down the mighty Vikings by a 27-6 count on the road as massive underdogs.
- The Browns getting off the canvas, and a decision coming on Baker Mayfield within hours of you clicking on this column.
- A big Monday nighter in a number of regards—with the Steelers wading through a messy few weeks and the national TV debut of a suddenly explosive Bucs offense fueled by new offensive coordinator Todd Monkey and operated by QB Ryan Fitzpatrick.
- Jimmy Garoppolo apparently tearing his left anterior cruciate ligament—he'll have an MRI today to confirm—in the Niners' loss to the Chiefs.
- Garoppolo's old team looking listless in Detroit.
- Saints wideout Michael Thomas continuing to put up crazy numbers in a huge overtime win at Atlanta—and giving credit to the guy who's getting him the ball.
- Cam Newton and the Panthers offense looking positively scary in a home win over the Bengals.
- The Bears defense looking similarly frightening on defense, on their way to sole possession of first place in the NFC North.
- And the Rams looking every bit the like juggernaut they hoped to be when they aggressively went through March and April, acquiring Aqib Talib, Brandin Cooks, Marcus Peters, Ndamukong Suh, et al.

The Rams, by the way, are one of just three teams to make it to 3-0 to this point (the Bucs can join them tonight). The surprise Dolphins are another. And then you have the high flying Chiefs and their gunslinging 23-year-old star.

That one play to Conley, which looked like it was drawn up in the dirt at the playground, represented a lot more than just another touchdown for the Chiefs. It represented part of what was so attractive about Mahomes in the first place. It represented the effort by Andy Reid and GM Brett Veach to put a skill group around Mahomes capable of excelling in space and in off-schedule situations. And it represented a lot of work.

Watch the play closely and you'll see Mahomes first break the pocket to his left, then pivot to avoid the pursuit of Niners rusher Cassius Marsh and break right. If you stop the play there and look at it from the opposite end zone, you'll see Conley plant his foot in the ground as Mahomes goes right, and burst past Niners DB Adrian Colbert toward the back right corner of the end zone.

Mahomes is sprinting right, and Conley is parallel to him. The quarterback sees the small window, drops his arm angle and shoots the ball like it's coming out of a Juggs machine to split the 1 and the 7 on his receiver's shirt. It was impressive physically, of course. But it also took a certain level of unspoken

communication, and so this was wholly a result of the work that Reid had his players do on the scramble drill.

“One-hundred percent,” said Conley. “It’s something that we’ve been working on, just getting chemistry as a team, and knowing where guys are going to go, keeping plays alive. It’s translating to Sunday.”

That’s what’s really cool about the Chiefs offense right now. There are new revelations every week, and playmakers everywhere. Nine different Chiefs caught passes on Sunday against San Francisco. They have burners like Conley, Sammy Watkins and Tyreek Hill at wideout, a matchup nightmare in Travis Kelce at tight end, and a workhorse in the backfield in Kareem Hunt.

And that’s meant Mahomes hasn’t really had to play hero as much, despite his gaudy numbers. The challenge will change, of course, as teams get more tape on him and on this iteration of Reid’s offense. But the signs are already good that Mahomes will be able to meet that challenge, even if there’s a natural regression from this craziness coming, as there almost certainly is.

“I think the thing that stuck out to me most about Pat, he’s been good in practice, he’s been good in the preseason, but when it’s come to the actual games, he elevates his play beyond what we’ve seen before,” Conley said. “He’s just a gamer. He’s ready to go out there and win, he performs really well when the lights are on, and when there’s a defense that’s coming at him. And that’s really interesting.

“We get a lot of looks that we didn’t assume we’d get during the week of practice, but he’s able to go out there and adjust and just make the play.”

Mahomes and the whole Chiefs offense look unstoppable right now, but they’re being cautious and realistic. Conley says “self-inflicted wounds” are still a problem, and, again, there’s the idea the rest of the league could catch up to them. The Chiefs’ offensive players have studied last year’s midseason swoon, to prevent a repeat.

As for the the rest of us? What Mahomes and company are doing on the field looks pretty good.

“If we execute, we practice and we prepare the way we’re capable of, and then we go out and play the way we’re capable of on Sunday, we feel like we can be the best offense in this league,” Conley said. “We honestly feel that way, and we put the pressure on ourselves each week to prepare like that. If you want to be the best, you have to show that you’re the best.”

So far they certainly look like the best. We’ll see if they can keep it up.

WATCH: THE MONDAY NIGHT KEY

Albert Breer breaks down a critical factor in the Steelers-Bucs Monday night matchup.

WENTZ’S ENCOURAGING RETURN

Carson Wentz wasn’t perfect on Sunday. After a fast start, he threw a pick and lost a fumble, and the Eagles offense went for a stretch spanning the equivalent of more than three quarters without reaching the end zone. If we’re being fair, some rust should be expected from a guy who hasn’t been in a live situation since December.

Now, the good news. To me Wentz, the 25-year-old third-year QB looked like himself in consistently extending plays and getting the team out of some tough spots. And, of course, in registering a win, 20-16 at home over a game (and improving) Colts team.

When I texted coach Doug Pederson after the game about what he was most encouraged by in watching Wentz, he responded: “Just how he battled the entire game. Even when he had the fumble and interception, he never wavered. Great job today. We’ll get better.”

That fight was evident, and most obvious, during the game-defining drive that Wentz captained in the fourth quarter. Down 16-13, the Eagles covered 75 yards in 17 plays, getting some help from the officials along the way (one penalty converted a second-and-26, another moved the chains on a fourth-and-5), while making their share of plays.

None was bigger—or more vintage Wentz—than a third-and-9 from the Colts 36 with 4:47 left. On the play, the pocket collapsed around Wentz, and Indy safety Clayton Geathers and rookie rusher Kemoko Turay had shots at him. Somehow he shook off both, slipped through, and popped the ball over the outstretched arms of defensive lineman Jihad Ward to Nelson Agholor in the right flat.

The next part was pretty cool, too. Knowing he was a few yards short of the sticks, Agholor leapt over Colts star Malik Hooker to pick up a vital first down, almost as if Wentz’s effort rubbed off on him.

“Guys really rallied around each other,” Wentz said at his postgame press conference. “The resilience I thought was huge today. We had that long drive at the end, we had some really unfortunate situations we were in, in second-and-extra-long, third down, the fourth down, a couple things, and guys just stayed together. The defense stepping up at the end was huge for us.”

It was a pretty good team win for the banged-up Eagles. But make no mistake—Wentz made a huge difference, and he looks like he’s about as close to the old Wentz you could expect given the circumstances.

DIS-BILL-IEF

There was the Nathan Peterman sequel to open the season, a blowout loss in Baltimore. There was his bad start against the Chargers in Week 2, and the bizarre halftime retirement of Vontae Davis, who walked away from more than \$4 million rather than play for this rebuilding Bills outfit.

Then there was what was looming—a trip to Minneapolis to play the imposing Vikings, who came into Sunday as 17-point favorites. Just when it looked like 0-3 was inevitable, 27-6 happened. Josh Allen piloted a nine-play, 75-yard drive to open the game, then the Bills cashed strip-sacks by Trent Murphy and Jerry Hughes on consecutive Vikings possessions into points to race to a 17-0 lead in the first quarter.

The best part for second-year coach Sean McDermott, though, wasn’t running off that great start, with Buffalo extending the lead to 27-0 by halftime. It was that his Bills never looked back.

“I was concerned at halftime—we’ve got a bunch of young guys who have never A) played in an environment like this or B) held a lead like this in the NFL,” McDermott said on his way out to the bus Sunday. “You know how this league works, from one half to the next. I thought our core group of

leaders did a great job of getting out in front of the team and making sure we stayed focused on the task at hand.”

The coach, for his part, let the leadership happen organically. On offense, it came from Pat DiMarco and Russell Bodine. On defense, from Lorenzo Alexander, Star Lotulelei and Murphy. On special teams, from Taiwan Jones. The message from each was simple: Don’t give the Vikings life. And the Bills, for the most part, didn’t.

While Buffalo didn’t score in the second half, Allen was steady and didn’t turn the ball over, and that allowed the defense to control the game, keeping the Vikings off the scoreboard all the way into the final four minutes. To McDermott, that really meant something.

“We’re trying to develop a young football team, a lot of our guys are first- and second-year players, or if they’re not in that category, they’re new to our football team,” he said. “So it’s just about us developing a culture, a resilient, tough-minded football team, understanding that this, and professional sports overall, not just the NFL, it’s gonna test you, it’s gonna try and pull your team in different ways.

“It’s through injuries, people talking about you outside the building, internal situations, as you mentioned with Vontae. This was a step for us as a young, developing football team.”

An important one too, given how McDermott and GM Brandon Beane have handled 2018—after inheriting a mountain of logistical challenges in the construction of the roster. This year was always going to be the year they ripped the band-aid off, and so:

- The Bills are carrying over \$50 million in dead money this year, meaning that almost a third of their cap is devoted to guys no longer on the team.
- There are just five Bills draft picks on the roster who predate McDermott’s January 2017 hire.
- There was some surprise attrition too—with the losses of Richie Incognito and Eric Wood putting the team in a bind on the offensive line.

McDermott and Beane have been resolute in proceeding with their plan, but the challenge on the coaches is to get the locker room to hang with them through the rough patches. That’s why Sunday was so important—because it’s some evidence that the players aren’t running from a difficult spot.

“I’m glad that Brandon and I are working on this together—it’s not easy,” McDermott said. “And we knew that going into this whole process, going into this season in particular. We’re counting on a lot of young guys, they’re playing some big roles for us. But that’s part of the leadership challenge. That’s what we signed up for. Listen, this is just a step. There are going to be highs and lows moving forward, like there is always in trying to build a football team that’s built for the long term.

“Being around that in Philadelphia with Andy [Reid], with Ron [Rivera] in Carolina, now we’re trying to do the same thing in Buffalo here with Brandon.”

They have a long way to go. They know that. And so being able to withstand what they went through in the first two weeks and come up with a performance like Sunday’s is a nice piece of affirmation that maybe the Bills do know what they’re doing.

HUE JACKSON HAS NO REGRETS

By the time you read this, the Browns will be back at work, preparing for their Sept. 30 date at Oakland. For the players, it will be the first day at the office since the Thursday night win over the Jets, the franchise's first victory in 635 days, and those couple days off have given everyone time to reflect. Including the man in charge.

On Friday, Hue Jackson was thinking of the support he's gotten from owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam (they got a game ball), he was excited for his players because of the work they'd put in, he was proud of the others in the organization who'd endured a lot, and he was happy for the fans and the city. And he wasn't going to compartmentalize the feeling right way. In fact, he wanted his players to revel in it.

"I hope our players enjoy it—they earned it," Jackson said from his office the afternoon after the win. "But I also hope they want that feeling again, that this wasn't the big moment, there's bigger things out there for us and we'll continue to work and grow and get better. You want everybody to understand that this is the feeling we want to capture. We just don't want it to be just one night."

And maybe we're burying the lead a little here—all those guys are waking up this morning expecting to hear they have a new starting quarterback in Baker Mayfield. Jackson wanted to tell his players first, and to give proper respect to Tyrod Taylor, and he'll have the chance to do that today when his team reports back to the facility in Berea, Ohio. That makes sense, even if the obvious is coming.

Jackson didn't say much to me about the decision that was coming. But we did talk Mayfield, and it's easy to find a few hints in about where things are headed. A few bullet points:

- One reason Jackson gave me for not wanting to start Mayfield, back in July—he preferred to avoid saddling the rookie with the franchise's recent history with first-round quarterbacks, and young quarterbacks in general, not to mention the dark cloud of 1-31. When I circled back on that on Friday? Jackson's mind had changed. "That's why he was made the backup quarterback, that's the position you put a young man in who still hasn't really played in National Football League, who has work to do, who's growing and learning the league, but you think he's talented enough where when the right time comes, he's going to be able to handle it," Jackson said. "That's why he was chosen as the backup quarterback." Indeed, if the idea was to put Mayfield on ice, it would have made sense just to have Drew Stanton backup Tyrod Taylor. That he didn't should've been a sign to us all about Jackson's feelings for Mayfield.
- The most impressive thing from Mayfield on Thursday? Jackson first said it was the accuracy on his ball. Then he doubled back—"It's just the way he handled it. It wasn't too big for him. We said, 'Baker, you're up, you're going.' There wasn't any anxiety or anything. It was like, 'OK, let's go,' and on he went, and he started to make plays for the offense, that the defense started to feed off of, that the special teams started to feed off of. And you look up, and we're ahead, and that's what you want from your quarterback."
- As for Jackson's comfort level in being tied to Mayfield, as coaches who draft quarterbacks first overall are, he reaffirmed his satisfaction with the pick. "I felt comfortable being hitched to him when we drafted him," Jackson said. "I feel even more comfortable being hitched to him today. I don't think there's been any wavering on my end when it comes to Baker Mayfield. I've always said he's going to have a great career and he's going to play when the time is right. When that is, it would show itself. And it's starting to show itself."

- Jackson also said there wasn't much that caught him off-guard about Mayfield's 17-of-23, 203-yard performance. Nor, he said, was anyone else in the building surprised. "Everything I saw, I've seen on the practice field, I've seen in preseason football, I've seen how he competes and how he works," Jackson said. "So I'm not surprised by it. I think surprise would be the wrong word. I think just watching him have it happen in real time, practice and preseason is a little bit different than the regular season, a game that's on Thursday Night Football, he did in real time what he's done in practice. I think that's really good."

So ... the Browns endured a loss and a tie with Taylor before going to Mayfield. Any regrets over not giving Mayfield more first team-reps? "No, not at all, because I knew he'd be able to handle whatever whenever he played," Jackson said.

And he showed it on Thursday. Even more impressive is that where a lot of rookie quarterbacks these days have a scheme constructed for them, Mayfield was actually running one put together for someone else—Jackson said it "was built for the players that are here, but it was mainly around Tyrod's talent."

I'd imagine all of that will start to change now. As a result, the possibilities seem endless. So buckle up.

THE MAN BEHIND FITZMAGIC

It doesn't take a Pro Football Focus subscription to see what's happening in Tampa—the Bucs are attacking with abandon, and without much regard for repercussions, on offense, and Ryan Fitzpatrick is playing so well that Jameis Winston's job fell into serious jeopardy just two weeks into the season. Consider:

- The Bucs scored on their second first down of the opener, with Fitzpatrick hitting DeSean Jackson downfield for a 58-yard touchdown. It happened even quicker in Week 2, with Fitzpatrick finding Jackson deep for a 75-yard score on the Bucs' first offensive snap.
- Fitzpatrick has thrown the ball more on first down (24 times) than he has on any other down.
- Fitzpatrick has a perfect passer rating on first down, having completed 20 of those 24 throws for 460 yards, four touchdowns and no picks.

So how has it happened? This offseason, coach Dirk Koetter quietly handed the play-calling reins over to offensive coordinator Todd Monken, the former Oklahoma State OC and Southern Miss head coach. And those who know Monken say the last couple of weeks looks awfully familiar.

"Our goal is to scare the defensive coordinator," said Oklahoma State coach Mike Gundy, who worked with Monken over his two stints in Stillwater. "If we don't scare the defensive coordinator, the play-caller from the other team during the game, then we're not doing our job. That's the way we look at it at Oklahoma State. We want them to be concerned throughout the game that we're going to throw the ball over their head, all during the game.

"At any time, when they make a call, they have to be aware of it—whatever call we make, they might try to throw it over our head on any down and distance, no matter where the ball is on the field. And that's the principle and the thought we carry."

For Gundy, playing that way has been a matter of survival (as it is for many college coaches), and a means of leveling the playing field with bluebloods like Texas and Oklahoma. And Monken has taken the approach to the NFL, where it seems, again, to have its own way of tipping the scales.

“Over the games that I’ve seen, bits and pieces, 50 or 60 plays, and it’s a different picture,” Gundy said of the Bucs. “And it works. The players like it. Fans like it. I think people enjoy watching aggressive football. I always tell the staff, now of course they’re not playing as fast as we do, but playing fast and throwing it down the field is fun as long as you’re scoring and getting some first downs.”

And that’s the key. Calling a game in an unorthodox way is one thing. Having it actually work is another—and you need to be confident it will, because there certainly is consequence to running lower percentage plays more often.

For now, though, it’s working. It’s also giving credence to the idea that the smart teams (Eagles, Chiefs, Patriots, etc.) are cribbing harder and more often from the college game to make their offenses go.

“The majority of the guys are using our stuff, they’re using college stuff,” Gundy said. “They’re watching tape and taking our plays, period. Now, they might not admit it, because they’re supposed to be the best at who they are and what they do. Look at the Patriots, look at the Chiefs, look at the Eagles in the Super Bowl—that’s all college stuff. That’s not NFL stuff. The teams in the NFL, if they don’t get on board and start doing some of the things that we do in college, they’re gonna get smoked.”

The Bucs have, in certain ways, proven as much over the last two weeks. Which makes tonight’s visit from the Steelers all the more intriguing.

... OF THE WEEK
TWEET

Apologies to Vontae Davis ... These kinds of jokes still have plenty of mileage on them, so he may want to settle in for a long ride.

MEME

Important note: This was before the Patriots got beaten 26-10 in Detroit. So maybe Bill Belichick had an idea of what was coming? Also, I have no clue on whether or not he even saw those kids, which really almost makes it even funnier.

QUOTE

“Yeah, of course, I heard chatter, people were coming up to me and saying a trade might happen. Even pregame, a couple Cowboys coaches came up to me, I don’t know if they were playing psychological games, but they were like, ‘You ready for the trade tomorrow?’”

Strange things seem to happen when Seahawks safety Earl Thomas gets around the Cowboys—the Texas alum grew up about five hours from AT&T Stadium. And this is just another brick in the wall. One way or another, after he skipped out on practice last week to, as he explained it, protect his health, Thomas’ situation in Seattle does seem to be coming to a head.

VIDEO

One more time for the people in the back.

S/O to ...

The Chicago Bears for being out in front as the league pushes forward with its social justice initiatives—the team’s players and management pledged \$500,000 to local programs last week. Linebacker Sam Acho, tight end Trey Burton, defensive lineman Akiem Hicks and quarterbacks Mitchell Trubisky and Chase Daniel were out front with chairman George McCaskey last week to introduce the effort, which will include ride-a-longs with local police in an effort to build a bridge between the team and law enforcement. Good to see it.

SIX FROM SATURDAY

A look at the college football weekend from an NFL perspective:

1. Ohio State DE Nick Bosa’s core/groin surgery last week will rob scouts of the chance to see the potential No. 1 overall pick against Penn State, one of the games in which he figured to be challenged most. With Bosa down, they should get a closer look at Bosa’s bookend, true sophomore Chase Young, who’s already expected to be a very high pick in 2020.
2. Oregon’s Justin Herbert, Missouri’s Drew Lock and Auburn’s Jarrett Stidham continue to have their ups and downs to start the season—and so next year’s QB class continues to be a big, fat question mark.

NFL

Drew Lock Is Poised to Rise Up NFL Draft Boards

3. While there, it’s worth mentioning that West Virginia’s Will Grier is playing really, really well, completing 75 percent of his passes for 1,117 yards, 14 touchdowns and three picks through three games.
4. Tua-mania has engulfed Tuscaloosa, but don’t ignore the guy lining up behind him—Damien Harris. The Tide’s senior tailback is averaging 7.4 yards per attempt, and scouts see him as the type of sturdy (5’11”, 215) three-down back that’s become the prototype of late.
5. I think I’ve said it here before. I’ll say it again: Penn State QB Trace McSorley’s going to be fun to argue over in the spring. And I know he does have one fan going into the process, in Trent Dilfer.
6. Big win for Texas Tech coach Kliff Kingsbury, running away with a 41-17 win over Oklahoma State. And he’s running another talented freshman QB, Alan Bowman, out there, to boot.

TEN TAKEAWAYS

1. The most staggering part of New England’s listless performance in Detroit was what happened right there along the line of scrimmage on Sunday night. The Lions came in ranked 30th running the ball on offense, and dead last stopping the run on defense—and Detroit promptly ran roughshod over the Patriots’ front on both sides of the ball. The Lions ran for 159 yards, New England just 89, and Detroit clearly did a better job of getting to Tom Brady than the Patriots did getting after Matthew Stafford. Now, the Patriots were down defensive starters Trey Flowers, Patrick Chung and Eric Rowe, and the offense is still waiting on Julian Edelman’s return. We’ve seen this before—the Patriots have made a habit of treating September like an extended preseason—but this was ugly, and so was last week, and that adds up to consecutive double-digit losses for the first time since 2002. A couple of Brady’s heaves

to nowhere on Sunday night seemed to be out of frustration, and it'd be hard to blame him for getting worked up, based on what's around him right now.

2. Lions back Kerryon Johnson looked ready to live up to the camp hype on him. Yes, the work of the Lions line (buoyed by improvement from Frank Ragnow) played into his success against the Patriots. But it had been nearly five years since a Lion rushed for 100 yards in a game. Johnson went for 101 on 16 carries on Sunday, and looked tough and decisive getting there.

3. There's no sugar-coating what happened to Jimmy Garoppolo. It's awful to see him suffer his second major NFL injury in his 10th career start. But the truth is, these Niners were a little short of where the hype had them this year anyway, still a year or two away from true contention. And the silver lining is that they are prepared for this. Last February, I worked with Kyle Shanahan on a story on his pursuit of Garoppolo, and he volunteered backup C.J. Beathard's name more than once. "When your quarterback plays at a higher level, some other issues aren't as glaring," Shanahan said then. "When you have that issue, everything's glaring. You can isolate a lot more, you don't have that lingering quarterback problem in the back of your mind. That's what I love with C.J. too. We feel great about C.J., and we love that we've got a young backup too. We've really got a good quarterback room, where we feel like we can focus everywhere else." It was genuine then, and I think it's genuine now—which means it's probably worth just keeping an eye on what happens here.

4. Interesting story on NFL.com by old colleague Ian Rapoport, detailing the dysfunction within the Raiders organization that became obvious and apparent through the Khalil Mack situation. We mentioned in the spring that there was an expectation that coach Jon Gruden, carrying the biggest stick on the football side of the building, would likely get the chance, at some point, to bring in a personnel man. One name he'd looked hard at, I'm told: Ex-Eagles exec/Alabama recruiting czar Ed Marynowitz, who's been working for CAA. The ship may have sailed on that one. We'll see.

5. Had a great conversation with Saints receiver Michael Thomas on Sunday night, following another huge performance—his breakthrough this September has been downright Mahomesian. Thomas had another 10 catches for 129 yards in New Orleans' scintillating 43-37 overtime win in Atlanta over the archrival Falcons. That puts Thomas—Keyshawn Johnson's nephew—on pace for 202 catches, 2,122 yards and 16 touchdowns. Which would be noteworthy. Interesting thing was, as we talked, he kept attributing his success to the guy throwing him the ball. "I have a lot of respect for him as a quarterback," Thomas said of Drew Brees. "I feel like he doesn't get the respect he deserves. I feel like I've been brought here to send him out the right way, and that's what I want to do, getting him to that championship, play at a high level every week like he does. I'm trying to match him. He has all these records, he doesn't make many mistakes, and he's throwing it to me—we should make the play." Brees, by the way, needs 417 yards to surpass Peyton Manning for No. 1 on the all-time passing yardage list.

6. I did have to ask Thomas about Brees' seven-yard touchdown run—the quarterback's stutter step somehow got Falcons DBs Robert Alford and Brian Poole to collide into one another. "Man, I was surprised," Thomas said. "But that just goes to show you how competitive he is. He's the same way. He's trying to win. He's trying to get the job done too. He's not out there just lollygagging around. That's a piece of our offense we have, and he showed it." But, I'd guess, not a very big piece.

7. Who'd have guessed that the body weight rule would be a much bigger problem for the NFL than the helmet rule, three weeks into the new season? That's our reality now. Packers LB Clay Matthews was flagged for a costly roughing call for the second straight week. This hit, to me, was pretty

straightforward. Can't hit high, can't hit low, so the teaching adjustment would be to target the quarterback's midsection as you go in rushing—which is what Matthews did. How he's supposed to stop his momentum from carrying him off his feet, I don't know. I understand the helmet rule, completely. I don't understand what the need for the body weight rule was, outside of just reacting to Aaron Rodgers getting blasted by Anthony Barr last year.

8. Don't look now, but the Panthers just ripped off more than 230 rushing yards against a Cincinnati defense that held Indy to 75 yards on the ground in Week 1, and the Ravens to 66 yards rushing in Week 2. The key? Cam Newton completed a career-high 32 passes against Baltimore, and that opened up things in the run game. Christian McCaffrey finished with 184 yards on 28 carries, Newton added 36 yards on 10 carries, and that was more than enough to carry the day.

9. All the Rams' shiny new toys have gobbled up the attention around the team in L.A., which has created a weird dynamic—a red-hot quarterback seems to be getting overlooked. Jared Goff shouldn't be. Through three weeks of Year 2 under Sean McVay, Goff has 941 passing yards, six touchdowns, two picks and a 111.0 passer rating. And he was tremendous against a very good Chargers defense on Sunday, going 29-of-36 (80.6 percent) for 354 yards, three touchdowns and one pick (which came on a spectacular play by Chargers rookie Derwin James). Should be fun to see him play on Thursday night.

10. The Bears defense closed out that game in Arizona twice, first by picking off Josh Rosen (negated by an offside call) and then by engulfing the Cardinals rookie on the last play of the game. Chicago is fifth in the NFL in total defense, but watching them down the stretch on Sunday absolutely gave you the feeling they could be even better down the line. Arizona was held to just 221 yards of total offense, and Cardinal QBs were sacked four times and picked off thrice. Now first-year coach Steve Wilks has a to make decision at QB, after benching Sam Bradford for Rosen.

FIVE-DAY FORECAST

Tonight should be telling in a number of ways.

When I asked one ex-Steelers staffer about the internal acrimony in the building, he laughed and said this stuff “happens every year.” Part of that is the program they've built there under three head coaches—Chuck Noll, Bill Cowher and Mike Tomlin, program-leader types who are experts at managing personalities. News of Le'Veon Bell being on the trading block, of course, won't help matters, however.

So that's one half of the Monday Night equation. The other is Fitzpatrick, Monken and the Tampa offense's last go-round before Jameis Winston is eligible to return.

This one's juicy, folks. You can give me the Steelers—let's say 27-24—based on the premise that the more desperate team usually wins a game like this.

And the best news? Just three days after that, FOX delivers a gem—Vikings at Rams—as it debuts the Thursday night package on its air.

So I'll see you guys on the couch for it all.

FMIA Week 3: A Sunday of Surprises? Nah, A Vet Says, 'This Is The Normal'

By Peter King
Pro Football Talk
Sept. 24, 2018

This is the kind of weekend it was in the NFL: You enter thinking you've got a decent handle on the league after a couple of weeks. Lost Lions, rising Vikes, dead-and-buried Bills, class-of-the-AFC Jags, hapless Cards, unstoppable Chiefs and Rams, feeble Giants and 'Hawks, re-throned Wentz ... Browns still stink but there's a dash of hope, Pats getting well, who knows what to make of the Dolphins, etc.

By midnight Sunday, you're spitting out pieces of your broken luck. By midnight Sunday, you're actually wondering, What team do I have more faith in to play a complete game right now—Cleveland or New England? In Week 4, I mean. Not in January.

"This is all I know," 33-year-old Adrian Peterson said Sunday evening from Washington after another rebirth in his 12-year career. "This is the normal. You don't show up on Sunday and play, you get smoked. For a while, the only team you thought you can just show up against [and win] was the Cleveland Browns. No more."

This is the normal.

A bit of a different column today, a stream-of-consciousness, three-dot column, to dive into everything that needs some interpretation. The Buffalo story is without peer this morning. The apparent loss of Jimmy Garoppolo till next season is close. The never-ending greatness of Drew Brees is a pretty good story too, as is the revival of left-for-dead Adrian Peterson. And the Titans, who are 5-1 in the last six meetings with Jacksonville; there's a story. The Patriots' semi-annual September swoon is upon us. Seattle has a win, and it also has a very big Earl Thomas problem. The Vikings got exposed badly. Their reward? The worst road trip of the year.

And roughing-the-passer still stinks, by the way.

We start with the Win of the Week.

The Lead: Odd Sunday

Normal, Ch. 1: Nothing Fluky About The Bills

I watched a lot of the Bills-Vikings game, and nothing about Buffalo's 27-6 win was fluky. The Bills were 16.5-point 'dogs, and this was the biggest NFL upset since 1995, and it happened because the Vikings thought they could overcome a terrible offensive line by putting the ball in Kirk Cousins' hands 55 times. And the Bills used defensive marauders you barely know like Matt Milano and Trumaine Edmunds and Trent Murphy to terrorize Cousins into hurried throws, three fumbles and a pick.

The weirdness of the week in Buffalo began with an important defender, cornerback Vontae Davis, quitting at halftime of the game against the Chargers last week. Logic would tell you that's an dagger to a team's season. Maybe it should have been. "Honestly," defensive tackle Kyle Williams told me from Minneapolis, "that had no impact on us at all. We flushed it just like it was a loss. We've got some guys

who've been around the league for a few years, guys who can be north stars for the young guys. If you're around this league long enough, you'll see things that shock you. But we just focused on the job all week. If we didn't let them run the ball, we knew we had some matchups we liked [rushing the passer]."

Milano, a smallish (6-0, 223) fifth-round linebacker from GM Brandon Beane's first draft class last year, fits in coach Sean McDermott's do-your-job ethos. He swarmed around Cousins all through the first half and had a sack, an interception, a team-high eight tackles and a fumble recovery. "Play fearless and play fast," coach Sean McDermott told his team during the week, and Milano led the way. He's a really good, really instinctive player.

Impressive, too, was Josh Allen. The thing no one knew about Allen—other than whether he'd be accurate enough in the NFL—was how he'd adjust to the jump in level of play. At Wyoming, he didn't respond well in games against major-college teams. In this game, playing without his biggest offensive weapon, LeSean McCoy (bruised ribs), Allen showed a great touch for knowing when to take chances and when to hold onto the ball. "No turnovers," he said, proudly, from the bus on the way to the airport post-game. His best moment, easily: the Saquon-like hurdling of Vikings linebacker Anthony Barr on the Bills' third touchdown drive.

"It was third-and-long," Allen said. "They brought their pressure. I escaped. I probably should have kept my eyes downfield longer. When I saw [Barr] coming, I knew I'd be short if I didn't do something like I did." The high hurdle, he meant.

"I saw it," Williams said. "I thought, 'Hey, wow, he can jump. Don't do it again.' We need him."

Buffalo's reward: The Bills get to get back on a plane west again next Saturday to Green Bay. An angry Green Bay, after a tie and a loss. Josh Allen, meet Aaron Rodgers.

Normal, Ch. 2: Peterson Says, 'I Control The Story'

What I like about 12 years of dealing with Adrian Peterson: He does not like the formulaic answers. Ask him a football question, get a pretty legit answer.

Me: How tough was it in the offseason, wanting to play, and no one bringing you into camp?

Peterson: "Rough. I think I was able to put things in perspective. In my last year in Minnesota, I didn't play a lot. In New Orleans, I had a short visit. In Arizona, I got a leg injury. This is a league of what have you done for me lately. You know that. When someone else has the platform to write the story, that sucks. When I have the platform, which I have now, I can control the story."

At 33, Peterson doesn't like to be told he's on his last legs. He might be, but that's something he wants to control. In the second quarter of Washington's 31-17 win over Green Bay, Peterson was having an OK day: eight rushes, 39 yards. He'd just hesitated on a run from his 2-yard line, and the hesitation caused a four-yard gain—not 98. "Nothing but green grass in front of me," he said. "I blew it. That run opened my eyes." Washington used its first timeout, and Peterson put it to good use. "I told my linemen, 'That one's on me, Keep doing what you're doing. We'll break one.'" Three plays later, Peterson sprinted and juked around right end for 41 yards, keeping his word. For the day, he rushed 19 times for 120 yards. "Should have been 160, 170 yards," he said. "I left too many yards out on the field." The 6.3-yard rushing average was his highest since 2015.

“Put it in my hands and I’ll make something happen,” Peterson said.

Still.

Normal, Ch. 3: Brees Is Breaking Records, And He’s Not Done

Drew Brees, the ridiculous metronome. It just never stops. Tom Brady talks about playing till he’s 45, and he well could. But Brees, who turns 40 in January, broke the NFL’s all-time record for completions Sunday, passing Brett Favre. And if he has two normal weeks (against the Giants and Washington, coming up), he’ll break another record—for passing yards. He’s 418 yards away from Peyton Manning’s yardage record. And 46 touchdowns from Manning’s passing-TD record. And if you watched the 43-37 Saints’ win at Atlanta on Sunday, all you could think was: This guy’s missed two games due to injury in 13 seasons in New Orleans, and he might put the records so far out that it’ll be tough for Brady or anyone to pass them.

The game has changed so drastically that you don’t know what to make of these numbers. Should they rule who’s the best quarterback ever? No. This era’s different from all the others. “I don’t know if I told you this story,” Brees, back in New Orleans Sunday night, told me. “But after I got drafted by San Diego [in 2001], we played in Miami that preseason. Pregame, walking in the stadium, I remember seeing Dan Marino up in the Ring of Honor. All the records written next to him ... I remember thinking, ‘Good gracious, how do you ever play that long to accomplish those numbers?’ That day, had you ever told me I’d have some of those numbers, I’d have told you you’re crazy, obviously.”

The game he set the completions record was made memorable because Brees won it with his legs. Down 37-30 late in the fourth quarter, from the Falcons’ 7-yard line, he jitterbugged toward the line and faced two Falcons’ defensive backs. Uncharacteristically, he jukeed corner Brian Poole, evading him and diving in for the tying touchdown. He drove the Saints 80 yards for the winning touchdown on the first drive of overtime, diving in from the 1 on a quarterback sneak. That’s Brees.

“I love to compete,” he said. “I love to work, I love to set a goal, embark on the journey and accomplish the task. So many incredible people in my life have put me in position to succeed. So many who have helped make me a confident person when maybe I was lacking in it in some parts of my life. So an accomplishment like this is for them too.

“A lot of receivers caught those passes. I hope they’re proud. This is for them, too. I’ve had the same head coach, Sean Payton, the same offensive coordinator, Pete Carmichael, for all my years here, and the same quarterback coach, Joe Lombardi, for 11 of the 13 years. This is for them, too.

“I’m having a lot of fun playing still. I hope there are lots more years.”

Normal, Ch. 4: Niners Lose Garoppolo

One of the reasons the NFL is so hell-bent on protecting quarterbacks is because sometimes passers get lost on fluky, freaky, extremely normal plays, and so the NFL simply doesn’t want to exacerbate the normal by getting quarterbacks bashed around in the pocket unless it’s totally unavoidable. In Kansas City on Sunday afternoon, one of the NextGen’s top passing prospects, Jimmy Garoppolo, took off around left end and was striding for the sidelines. He took an awkward step with his left foot. The knee caved. Preliminarily, the Niners think Garoppolo tore his ACL. There will be an MRI this morning in California, but coach Kyle Shanahan is preparing to play the rest of the year with backup C.J. Beathard,

beginning Sunday at the Chargers. GM John Lynch's glum voice over the phone when he returned home illustrated the harsh likely reality.

"All indications are that it's torn," Lynch said. "Our [medical] guys say they've been wrong before and so they need to do the MRI, obviously."

Garoppolo, Lynch said, "is heartbroken. His family's heartbroken. You can see it in his eyes, in their eyes. It's tough. Jimmy needs to play, and he wants to play. But Kyle feels strongly about C.J. We all do."

Tough night for the next-man-up mantra. But that's the normal in a brutal league. When Lynch says Garoppolo needs to play, he's not being harsh; he's being real. Carson Wentz was injured 29 games into his career, and the Eagles already knew he was their long-term quarterback—he'd experienced enough highs and lows to have a proven track record, even as a young player. Garoppolo started his 10th game Sunday; the Niners have already signed him to a rich contract, and their confidence in him won't be shaken by a knee injury. But any quarterback, no matter how promising, needs to play at this high level before feeling truly confident, and convincing his mates, that he can be a great quarterback in the NFL. Garoppolo has already had his financial coronation. Now, most likely, the Niners will have to wait for Garoppolo's football coronation.

Normal, Ch. 5: The Madness Continues

- Titans 9, red-hot Jaguars 6. Tennessee's got Jacksonville's number, winning five of the last six in the series. In the last three games, while the Jags were rising offensively, Tennessee held Jacksonville and quarterback Blake Bortles to 32 points and just two touchdowns. "The game plan was to keep Bortles in the pocket," said Titans linebacker Wesley Woodyard. "Don't let him extend drives. In a series like this, you've got to play sound, and that's the way we play defense."
- Ryan Tannehill is 9-1 in his last 10 starts. The win over Oakland was his 80th start. He's 40-40. But he's more efficient than a .500 quarterback should be, at least lately. The faith Miami showed in Tannehill after he missed the team's previous 19 games heading into this year is paying off.
- It's madness in Houston for the 0-3 Texans—one of only three 0-3 teams in the game—after losing to the Giants and their porous offensive line. The Texans have struggled more than I thought they would in the secondary, but the real problem is a poor offensive line. Right tackle Julien Davenport was called for two false starts and two holding penalties against the Giants.
- So what will Seattle GM John Schneider do with problem child (and FMIA Defensive Player of the Week) Earl Thomas? Seattle got its first win, over Dallas, on Sunday, but it's a Band-Aid on a bigger wound. Thomas is going to be disruptive unless he gets his contract re-done, so the Seahawks should deal him for what they can get this week.

This Is The Normal: Epilog

The media parrying with Bill Belichick after the Patriots lost to Detroit 26-10 Sunday night:

Q: "Was Josh Gordon inactive tonight because of an injury?"

Belichick: "I don't know. He wasn't active today."

Q: "How would you describe your conversation with Matt Patricia after the game?"

Belichick: "No."

Q: "Your reaction to being 1-2?"

Belichick: "I don't think anyone can clinch a playoff spot today. I don't think anyone is eliminated today."

Roughing The Passer

So What Exactly Is Roughing The Passer?

The roughing-the-passer controversy continued Sunday, as did the social media outrage over it. Former NFL tight end Martellus Bennett, for instance, had this gem: "Breaking news. NFL just passed a Mississippi rule all pass rushers must count 3 Mississippis before rushing the passer." This came after the Clay Matthews roughing call that sent Green Bay coach Mike McCarthy into orbit.

I hate the rule as much as anyone. But by the letter of the silly law, Matthews did commit a roughing the passer foul Sunday in Washington. In the NFL rules digest, Section 2, Personal Fouls, in Article 9, Roughing the Passer, here is the rule:

"A defensive player must not unnecessarily or violently throw [the quarterback] down or land on top of him with all or most of the defender's weight. Instead, the defensive player must strive to wrap up the passer with the defensive players' arms and not land on the passer."

NFL officiating consultant Ed Hochuli, who was in the NFL's officiating command center Sunday, believes the Matthews roughing call "was an absolutely textbook full-body-weight roughing call, the best example of it that I've ever seen."

If so, the question is whether the NFL wants players playing this way. Matthews last week (I'll get to that in a moment) certainly did not commit a foul in the eyes of any reasonable football fans and most in the league; I think at least half believe the flag he drew in Washington on Sunday was unjust. How is a man supposed to play if he can't do it the way Matthews played both of these?

Some history from last week. The NFL sends out an officiating video each week to the media and the public, to try to educate and inform about significant plays from the previous week. This week, NFL VP of officiating Al Riveron highlighted six plays from Week 2 in a 5-minute, 15-second video. He explained why two players were ejected in the first two reviews; a fluky two-passes-in-one-play situation; a close call using the new what-is-a-catch rule; a defensive hold off the line of scrimmage; and then explaining the dropkick rule after a drop-kicked kickoff in Chicago.

There was nothing, however, about the most discussed, most controversial plays of the weekend—the roughing-the-passer calls on Minnesota's Eric Kendricks and Green Bay's Clay Matthews in the Vikings-Packers game. (Pro Football Talk's Mike Florio first reported what was on the tape.)

What a lost opportunity. There's an elephant in the room, with a penalty that was hugely controversial and significantly influenced the outcome of a game (the Matthews roughing call that gave Minnesota life, down eight with less than two minutes left in the fourth quarter) that could decide the winner of the NFC North. And Riveron spends the last 62 seconds on a frivolity: Michael Dickson of the Seahawks drop-kicking a kickoff.

The NFL preferred to talk about one of the flags only—the Matthews penalty—in ref Tony Corrente’s pool report minutes after the game. And Riveron discussed roughing the passer privately with some teams in the wake of the calls, a league source told me. But not in the one way the league communicates each week with the media and the public. That’s at best a tremendous lost opportunity, at worst trying to bury an embarrassing call that was a major factor in the outcome of a game. The league is sticking with what Corrente said post-game: that Matthews “picked the quarterback up and drove him into the ground.”

Here is actually what happened: Vikings quarterback Kirk Cousins had released the ball a split-second before Matthews wrapped his right arm around his waist; his left arm first went to the back of Cousins’ legs, then to the ground, to brace for the fall. Cousins’ right leg was off the ground when Matthews made contact with his head to the left of Cousins’ midsection, and the QB’s left leg appeared to come an inch or two off the ground for a distance of maybe two feet as Matthews tackled the quarterback backward. As they fell, Matthews stuck his left arm out to cushion the fall, in effect preventing his full body weight from landing on Cousins.

“I don’t see where [Matthews] lifted him and drove him down,” respected former ref Terry McAulay said on “The Peter King Podcast” this week.

There is nothing else Matthews could have done. The left arm being braced to the ground was almost a gentlemanly act by Matthews, who knows how closely any hits on the quarterback are being watched. Corrente threw the flag. “I’m sure it was probably a generous call, and two or three years ago, it probably doesn’t get flagged,” Cousins said afterward.

I asked McAulay, now an NBC rules analyst, what he thought when he saw the flag on the Matthews call.

“I thought the NFL just had another self-inflicted crisis that was completely avoidable,” McAulay said. “I felt for Tony Corrente. A lot of emotions. If that had been me, I may very have made that call, given the guidance I’ve heard and would have been sick about it—that I had to make it ... This is indeed what Tony in his mind, and his superiors, want him to call.”

McAulay said: “I don’t know what happens next.”

I’ve got an idea. In my opinion, what should have happened is this: Riveron could have supported the call publicly, and then, in reviewing the call, could have said, It was very close, and we’d have been fine with a no-call here as well. It’s a judgment call by the referee, and Tony Corrente erred on the side of protecting the quarterback. Then, in the weekly training tape to officials, Riveron could have cautioned the league’s 17 crews to be vigilant about roughing but not overdo it.

I’ll be shocked if the league’s 17 referees, including four rookie refs (whose heads must be spinning with this mayhem), continue to make this call. It’s not roughing the passer. Continuing to call clean plays like this, and like the Kendricks hit of Rodgers, will totally bastardize the ability of defenders to pressure the quarterback. Everyone knows the league is being hyper-vigilant about losing \$33-million and \$28-million-a-year quarterbacks (Rodgers and Cousins) in Week 2 of a long season; the Packers were an unattractive prime-time team three times after Rodgers was lost last year in Week 6 with a broken clavicle. I appreciate that. But football’s football. Protect the quarterbacks. Don’t put velcroed flags on them.

“In my opinion,” McAulay said, “there are two fundamental principles of rules-making. Number one is player safety. Number two is maintaining a balance between offense and defense. I think college football has lost that number two. And if the NFL’s not careful, they’re gonna lose it.”

What I Learned

‘How wonderful life is without the pressure.’

Retired ref Ed Hochuli on life without officiating—and, for now, living in a 45-foot RV—while being an NFL officiating consultant. (He was in New York this weekend working in the officiating command center Sunday.)

“I think the first thing I’ve learned since I’ve been out and my wife and I have gotten on the road is how proud people are to be Americans. I have never seen so many flags in my life. We’ve been on the road now for about eight months—we’re based in Couer d’Alene, Idaho right now—but everywhere we go, we see the flag. We had some friends who picked up some hitch-hikers, a couple in their twenties who travel all over the world, and they said, ‘Everybody here puts their flag out; we don’t see that in other countries.’ Forget what’s going on in the country right now. But putting out the flag—we’ve got one in our RV—makes a very loud statement.

“I’ve also found out how wonderful life is without the pressure of officiating. When I was doing it, I thrived on the pressure. I loved the pressure. I loved the adrenaline of the game. But now that it’s gone, I’m able to sit back and enjoy life. I can enjoy the forest and the plants and the water and the beauty. Instead of being a player in life, I am a spectator. And I have to say, that’s pretty great.

“People see me and they say, ‘You gotta be missing being on the field right now.’ But I’m not. Not at all. It’s incredibly different than I thought, because I thought I’d miss it. But we’ve traveled a lot now for the last eight months. We sold our house [in Arizona] and got this RV, and we’ve traveled through Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, California, Oregon, New Mexico, Utah. We’re going to go down south in a while. But we drive for a day or two, find a place we like, and we park maybe for a month. My whole life I wanted to learn how to fly-fish. So a friend of mine took me to Snake River in Idaho, two separate trips, about five days, and I learned how to do it. It’s the most peaceful thing. No noise, no clutter. Just beauty. Man, that’s living. The majestic, beautiful country we’ve got—the first thing that comes to mind is the parks of Utah. Zion, Bryce Canyon, Arches, Canyonlands. I walked to the edge of Bryce and I did say out loud, ‘Wow. That’s unbelievable!’

“For me, it was time to quit. It was time. I knew it. You gotta know when it’s time. Enough was enough. I didn’t want to go when everyone was saying, ‘You gotta go.’ I wanted to go on my terms, which I did.

“Now there’s another guy named Hochuli, and he’s better than his old man already. [Shawn Hochuli, Ed’s son, was named one of four new NFL referees for the 2018 season.] On the first day of this season, I was in Baltimore. I had to go to his first regular-season game [as a referee]. On the very first play of his career, he had one of the most challenging calls a referee can have, a double foul after a change of possession. It happened during the opening kick return. That’s rare—I bet it didn’t happen to me three times in 28 years. But he got the crew together, they discussed it, and the interpretation of the enforcement changed three days before the season. And he got it right. Perfect. Then he made a beautiful announcement. Just right. Beautiful.”

The Award Section

Offensive Players of the Week

Hate to do this, and I'll keep them brief, but five men deserve a hand.

Jared Goff, quarterback, Los Angeles Rams. Time to start recognizing that Goff is playing really good football under Sean McVay, not just caretaking football. His 29-of-36 day, for 354 yards, with three touchdowns and one pick, keyed a five-touchdown, 521-total-yard day against a good Chargers defense.

Drew Brees, quarterback, New Orleans. On the day he played one of the most scintillating games of his storied Saints career and set the NFL record for career completions (Brees 6,326, Brett Favre 6,300), it was a pair of his touchdown runs that saved the day for the Saints. His seven-yard TD scramble with 1:15 to play sent the game to overtime. Then he drove New Orleans 15 plays for 80 yards in overtime, finishing it with a one-foot sneak for a 43-37 win. Brees has had a lot of great days in New Orleans, but on balance, with everything he did in a huge division game, this has to be one of his proudest moments. He's turns 40 in January, by the way.

Josh Allen, quarterback, Buffalo. Leapt over tall linebackers (Anthony Barr, in this case) in a single bound on a third-and-10 to breathe life into the Bills' last touchdown drive in a 27-6 shocker at Minnesota. Allen's numbers can't match most of his peers' on this day (15-26, 196 yards, one touchdown, no picks), but he and the Bills didn't turn it over in the raucous environment of the Vikings' stadium. In a big and challenging week for a team in semi-crisis, Allen was the steady quarterback force he was drafted to be.

Eli Manning, quarterback, New York Giants. "Eli will be fine," Tom Coughlin told me the other night at his charity function in New York, and I bet he might have even believed it. Coughlin was in the minority after the Giants' 0-2 start. In Houston, even under significant pressure, Manning, who turns 37 in January, was as good as he's been in a long time: 25 of 29 (.862), for 297 yards, two touchdowns and no interceptions. The Giants were desperate for competence across their offense entering this game, and Manning conjured memories of the old days, when he twice beat the Patriots in Super Bowls.

Baker Mayfield, quarterback, Cleveland. In 32 minutes of football Thursday, Mayfield erased a lot of pain for a region, and for a nation of frustrated Browns fans. In his first five series as an NFL quarterback, he led the Browns to a field goal, punt, field goal, touchdown and touchdown. It was more the way Mayfield played—fast, confident, so self-assured—than the numbers he put up. Cleveland's front office had to be thrilled after taking so much heat for drafting him one overall at how well he played to break the long Cleveland schneid.

Defensive Players of the Week

Earl Thomas, safety, Seattle. With so much fodder swirling around Thomas—he is unhappy the Seahawks won't re-do his contract, he mysteriously didn't practice Friday, Chris Mortensen reported the club is considering fining him for undisclosed reasons—was huge in the Seahawks' 24-13 win over Dallas. He had two interceptions—one in a scoreless game stopping the Cowboys near midfield, and the second to snuff out Dallas' final hopes with less than four minutes to play and the Cowboys driving. Thomas made a rookie mistake then, bowing dramatically toward the Dallas sideline, sticking it to the Cowboys for not trading for him when he wanted to go there this offseason.

Xavien Howard, cornerback, Miami. The Dolphins are 3-0, and it's the defense that won Sunday's game against the Raiders. Howard had two picks, both of which prevented points. In the first quarter, he intercepted a Derek Carr pass at his own 4-yard line and returned it 39 yards. In the fourth quarter, with the Raiders driving to try to take the lead in a 21-17 game, Carr threw for the end zone, and Howard picked it off nine yards deep to ice the win.

J.J. Watt, defensive lineman, Houston. After his performance Sunday in the loss to the Giants, it's not a case of "He's back." Watt looked more like HE'S BACK. For the first time in two years and five days, he sacked the quarterback ... and then did it again, and again. Three sacks of Eli Manning for 25 yards of losses, plus eight tackles and one forced fumble. Watt has to be sick over the Texans being 0-3, but he has to be personally thrilled to be the kind of impact player—at least for now—that he hasn't been in three years. Watch him whirl around Giants right tackle Chad Wheeler and strip-sack Manning on a play that is virtually unstoppable.

Special Teams Player of the Week

Justin Tucker, kicker, Baltimore. In the rain in Baltimore, Tucker, the NFL's state-of-the-art kicker, booted 52-yard field goals in the first and second quarters in the Ravens' 27-14 win over previously unbeaten Denver. You want the amazing stat about Tucker? Since opening day 2016, he's made 18 of 20 field goals from 50 yards or more.

Coach of the Week

Brian Daboll, offensive coordinator, Buffalo. It was a very anti-2018 offensive game plan for the Bills on Sunday. They called 38 runs and 25 passes, a risky game plan without veteran LeSean McCoy (bruised ribs) and a rookie quarterback making his second start. Funny thing, it worked like a charm, with the Bills winning easily behind 36 minutes in time of possession. Credit to Daboll, who came from Nick Saban's staff at Alabama and inherited a dysfunctional quarterback situation. Didn't faze him or the Bills a bit, at least this Sunday. Smart way to play this game behind the 8-ball.

Quotes of the Week

"I told him I would be praying for him and that I love him. He told me to lead these guys."

—San Francisco quarterback C.J. Beathard, speaking of Jimmy Garoppolo after the Niners' franchise quarterback suffered a knee injury Sunday in Kansas City. The initial diagnosis, a possible torn ACL, will be re-checked with an MRI this morning in the Bay Area.

"Pre-game, a couple of Cowboys coaches—I don't know if they were trying to play psychological games, but they were like, 'You ready for the trade tomorrow?'"

—Seattle safety Earl Thomas, still engaged in a bitter contract dispute while playing for the Seahawks, after picking off two pass in Seattle's win over Dallas Sunday.

Thomas made it clear he still wants to be paid more or traded ... and implied he wasn't going to practice with any semblance of an injury. "If they was invested in me, I'd be out there practicing," he said. "But if I feel like anything, and I don't give a damn if it's small, I got a headache, I'm not practicing."

Well, that's not going to go over well in the Seattle front office today.

"No."

—Eagles quarterback Carson Wentz, playing football for the first time in 54 weeks, asked post-game whether he thought about his injury at all during the win over the Colts.

“Anyone willing to fairly assess the NFL knows Davis’ decision didn’t put anyone’s life in jeopardy. And the expectation for loyalty in the big business that is professional football could be described as subjective at best.”

—Former NFL defensive back Domonique Foxworth, writing in *The Undefeated* about Vontae Davis, the Buffalo cornerback who retired at halftime of the Bills-Chargers game eight days ago, empathizing with a decision that Davis’ teammates felt was irresponsible ... to put it mildly.

“It’s hard to find a great one. It’s hard to find a good one. It’s hard to find one.”

—Oakland coach Jon Gruden, whose Raiders traded a brilliant pass-rusher, Khalil Mack, to the Bears 23 days ago, on how difficult it is to procure a pass-rusher in the NFL today.

“We’re just getting started. And Christian Yelich for N.L. MVP.”

—Cleveland quarterback Baker Mayfield, with his parting words at his post-game press conference after his first NFL victory Thursday night. The two became pals after working out at the same California training facility last winter, and Mayfield wore a Yelich jersey to the game Thursday night.

Numbers Game

On Labor Day, I walked the turf with Aaron Rodgers at Lambeau Field for an NBC feature. At one point, he looked up at the new seating in the refurbished place—luxury suites and in particular a major expansion of the south end zone, with 7,500 new seats to be added.

“It’s helped me,” Rodgers said. “I never knew which way the wind was going, and this blocks that swirling wind now. I don’t know if you remember, but I always used to throw grass up to see what the wind was doing. This [construction] changed the wind factor.”

That construction was completed in time for the 2013 season. I went back and calculated how much the dying of the swirling wind has helped Rodgers, and the answer is some, but probably not as much as he thinks. Maybe he compensated for the wind so well that he doesn’t realize how well he was able to throw it in the wind—and he’s just kept up the proficient play without having to worry about the wind now. These figures include the two home playoff starts for Rodgers in the era with wind, and the three home playoff starts since the construction was completed in August 2013.

The Windy Era, 2005-12

Games: 41

Comp.-Att., Pct.: 929-1,287, .670

TD-INT: 92-23

Rating: 106.9

The Calm Era, 2013-18

Games: 36

Comp.-Att., Pct.: 822-1,244, .661

TD-INT: 92-10

Rating: 111.6

Factoidness

In his first game back after 2017 knee surgery, Carson Wentz, who grew up in North Dakota playing football and basketball and went on to star in football at North Dakota State, threw his first and only touchdown pass to rookie tight end Dallas Goedert, who grew up in South Dakota playing football and basketball and went on to star in football at South Dakota State.

You'll probably remember Carl Peterson, the 20-year GM and president of the Kansas City Chiefs. He's 75 now, and he and wife Lori have a residence different than any other NFL retiree. He and wife Lori live for half the year on *The World*, a gigantic yacht with 165 residences that spends the year sailing the world. When they're not on the ship, they stay either in New York or the Kansas City area, where Lori has family.

The boat's residents, from 19 countries, vote on their destinations every year. In the coming months, the floating city will be in the Indian Ocean to see the island of Madagascar; later, it will traverse the length of northern Canada and Alaska, south of the Arctic Circle.

Six restaurants, yoga classes, a full-size tennis court, an outdoor fitness place, lectures from authors and diplomats and historians who pop aboard during the year.

Life's been good to Carl Peterson.

King of the Road

Yankee Stadium, Tuesday night, men's room.

Standing at a bank of urinals. Hat pulled down low on my forehead. Fairly incognito.

"Eli done?" Urinal Guy to my right says.

"Hard to play if you got no time to throw," I manage, "but he's not helping himself. Too inaccurate."

"Like the Saquon pick?" Urinal Guy says.

"Like him a lot. But not when your quarterback's 37 and declining, though."

Finishing.

"Hey thanks."

"Have a good night."

I hope Urinal Guy sees this somewhere in greater New York today. You're famous, buddy!

Intelligent Football

Something's happening here. What it is ain't exactly clear.

But I've got a couple of theories.

My question to the brains at Pro Football Focus this week is about the awful offensive-line play we've seen this year, and about whether it's a trend. Now that you mention it, PFF folks say, yes it is.

PFF has an odd statistic it tracks about offensive-line play. I'll loosely title it: "Percentage of offensive-line pass-blocking snaps that an offensive lineman does his job." So this means that on every pass attempt, PFF grades the five offensive linemen on whether they did their jobs well, or whether they allowed leakage/pressure/a sack. So if a team has, say, 40 pass attempts in a game, that would be 200 possible grades given. (Forty passes times five linemen.) And over the last few years, consistently, the quality of pass protection is declining. Let's see the decline, and we'll call the percentage of times each line gets it right "OL Proficiency."

Year: 2009; OL Proficiency: 95.00%
2010: 94.55%
2011: 94.67%
2012: 94.76%
2013: 93.90%
2014: 93.46%
2015: 92.65%
2016: 93.00%
2017: 92.40%
2018: 92.79% (through Week 2)

Interpreting: Last year, each team averaged 34.15 pass attempts per game. We'll round that down to 34. So, multiplying 34 pass-attempt opportunities per game times the five offensive linemen, you get 170 total pass-attempt opportunities for the average offensive line in 2017.

In 2009, with a 95.0 percent pass-blocking proficiency, that means teams averaged 8.50 poor pass-blocking results per game—either in getting the quarterback sacked or significantly pressured. In 2017, with a 92.40 percent pass-blocking efficiency, teams averaged 12.92 poor pass-blocking results per game.

Interpreting further: Teams were allowing 4.42 more negative offensive-line plays last year than in 2009. That seems a significant fall in quality in just eight seasons—basically one bad play per offensive lineman per game more in 2017 than in 2009.

Offensive line is a technician's position. Since the advent of the 2011 CBA, there is less practice time, and that hurts the offensive line as much as any position or more. Plus, so many coaches today shy away from full-contact practice, which is another black mark against offensive linemen learning their craft. "Offensive line is a repetition position," says former NFL lineman Geoff Schwartz. "You rep a play multiple times, you do it at full speed, and you do it when you're tired and sore. But if you don't do that—and most teams don't now—offensive linemen don't get to build up that muscle memory. When you see it in a game, you haven't worked on it the way you used to."

One more factor: College offensive linemen who work exclusively in the spread often come to the NFL having not played much in a three-point stance, the way all NFL offensive lines play. In college, offensive linemen are often fending off rushers defensively, not attacking them offensively.

Joe Thomas, the perennial Browns Pro Bowl tackle, agrees with those factors, but says defensive sophistication is big too. Overloading single tackles or guards with mismatches—Rex Ryan was big on this as Ravens defensive coordinator a decade ago, and others followed—was one thing, and new

coaching techniques another. Thomas pointed to several teams (10 at last count, currently the Patriots) hiring martial-arts expert Joe Kim to institute new pass-rush techniques. “The advances in pass-rushing and pass-rush technique have been significant,” Thomas said. “Some of the MMA and karate training, I’ve been surprised, are really making a difference in how some guys get to the quarterback.”

The biggest factor, it seems, is the lack of real-time work young offensive linemen get. I don’t see that changing soon.

A PFF Elite subscription gives you access to performance metrics the pros use.

Newman!
Mail call.

I got 25 of these letters if I got one. From Michael M., Maryland: “Ratings will continue to go down not because of kneeling, the commissioner, etc., but because the game is now unwatchable. Clean legal hits are being penalized for no particular reason. Referees now have so much garbage to call and precedent to fall back on that it becomes Machiavellian. I have already started to wean myself off the game. This is only accelerating my action. On the bright side, I’m more productive on Sundays.”

I am trying to be open-minded about the protect-the-quarterback craze sweeping the NFL. I really am. MY job is to try to see both sides of the issue. But I continue to say what I said last Monday: If the Matthews/Kendricks Week 2 roughing calls are legitimate penalties (clearly they are not), then the NFL has crossed the Rubicon and it’s going to be impossible to play defense fairly in the NFL if you cannot make clean hits on the quarterback when they have possession or when they have released the ball a split-second earlier. Make your voice heard. Write to Roger Goodell and to Al Riveron at: 345 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10154.

Well, I’m sort of adamant. From Chris M.: “I see you’re very adamant about Baker Mayfield taking the Carson Palmer/Patrick Mahomes route with a rookie redshirt season, but what about all the success stories of rookie quarterbacks starting and having good first seasons and careers—Cam Newton, Peyton Manning, Andrew Luck, Russell Wilson, Big Ben, Dan Marino and many more. Judging from his first game it seems like Mayfield could have equal chops and be able to persevere. So why so adamant?”

You make a good point, Chris, and I realize Mayfield is almost certain to get the job for the rest of the season beginning this week at Oakland. I just believe in an ideal world you treat your rookie franchise quarterback intelligently and give him the year to watch and learn. You see the results with Mahomes, obviously. But with Tyrod Taylor beat up and Mayfield looking so good Thursday night, I get the Browns’ decision. And ... be careful when you talk about those guys having such great rookie years. Wilson and Roethlisberger hit the ground running, to be sure, but Marino didn’t start till Week 6. Manning set the NFL record for rookie passers (still in effect) with 28 interceptions, and Newton and Luck each had passer ratings under 85. It’s not impossible a rookie quarterback can be very good, obviously. I just think what you’re trying to do when you draft a franchise quarterback is do everything possible to get him ready to have a great career—not a great first year.

A Dane loves Andy Reid. From Nicolai H. of Denmark: “Where do you rank Andy Reid as coach, all time and current? I believe he is underrated. In Philadelphia his record was great and he managed to keep great quarterback play. Then in Kansas City he took a bad team and has gone to the playoffs again with great quarterback play.”

With three more victories, Reid will be the ninth coach in history to win 200 games (including playoffs), and it's hard to be consistently good, virtually every year. The knock on Reid will be his playoff record, with two ugly first-round playoff losses in the last two opening playoff games with the Chiefs and 13 playoff losses overall ... and no Super Bowl wins. Two other accomplished coaches—Marty Schottenheimer and Dan Reeves—won more than 200 games but are the outside looking in at the Pro Football Hall of Fame. So Reid may have to win a Super Bowl to ensure his spot in Canton. He's 61 and I'm sure plans to coach a few more years. Right now, he's not one of the all-time greats. All-time greats win titles.

MVP Watch

My second edition looks a bit like my first.

1. Patrick Mahomes, QB, Kansas City. (Last week: 1.) Thirteen touchdown passes in the first three weeks of the season is an NFL record. The Chiefs will have to run it a little better down the road, but they can sustain the wins if Mahomes keeps up this pace.
2. Ryan Fitzpatrick, QB, Tampa Bay. (Last week: 2.) He can solidify his standing tonight against the Steelers—and he can ensure Dirk Koetter won't be tempted to go back to Jameis Winston anytime soon when Winston returns to the Bucs' facility from his suspension Tuesday.
3. Khalil Mack, DE, Chicago. (Last week: unranked.) Bears are 2-1 and an Aaron Rodgers miracle from 3-0. And Mack has four sacks, three forced fumbles and an interception. Think what he'll be like when he actually knows the defense.
4. Drew Brees, QB, New Orleans. (Last week: unranked.) Might sound hyperbolic, but I don't know if Brees has played better than his current run: 81-percent passing, eight touchdowns, no turnovers ... and the offense is averaging 44.7 points a game.
5. Ryan Tannehill, QB, Miami. (Last week: unranked.) Completed 73 percent with a 121.8 rating, after sitting for 19 straight games with injuries entering the season. It helps that the Dolphins are 3-0.

10 Things I Think I Think

1. I think these are my quick-hit thoughts of Week 3:
 - a. The Bills, in Minnesota, without LeSean McCoy, building a 24-0 lead in the first 18 minutes. Insane. Good chance that will go down as the stunner of the year—even at the end of the year.
 - b. Very good challenge, Matt Patricia, on the Lions' fumble-turned-touchdown, making it Detroit 10, New England 0 early in the second quarter.
 - c. Watching Sunday night, I got the strong feeling that the debacle loss to the Jets was a mulligan for the Lions. Great example of how you can't bury a team after one awful loss in Week 1.
 - d. Falcons have the makings of a second premier receiver from Alabama. On draft night, I sensed the Falcons were in the minority among teams that thought Calvin Ridley could be a dominant NFL wideout. Atlanta was proven correct on this day, at least. He had seven catches for 146 yards and three touchdowns (18, 75 and nine yards), with a fourth touchdown made impossible when he had two

Falcons maul him near the goal line and get called for pass interference. Sure-handed and elusive—that was Ridley on Sunday.

e. Maybe the Seattle offensive line isn't hopeless.

f. Maybe the Giants' offensive line isn't hopeless.

g. For the record: When Carson Wentz had knee surgery last December, doctors said his rehab period would be nine to 12 months. When he returned Sunday for his first start since the surgery, it was nine months and 10 days since the procedure.

h. Watching Drew Brees dice up the defense of division-foe Atlanta on the lightning-fast, 75-yard opening drive was art. More where that came from, as it turned out.

i. Ben Watson, 37 and still beating linebackers (and, later, cornerback Isaiah Oliver) down the seam. Great decision by the Saints to ignore his birth certificate and give him a role on important snaps.

j. I thought Boomer Esiason was fantastic at the deception of play-action. Andy Dalton's every bit as good. Just ask the CBS director at Bengals-Panthers, who bought Dalton's fake so much that we barely got to see a second-quarter touchdown pass to tight end C.J. Uzomah.

k. Not something San Francisco fans want to hear the TV analyst, Chris Spielman, say about the team's defensive line after it has used first-round picks on defensive linemen in 2015, 2016 and 2017: "The 49ers are getting manhandled up front."

l. Dolphins rookie Minkah Fitzpatrick has to learn to not fall for every quarterback head fake he sees. Two such quarterback-freezes cost Fitzpatrick dearly versus Derek Carr in Miami.

m. How did any official on the field rule a touchdown on the Adrian Peterson touchdown scrum in Washington? Sure looked shielded on all sides to me—and I'm quite dubious Peterson legitimately had the ball over the line.

n. Having said that, New York made the right call in not overturning the touchdown. There was no indisputable evidence to show Peterson was stopped.

o. Quibble with Kyle Shanahan: Down 35-7 with nine seconds left in the half at the Kansas City 21-yard line, down 35-7 to one of the most explosive offenses we've ever seen. You need four touchdowns, minimum, and almost certainly more than that against the freak who is Patrick Mahomes. And you kick the field goal? Shanahan's really good, but I'd certainly have used the last two plays in the half to try to score a touchdown there, even though the Chiefs were packing the deep secondary.

p. Almost every game you go for the field goal in desperate times before halftime. Not against the 2018 Chiefs.

q. Colts-Eagles. Super Bowl champs on the road. Colts driving to take the lead in the third quarter. Andrew Luck throws a little high for wideout Chester Rogers, but he gets both hands on it ... and it slips right through his hands. That's a mistake you cannot make.

r. What a throw by Philip Rivers, the 42-yard touchdown strike in tight coverage, perfectly placed, to tie the Rams in the battle for LA. (Doubt there really is a battle for Los Angeles, by the way.)

s. It's Pat Mahomes' World and We're All Living In It Dept.: He had three touchdown passes in a nine-minute span of the second quarter (his only three of the day on a 24-of-38, 314-yard day) as the Chiefs built up a 35-10 halftime lead. Thirty-five points in one half. Nothing's too much for this young passer and this offense.

t. Sam Bradford, 30, looks 40 out there.

u. Nice gesture, Mike Vrabel giving Marcus Mariota the game ball after Tennessee's upset of Jacksonville. Tennessee didn't want to play Mariota Sunday but had to when Blaine Gabbert went down with a concussion. Mariota had a meh day, but he kept his team in it.

v. Adam Vinatieri tied Morten Andersen the the NFL record for field goals (585) with three Sunday, and he's only 34 points away from breaking Andersen's all-time scoring record. Vinatieri turns 46 in December.

2. I think I hope you enjoyed that electric ballgame in Los Angeles, with 58 points, 877 yards and big momentum turns by the Rams and Chargers. Thanks to the schedule process that I hate—regional rivalries in different conferences meeting once every four years—you won't see the next Chargers-Rams game till 2022. The Raiders and Niners meet Nov. 1, and then not again till 2022. Patriots-Packers in November, and then Brady and Rodgers will never play each other again. (All of these, of course, are true unless the teams meet in a Super Bowl before then.)

3. I think for those who want to wring hands (or rejoice) about the Patriots this morning, remember some prior early-season debacles. Remember Buffalo 31, New England 0 on opening day 2003 ... and Kansas City 41, New England 14 in Week 4 2014 ... and Buffalo 16, New England 0 in Week 4 2016. And remember New England won the Super Bowl in each of those three seasons. The one difference this year, it seems to me, is the absolutely total lack of a downfield threat, or a threat of any sort in the passing game other than Rob Gronkowski. Even when Julian Edelman returns, unless Josh Gordon suddenly gets his head screwed on straight, this is not an offense with any weapon to scare a defensive coordinator.

4. I think if Le'Veon Bell is truly on the training block, as Adam Schefter reported Sunday, the two teams that should be interested are Indianapolis and San Francisco. Each has more than \$40 million in cap room this year.

5. I think Alvin Kamara is going to be the best fantasy-football player in the game for the next three years. And maybe even after Drew Brees is gone. Kamara the receiver is so good, so scary.

6. I think my advice to Eric Dickerson and the other Hall of Famers would be to come up with a reasonable plan for health benefits for retired players—not just for Hall of Famers, and not for \$300,000 a year. They didn't get much empathy from players who made a fraction of what they made in their careers and weren't included in the letter the former star players sent to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

7. I think the clock is ticking for Todd Bowles. He's got to make sure the Jets clean up their messes, and do that against a pretty tough stretch of games coming up in the next six weeks: at Jacksonville, Denver, Indianapolis, Minnesota, at Chicago, at Miami.

8. I think I would love to know what possesses a man—Isaiah Crowell of the New York Jets—to faux rub the football on the crack of his posterior in celebration after scoring a touchdown in Cleveland the other night. Does he, perhaps, lay awake in his hotel the night before the game and think, I know what I'll do if I score in this game. I'll take the football and rub myself with it like it's toilet paper! It's okay—I know we're not that good and the 15-yard unsportsmanlike flag could hurt us, but how great will it be to do that on national TV! It must be fun to be a head coach in the NFL. You have to think to advise your players to not wipe themselves with the football if they score a touchdown.

9. I think it was a good month for good people in the NFL. The Bears committed \$500,000 to social-justice issues in Chicagoland, management and players combining on the money to start the program, with the hope that it becomes a consistent initiative in the coming seasons. "I think it's a great issue that was brought up by [Colin] Kaepernick," defensive end Akiem Hicks, one of the team leaders, said. So many people around the NFL doing so many good things, including:

- Julius Peppers of the Panthers, a native of eastern North Carolina, provided \$100,000 in seed money for the Julius Peppers Hurricane Relief Fund. "I wanted to do something to help," he said.

- The Raiders donated \$250,000 to help save youth athletic programs in the Oakland Unified School District, a desperately needed assist for a community that badly needs after-school programs for its students ...

- And on Friday night, Tom Coughlin returned to New York for his annual Tom Coughlin Jay Fund gala. It's amazing to see the reach The Jay Fund had since Coughlin founded it 22 years ago to honor one of his former Boston College football players, safety Jay McGillis, who died of leukemia in 1992. Coughlin was so touched by McGillis and his family dropping everything to care for their sick son that, in 1996, while coaching in Jacksonville, he established a foundation that, mostly, provides money for families who have had to drop everything to care for cancer-stricken children. "Jay's family prayed for a miracle they didn't get," Coughlin said Friday night. "But his life has been a miracle to over 5,000 families he has directly helped."

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

a. Congrats to Paul Simon, on the great career, on the occasion of the last show on the last concert tour of his life—in Queens, where Simon grew up, Saturday night. Two weeks shy of his 77th birthday, Simon finished his last tour two miles from the home of his youth with 24 songs, ending with a song he wrote in the bathroom of his Queens home 53 years ago, "The Sound of Silence." Man, did he sound melancholy on that.

b. Simon highlights: Three times he won the Grammy for Record of the Year—and he won them 19 years apart, for Mrs. Robinson (1969), Bridge Over Troubled Waters (1971) and Graceland (1988) ... He made the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame twice, as a solo artist and with Art Garfunkel in Simon and Garfunkel ... I was a soph at Ohio University, addicted to "Saturday Night Live," when Simon and George Harrison did Here Comes the Sun one night ... He and Garfunkel are estranged. Bummer.

c. New York mayor Bill deBlasio: “He’s one of the greatest New York City artists of all time.”

d. Movie of the Week: “Science Fair,” a fast-moving 90-minute documentary about the 2017 international Science Fair, highlighting high school students from Brazil, Germany, West Virginia, South Dakota (a charming, eminently likeable 16-year-old girl named Kashfia whose parents immigrated from Bangladesh), Jericho, N.Y., and Louisville. I cried twice during this movie, because I was so emotional about 1,700 teenagers from 78 countries so devoted to science and to find solutions to problems of the current human race. I certainly loved it as much as any movie I’ve seen this year—and there have been some excellent ones, like “RBG.”

e. How about this: The Brazilian girl featured, Myllena, lives in a dirt-poor village, Iracema, and is trying to find a cure to the fast-spreading Zika virus. Her family is so devoted to her hopes and dreams ... it’s beautiful. You really should see this.

f. I walked out of the theater in Manhattan the other day thinking how great these kids are, and how much hope they have about the future, and how much hope we all should have about the future. Thanks to them, and to National Geographic for backing this film, and to Cristina Costantini and Darren Foster for writing it.

g. Football Story of the Week: by Joe Person of The Athletic (feels funny, Joe, to NOT write Joe Person of the Charlotte Observer), on the work ethic and film study habits of Luke Kuechly. The great thing about Kuechly’s game is his instinct; that’s what I’ve always thought. And when you read this piece, you’ll understand how football instinct can be honed. It’s not just something that happens.

h. News Story of the Week (involving football): by Samantha Pell of the Washington Post, about a homeless 18-year-old D.C. student and football player, Jamal Speaks, whose residency and eligibility have been major issues in his life.

i. Read that. And tell me what possible good there is in keeping Jamal Speaks off the field—thus hurting his chances to play football in college and get the kind of education that likely would not be possible without football.

j. Perspective Story of the Week: From Nicole Yang of Boston.com, a look at the sordid drug and discipline history of new Patriot receiver Josh Gordon, who was expelled from two Texas middle schools, expelled from one Texas high school, drank vodka from juice bottles during high school classes, drank before games, used counterfeit money, got arrested for felony credit-card theft, and then, at Baylor, dealt marijuana while in Waco and made as much \$10,000 a month doing so, was suspended twice by coach Art Briles, admitted to Uninterrupted that he passed drug tests with the help of an enabling coach at Baylor, and then, in the NFL, has been suspended five times for substance abuse and missed most of another season when he entered a rehab facility on his own, and played in six of the Browns last 51 games before a weird episode last weekend caused the Browns to decide to get rid of him for good. (Plus, according to Jason Cole, Gordon was late for and/or missed some team meetings in Cleveland this season.)

k. Gordon, 27, has fit six lifetimes of debauchery into the last half of his life.

l. It’s not a good sign of my modernity that I’ve never seen any of those shows that won the Emmys.

m. Last week, I didn't know Connect Four. This week, never heard of "Marvelous Mrs. Maisel."

n. Coffeenerdness: You're not going to find a better latte than the one Blue Bottle Coffee sells. You're just not. The espresso is perfect.

o. Beernerdness: You might find a few pilsners better than Victory Prima Pils (Victory Brewing Company, Downingtown, Pa.), but not many. The hallmark of Victory beers is a distinctive and different taste, and there's the faintest hint of honey in this. Cool beer.

p. The Mets might have a lousy ballclub, but they are a fun TV watch. On Saturday, from Washington, the TV crew found two guys in neck-to-toe flannel Mets onesies, in the stands, on the road. Play-by-play guy Gary Cohen asked: "What are they wearing on their feet? Slippers? ... Or are there built-in feet?" Investigative reporting found sneakers on their feet. But those guys, including (I'm) Keith Hernandez, have fun.

q. For those who say David Price should not pitch against the Yankees in October, based on a bad history and on the fact that Price gave up three homers and got hit off the field in New York (again) the other day: I would just say the home runs he gave up traveled 343, 349 and 340 feet, and all to right field last week. None would have reached the seats or bullpen at Fenway Park. And Price would be pitching in Game 2 of the series, which would be at Fenway. He should pitch Game 2, whether it's against New York or Oakland.

r. Man, I don't know who in their right mind would want to play the A's right now. Oakland's on fire. Three games against the Angels last week: 38 runs. Then a 10th-inning walkoff homer by Khris Davis, and then a ninth-inning walkoff wild pitch. What a fun team.

s. Khris Davis homers, last three seasons: 42, 43, 45.

t. Bryce Harper homers, last three seasons: 24, 29, 34.

u. Mike Trout homers, last three seasons: 29, 33, 38.

v. Hank Aaron hit 113 home runs at age 28, 29, and 30. Davis, 30, has hit 130 in a similar span.

w. Blake Snell's going to run away with the American League Cy Young Award. Good for him. Good for the Rays.

x. Great career, Victor Martinez. More hits (2,153) than Maury Wills, Yogi Berra, Mike Piazza, Gary Carter and Johnny Bench. Always played the game right, and hard, and got a ton of big hits. His last hit Saturday night was a legged-out infield single against the Royals.

Monday, Monday

Tampa Bay 33, Pittsburgh 27. Steelers have allowed seven touchdown passes and a league-worst 108.9 passer rating. On deck: Ryan Fitzpatrick, with a league-best 151.5 rating. So the Steelers enter dangerous territory tonight at the Pirate Ship. At halftime, the Bucs will induct Tony Dungy into the team's Ring of Honor at Raymond James Stadium.

The Week Ahead

- Today ... Berea, Ohio. Pretty Simple Prediction of the Week: Hue Jackson steps to the podium at the Browns' complex and says the Browns will play Baker Mayfield in Week 4 at Oakland. The call is made easier by the fact that Tyrod Taylor may still be in concussion protocol this afternoon, and by the fact that fans (and owner Jimmy Haslam) will storm the complex if Mayfield doesn't practice with the first unit this week and start next Sunday.

- Tuesday ... Los Angeles. Happy 25th birthday, Brandin Cooks. I find two things rather amazing about Cooks. One: He's a very good player, and he's already on his third NFL team in his fifth NFL season; he was dealt at 23 from New Orleans to New England, and he was dealt at 24 from New England to the Rams. Two: Despite his slight stature (5-10, 183 pounds), he's played all 54 games in his last four seasons (2018 included), and he's produced in every one, with three straight 1,000-yard receiving seasons with at least 110 targets and 65 catches in each. His absence in New England clearly made them have to go fishing, dubiously, for Josh Gordon.

- Thursday ... Los Angeles. It's not often the game of the week in the NFL comes on a Thursday night. But Vikes-Rams could be a playoff preview, and it's the best the league has to offer in Week 4. I doubt Minnesota coach Mike Zimmer is real happy about it, though. The Vikings will scurry about to jam in the game plan by Tuesday—and then, traveling early because of the distance, they'll take off Tuesday evening on a three-hour, 50-minute, 1,600-mile flight to LAX. Coaches hate these Thursday nighters anyway, and flying for four hours with a tired team won't make Zimmer happy. At all.

The Adieu Haiku

Paul Simon. The end.

Home, where my love lies waiting,
silently for me.

Ravens control Broncos, 27-14

By Charean Williams
Pro Football Talk
Sept. 24, 2018

The Ravens have some work to do on special teams, but otherwise, it was a good day.

Despite having a field goal and a punt blocked, Baltimore rolled to a relatively easy 27-14 victory over the Broncos.

The Broncos allowed three sacks. They had 13 penalties for 120 yards, including a 15-yarder on running back Phillip Lindsay for throwing a punch that took Denver out of field goal range and an illegal block called on Billy Turner — who wasn't in the game — that negated a Chris Harris touchdown on a blocked field goal. Their one turnover was a big one — an interception thrown by Case Keenum that Patrick Onwuasor picked off in the end zone.

The Ravens kept Von Miller from sacking Joe Flacco, with Shane Ray and Bradley Chubb having the Broncos' only sacks.

Flacco had an efficient game in getting the Ravens to 2-1 on the season, completing 25 of 40 passes for 277 yards with a touchdown.

Alex Collins has a 6-yard touchdown run for the Ravens, and Javorius Allen caught a 12-yard score from Flacco and had a 1-yard touchdown run. Collins had 18 carries for 68 yards.

Phillip Lindsay on ejection: It's not in my character; that's not who I am

By Charean Williams

Pro Football Talk

Sept. 24, 2018

Phillip Lindsay drew much attention after gaining 213 yards from scrimmage on 32 touches in the first two games. But the Broncos rookie running back had only four carries for 20 yards Sunday, having earned an ejection in the first half.

"It's my first time ever getting ejected, so yeah I was surprised," Lindsay told Troy Renck of Denver's 7 News. "It's not in my character. That's not who I am. I love the game of football."

Ravens linebacker Terrell Suggs had a strip-sack of Case Keenum that prompted a scrum for the football. Lindsay dove on the pile late and then began throwing punches as he was lying on his back, apparently in retaliation.

Officials, though, cited only Lindsay, penalizing the Broncos 15 yards and kicking Lindsay out of the game.

"To be smart. That's the lesson," Lindsay said. "I have to be smart. I am fighting for my teammates, and I can't do that if I am sitting here in the locker room."