

Broncos pleased with Bradley Chubb's edge rush, developing coverage skills

By Kyle Fredrickson

Denver Post

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Bradley Chubb can't really explain it, but going back to his early days playing football, the Broncos rookie outside linebacker has a proven knack for making a great impression. As in, Hello Mr. Ball Carrier. Welcome to the ground.

The first defensive snap of his senior season at North Carolina State? A tackle-for-loss of South Carolina running back Rico Dowdle.

The first defensive snap of his Broncos rookie season? A half-sack of Seattle's Russell Wilson.

Chubb's second snap (geez, what took him so long?) last week? A full-sack of Baltimore's Joe Flacco.

"It's crazy," Chubb said. "It just always seems to happen like that."

Fast starts in the NFL, though, are not measured by just plays, but instead through complete games, and with three to Chubb's credit in orange-and-blue, it's time to audit the player many considered the best defensive prospect in the 2018 draft class. And, to better understand his early development, compare Chubb's production to recent top-five picks who had enormous edge-rushing expectations.

Through three games as rookies during their respective seasons, Chubb has played more snaps, 152, than did Myles Garrett (Browns), Joey Bosa (Chargers) and Jadaveon Clowney (Texans). Chubb's sack total, 1.5, also eclipsed Khalil Mack's introduction in Oakland. Chubb falls behind the group in quarterback hurries (two) and tackles (eight).

However, Denver certainly isn't dependent on Chubb alone to create pressure with arguably one of the league's deepest pass-rush units. The Broncos' nine team sacks rank tied for seventh-most in the NFL.

"I've been very pleased with Bradley," coach Vance Joseph said. "Every game he has gotten better and better. He's getting more comfortable dropping (into coverage). He's winning his one-on-ones as far as pass rush. He's getting Von Miller more one-on-ones."

The learning curve is steepest for Chubb's transition from his college duties to a hybrid SAM linebacker role chasing quarterbacks and covering pass catchers. Chubb said he "went straight ahead 90 percent of the time, and when I did drop back, it was in zones" in college. Denver often placed Chubb in man-up situations in the opener against Seattle and tight end Will Dissly feasted with 105 yards on just three receptions.

"Having to do the whole man-to-man thing, it was different and I'm still getting used to it," Chubb said "It's never perfect. I always want to get better. But over the past couple of games I've been progressing."

Linebacker Shane Ray, whom Chubb credited among his mentors in refining coverage techniques, added: "It's the little things. You have the athletic ability to make up on anybody with speed and size. But you've got to be in the right place leverage-wise. ... The thing that we really love about Chubb is with the talent level in our room, we look at ourselves as elite outside linebackers, for him to already come in here as a rookie and be at that level with us is big-time. That's what we expect of him."

Chubb is starting to catch his niche in Denver's defense as the initial spark.

He doesn't want it to stop there.

"Whether it's just me excited to be out there or what-not, it's just a normal thing that happens," Chubb said. "Hopefully it's a trend I can keep going, progress throughout the whole game and make even more plays."

ROOKIE IMPACT

Looking back at the production of notable recent rookie pass rushers after their first three NFL games.

Team	Player	Season	Snaps	Tackles	Sacks
Broncos	Bradley Chubb	2018	152	8	1.5
Browns	Myles Garrett	2017	109	11	4
Chargers	Joey Bosa	2016	130	11	4
Raiders	Khalil Mack	2014	191	19	0
Texans	J. Clowney	2014	94	4	0

Broncos TE Matt LaCosse embraces increased role after Jake Butt ACL tear

By Kyle Fredrickson
Denver Post
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The news tore Matt LaCosse up inside that teammate Jake Butt tore his ACL a third time. The tight ends group practiced Thursday afternoon without No. 80 and LaCosse said “it was rough because you didn’t know what was going on and didn’t know how he was doing.” Yet, life in the NFL doesn’t stop. It’s next man up.

Butt’s season-long absence means Denver is without arguably its most dynamic pass-catching tight end.

LaCosse will try to prove how he can fill the role starting Monday night against Kansas City.

“As sad as Jake’s injury is, it’s my job to help this team step up,” LaCosse said, “and play to the best of my ability.”

Don’t feel ashamed, Broncos Country, if you’re not totally filled in on the 6-foot-6, 255-pound tight end in his third NFL season. LaCosse called his path to this moment, “pretty unique,” before laying out each step.

1. Undrafted from Illinois in 2015, signed to the Giants, tore his hamstring the first day of camp and cut.
2. Signed with the Jets, cut three days later, and moved back home (Naperville, Ill.) for about six weeks. “Doing nothing,” LaCosse said, “interviewing for jobs and thinking, ‘Ah, crap. Did I just ruin my NFL dream?’ ”
3. Signed back to the Giants practice squad, promoted to the active roster and caught three passes in his NFL rookie debut. “Sunday night in Minnesota,” LaCosse said, “about six degrees.” A torn MCL the following preseason and then cut by New York in Year 3.
4. Signed to the Broncos last December and appeared in three games. LaCosse scored two receiving touchdowns in 2018 exhibition play and made Denver’s 53-man roster.

“Matt’s done a nice job in preseason, he made some plays for us,” offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave said. “I know he has a prominent special-teams role also on our team. So, he’s important to us and we’ll utilize him more than we had planned.”

Of course, replacing Butt’s production will require a team effort. LaCosse’s promotion opens the Broncos’ third tight end slot. Brian Parker, a second-year pro, undrafted from Albany, appears a viable option from the practice squad, although the Broncos could look elsewhere to bolster their depth. Coach Vance Joseph said there are “options” that are “being discussed right now.”

One certainty? Broncos tight end Jeff Heuerman’s role in the passing game is bound to expand. Denver utilizes his talent often as an in-line blocker, but quarterback Case Keenum has also targeted Heuerman

eight times through three games. Heuerman, in his fourth year with the Broncos, responded with five catches for 32 yards.

“(Heuerman) has always been a pretty good pass-catcher,” Joseph said. “Now, without Jake, obviously his targets should go up a little bit, but he’s done a great job in the past, especially in the red zone.”

LaCosse received a taste of NFL regular season play as a rookie and then patiently waited his turn for another opportunity to catch a pass and help his team win. The chance has finally arrived.

“Preseason has been my time to shine. That’s when I’ve showed up and played well,” LaCosse said. “Now, it’s my time to do it on Monday night.”

Broncos Briefs: Best way to contain Chiefs offense?

Keep the football

By Ryan O'Halloran
Denver Post
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The Broncos look to avoid falling back to .500 when they host Kansas City Monday at 6:15 p.m. Here is a Week 4 whip-around:

Pressing question. Can the Broncos' offense neutralize Kansas City's offense?

The Broncos' offense should operate with a great sense of urgency. Three-and-outs and turnovers are even more penal against the Chiefs, who have scored 38, 42 and 38 points in their three games.

"We know our defense accumulates their best stats when they're on the sideline," Broncos offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave said after Friday's practice. "We want to be on the field."

The Broncos have four 10-play and three five-minute drives this year. They have seven three-and-outs in the last two games. To avoid that, running back Royce Freeman must have room to run on first down.

"Let's keep their offense right where they belong — on their sideline and keep our defense nice and rested (so) when they have to do their job, they're fresh," Musgrave said. "That means putting together drives, ending up in the end zone and getting points all the time."

Spotlight player. Kansas City's Tyreek Hill has faced the Broncos three times, totaling 11 catches for 90 yards and a seven-yard average on seven punt returns.

"He's the fastest person I've ever seen on the football field," Broncos cornerback Chris Harris said. "He's always the motion guy. We've got to be ready for that. When I play the Chiefs, I try to make sure I'm in extra (physical) shape because I'll be running around."

Said Broncos coach Vance Joseph: "(Hill is) obviously a problem. He's really fast. What he's doing better is catching the football and his route-running has improved. It's really about having great eye placement, great (positioning) and our safeties having great, great range to keep deep balls from going over our head."

Hill has 14 catches for 310 yards. His six catches of at least 25 yards lead the NFL and his 22.1-yard average is third.

Watch for ... The Broncos' response when Kansas City uses an empty backfield.

A staple of the Chiefs' offense motioning running back Kareem Hunt into a receiver position. If the Broncos are in nickel (five defensive backs), it could mean linebackers Todd Davis or Brandon Marshall covering Hunt.

“Empty forces you to show your hand,” Joseph said. “(The quarterback) knows if it’s man or zone so he knows the matchup. He knows what he’s got.”

Empty backfield means it is almost always a pass play, but not a longer-developing play.

“If they go five wide, they’re throwing the ball fast,” linebacker Von Miller said. “It doesn’t change my rush. You want to get your hands up. When they go empty, it’s tricky because you’re thinking quick pass but it could be anything.”

According to Stats, Inc., Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes leads the NFL with a 118.3 passer rating when he has four or more receivers on the field.

Injury report. Broncos cornerback Tramaine Brock (groin) missed his second consecutive practice.

“I’m hopeful (Brock can play Monday),” Joseph said. “He ran (Friday) without pain so we’ll see.”

Limited on Friday were Marshall (knee), cornerback Adam Jones (thigh), defensive tackle Shelby Harris (ankle) and safety Dymonte Thomas (abdomen).

Joseph said Jones is not expected to have any limitations if he’s active.

Count Broncos star linebacker Von Miller among those who have caught Rocktober fever

By Kyle Newman

Denver Post

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With Colorado on the precipice of the first National League West title in franchise history, count Broncos star linebacker Von Miller among those who have caught Rocktober fever.

“I’m pretty excited about it,” Miller said. “If we get the Rockies in (the playoffs), it’d be great. When it comes to Denver sports, there’s no bigger fan than me.”

Miller, frequently spotted at Denver sporting events, is looking forward to the action at the Pepsi Center this winter as well. He also hopes the city’s success on the diamond will rub off on the Broncos (2-1), who host the Chiefs on Monday Night Football.

“The Avalanche start on Thursday, right? It’s a great time to be a Denver sports fan,” Miller said. “We’ve got to get the Rockies in there, and after them, we’ve got to get in there as well.”

Entering Friday’s series opener against the Nationals, the Rockies held a one-game lead over Los Angeles in the division and were guaranteed of at least an appearance in a playoff tiebreaker game on Monday.

Denver Post Week 4 NFL Picks

By Ryan O'Halloran
Denver Post
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Game of the week

Miami at New England

The reeling Patriots (1-2) are a seven-point favorite over the surging Dolphins (3-0). But chalk this up to picking the team that needs the game more. New England's offense should round into form once receiver Julian Edelman returns from suspension (Week 5). But its defense looks beyond massive repair. The Patriots, win, though.

Patriots 27, Dolphins 21

Lock of the week

Philadelphia at Tennessee

The Eagles (2-1) are a four-point favorite at the Titans (2-1). Tennessee quarterback Marcus Mariota (arm) wasn't supposed to play last week at Jacksonville, but he did in a 9-6 win when Blaine Gabbert was concussed. Philadelphia got quarterback Carson Wentz (knee) back last week and he'll be the difference.

Eagles 24, Titans 10

Upset of the week

Houston at Indianapolis

The Texans are a one-point underdog and 0-3, including last week's eye-sore to the New York Giants. Houston isn't any good, but J.J. Watt (three sacks in Week 3) will single-handedly carry the Texans to their first win.

Texans 13, Colts 6

Woods meets with Harris, defensive backs to discuss play calls

By Mike Klis

9 News

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Joe Woods began his press conference with a bemused smile.

He coached such outspoken characters as Aqib Talib, T.J. Ward and Chris Harris Jr. during the height of the No Fly Zone, when all was swell. And we think Harris essentially telling the coaches what to do after the Broncos' loss at Baltimore was a new development?

"I've heard that before, honestly, coaching those guys here," Woods said Friday during his defensive coordinator press gathering.

What Harris said after the Broncos' secondary got sliced up by Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco was there needs to be more creativity to Denver's defense. Opposing quarterbacks Russell Wilson, Derek Carr and Flacco have all completed a high percentage of passes against the Denver defense through three games.

Harris explained his thoughts further this week in a sitdown interview with 9News, parts of which can be seen both on Sunday morning on Broncos Game Day (9 a.m., Channel 9) and during our pregame show Monday night.

"It wasn't out of frustration," Harris said. "I think as a whole talking to players and coaches, everybody, we need to disguise what we're doing, we need to give them different looks and we're just making it too easy where the quarterback doesn't have to think at all. We just want to put some pressure on them, make 'em think a little bit and try to force them to make some mistakes."

For the most part Broncos' bosses and coaches agreed with Harris. Truth is, former Broncos defensive coordinator Wade Phillips was known for keeping it simple. When you have talents like DeMarcus Ware, Malik Jackson, Danny Trevathan, Talib and Ward along with holdovers Von Miller, Derek Wolfe, Darian Stewart, Bradley Roby and Harris, simple works.

Woods, Harris and the rest of the secondary talked it out this week.

"Chris has played the game for a long time," Woods said. "He's playing at Pro Bowl level and he's extremely smart. I sat down with all the DBs. In the meeting, we talked through a lot of different issues. I listened to some things they were concerned about and I explained to them why I was calling the things that I called. We're in a good place right now, and moving forward, we'll make sure we try to do that."

They better be pulling on the same rope Monday night. The Kansas City Chiefs and Patrick Mahomes – the hottest quarterback in the league with 13 touchdown passes and 0 interceptions in a 3-0 start – are coming to town.

It has appeared that the Broncos' cornerbacks have been playing a couple yards off receivers much more than they did during their Super 50 season of 2015 -- when Woods was their defensive backs coach, by the way.

"They're putting (receivers) in tight splits where you can't press them at all," Harris said. "It might look like we're trying to play off but we're not trying to play off -- they're forcing us to play off. People might think on TV that we're playing off because we choose to—trust me, we all choose to play press but it depends on what they're doing."

One thing about adding sophistication to the defense: It increases player responsibility to carry out their assignments. Harris, one of the smartest football minds in the league, is trying to help his teammates.

"This week we've put so much extra time together that we know something's good got to happen sooner or later," Harris said. "We're putting extra work in. I got us doing extra film and I'm breaking it down for everybody, so everybody can be on the same page. I think with Pacman (Jones) out there this week we should be way better."

Broncos don't want to see 'cheetah speed' on display against Chiefs

By Jeff Legowld

ESPN

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A cheetah can hit top speed in three seconds and that top speed can reach 70 mph. File that away because the Denver Broncos get their first look of the season at "cheetah speed" Monday night when they face the Kansas City Chiefs.

Chiefs wide receiver Tyreek Hill has described his best work as "cheetah speed," and he has been a standout against the Broncos during his career.

The Chiefs closed out the NFL's third week as the top-scoring offense in the league (39.3 points per game) with an array of playmakers that includes Hill, tight end Travis Kelce, running back Kareem Hunt and wide receiver Sammy Watkins. But when Broncos cornerback Chris Harris Jr. made his choice about the one to worry about the most, he made that pick without hesitation, quickly referencing Hill's jersey number.

"[No.] 10, easy," Harris said. "He's the fastest person I've ever seen on a football field."

Hill leads the Chiefs with four touchdowns -- three receiving and one on a punt return -- as his 22.1 yards per catch average is the third highest in the league. His 25.0 yards per punt return is second in the league.

Harris was asked what a defender can do if he knows the player he's being asked to cover just might be faster than he is in the open field.

"Just play great technique," Harris said. "You can't be scared. If you're scared, go to church. You've got to be ready to challenge everybody."

Hill has scored four touchdowns in three games against the Broncos, with three of those coming during Week 12 of Hill's rookie year of 2016 when he had a touchdown receiving, a touchdown rushing and a kickoff return touchdown.

Chiefs coach Andy Reid likes to move Hill all over the field. Hill has run with the ball, caught the ball, returned punts and thrown a pass against the Broncos.

While that pass -- an interception during the Week 8 game last season -- did no damage, it is Hill's unpredictability and dangerous ability that makes him difficult to defend.

After the Chiefs' Week 1 over the Los Angeles Chargers, when Hill scored three times, opposing quarterback Philip Rivers called Hill "unbelievable to watch" and added "what a dynamic player ... I don't know if I've seen anybody better, the things he can do speed-wise, in all my time playing."

For the Broncos to stop him, they need to do as much as possible on first and second down. Though Hill's speed and skill set would seem to make him a bigger threat on longer distance third-down situations, a look at the game video shows otherwise.

In his time with the Chiefs, Hill has touched the ball on first down the most. This season, 61 percent of receiving plays have come on first down, including incompletions. Though the Chiefs haven't been forced to run third-down plays that often because of their efficiency, only four of Hill's receiving plays have been on third down this season.

Last season, 45 percent of his receiving plays came on first down with 29.4 percent on second down. In short, the Chiefs are looking early and often to Hill as they move through their drives.

And Reid is usually moving Hill around the formation pre-snap.

"One motion he might jog across the ball and next motion he's flying across, so you never know," Harris said. "He's always the motion guy, we've got to be ready for that."

On Christmas night in 2016 -- a 33-10 Chiefs rout of the Broncos -- Denver held Hill without a reception, but Hill rushed for 95 yards, including a 70-yard touchdown.

"You have to be aggressive," linebacker Brandon Marshall said. "And you can't double everybody, so eventually you have to win those one-on-one matchups."

"Tyreek Hill, he's a weapon. ... You watch the Chargers game, in the first quarter, he's got a punt return for 91 yards and a slant for 65," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said. "In all three phases, it's going to be a challenge. But again, we're looking forward to it."

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

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

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Five times since September 2015, the Broncos have fallen to the Chiefs, often losing in the same way with turnovers, special-teams mistakes and defensive miscues.

Now the Broncos face one of their toughest meetings yet with a Chiefs team that underwent a makeover of sorts in the offseason. Gone is veteran quarterback Alex Smith. Starring is Patrick Mahomes, a first-round pick who made his debut in Denver last year and has already snapped one of Peyton Manning's records. Through the first three games, Mahomes has thrown 13 touchdowns, to go with zero interceptions for a passer rating of 137.4.

The Chiefs are one of only three remaining undefeated teams, along with the Dolphins and Rams, and stand alone as the league's leader with 39.3 points per game. Which means, after a dismal loss at Baltimore in Week 3, the Broncos will try to right the ship against the league's most prolific offense.

An upset victory for the Broncos could be a catalyst for continued success. Another loss to Kansas City could, again, alter Denver's season, maybe even prompt changes to its staff.

Matchups to watch

Broncos' secondary vs. TE Travis Kelce

The Broncos' secondary has been hardly a no fly zone like it was in years past with Chris Harris Jr., Aqib Talib and Darian Stewart leading the group. The Broncos have allowed an average of 262.7 net passing yards to opponents this season, including 78.7 per game to tight ends.

Kelce has historically been one of Denver's toughest challenges. In his last three games against the Broncos, he has totaled 394 receiving yards (15.2 average), two touchdowns, 18 first-down catches and three receptions of 25 yards or more. The Chiefs, of course, won all three of those meetings by an average of 12 points.

Through three games this year, Kelce already has 229 receiving yards and two touchdowns this season.

"(He's) a huge problem," coach Vance Joseph said. "Week 1 he had like one catch. I think Weeks 2 and 3 he had over 100 yards. He's obviously an issue in the red zone and on third downs for us. He's a matchup problem. He's too fast for most backers and he's too big for most safeties. We have a plan to obviously contain him and keep his production to a minimum."

Broncos OLB Von Miller vs. Chiefs OT Mitchell Schwartz

The Ravens in Week 3 managed to minimize the damage Miller typically causes on the edge. For the Broncos to have any success in containing Mahomes and the Chiefs' offense, Miller will need to be his usual one-man wrecking crew.

In his 14 career meetings with the Chiefs, Miller has tallied 11.5 sacks and 21 quarterback hits.

The last four meetings, with Mitchell Schwartz manning the right tackle position for the Chiefs, Miller recorded three sacks and six quarterback hits.

The Broncos' pass rush will be key to trying to contain Mahomes. The second-year quarterback has a 43.3 completion percentage under pressure compared to a 77.8 completion percentage when kept clean, according to Pro Football Focus.

"I don't want to say too much or give them any tips of what we're going to do in our game plan," Harris said. "He hasn't been hit, I will say that. The dude has been untouched. He hasn't had to scramble. Their offensive line does a great job and he gets the ball out fast. We've got to hit him some way and try and get pressure on him. That's the best way to rattle a quarterback that's hot like this."

Broncos WR Emmanuel Sanders vs. Chiefs' cornerbacks

All of the Broncos' receivers should have a big game against the Chiefs' defense. Kansas City ranks last in net yards allowed per game (474) and is tied for second-to-last in passing yards allowed (362.7 per game). They also rank 30th in scoring (30.7 points allowed), 28th in takeaways (two), are tied for 24th in sacks (six) and are tied for 29th in red-zone percentage (88 percent).

The Chiefs' quick-scoring offense has allowed their defense to get away with poor play. But their porous secondary should be an advantage for Denver.

I'm singling out Sanders here because of his connection with Keenum. Since the start of OTAs and continuing into training camp and preseason, Sanders' on-field rapport with Keenum has been the strongest of the Broncos' pass catchers. So far he leads all Broncos receivers with 269 yards (14.2 average), one receiving touchdown and a rushing touchdown.

"With a receiver, they want the ball. Case can get him the ball, so that makes him happy," Joseph said. "It's a simple as that. They all want the ball and Case is good at getting them the ball, so they're friends. That's how that works with receivers. If he can't do it, they won't be friends. That's how it works."

Predictions

Chiefs 27, Broncos 17

For the Broncos to keep up with Mahomes and the Chiefs' offense, they'll have to score in bunches. Since the start of the 2016 season, the Broncos have scored 30 or more points only twice.

For the defense to contain Mahomes, the pass rush has to work in unison with the secondary. Kelce, and tight ends in general, have caused trouble for the Broncos for years. Throw in Tyreek Hill and Kareem Hunt and the Chiefs have plenty of ways to carve up Denver's defense.

The Broncos have a chance here, with home-field advantage and in facing a spotty (to put it politely) Chiefs defense. But I don't think they'll be able to pull out a win.

—Nicki Jhabvala

Chiefs 24, Broncos 20

As the last few years have shown, the Chiefs are the more talented team right now. That doesn't mean the Broncos can't produce an upset Monday night. I do think the game will be the closest one yet for the Chiefs for many reasons. The Broncos have a good home crowd, and I expect coach Vance Joseph to throw everything he has at the Chiefs — trick plays, a unique special teams play here or there, going for it on fourth down and blitzing quarterback Patrick Mahomes a ton. The Broncos should try everything possible to get an early lead just to see how the Chiefs, who have yet to trail this season, react. My feeling is that the Chiefs have one more successful play in the fourth quarter to decide the game in their favor.

Broncos enter crossroads stretch of season as underdogs

By Troy Renck
KMGH
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Four weeks is not a long time. But there's no denying the Broncos sit at a crossroads in their 2018 journey to redemption.

They own a 2-1 record. They are undefeated at home. And yet, it feels precarious, an uneasy feeling for a head coach who barely kept his job last season and a defensive coordinator whose game plans have been openly questioned.

The Broncos face Kansas City, the AFC's Super Bowl favorite du jour. Next are the Jets, a team Denver desperately needs to beat for its first road win, followed by a home date with the Los Angeles Rams, whose coach Sean McVay might be the game's best playcaller.

Broncos coach Vance Joseph embraces the challenge of facing the Chiefs. He knows the history. Kansas City has won five straight games against Denver, three of which predated his arrival. The Broncos waded into Monday night's game as a home underdog against the Chiefs for the second time in 27 years.

"I'm not surprised they're favored," Joseph said. "That means nothing."

Broncos linebacker Shaquil Barrett put it another way to Denver7, "It's disrespectful."

Walk around the Broncos locker room this week, and the motivation is clear. They remain irritated by the Chiefs' status, with players putting in extra time to prepare. That's the easy part. The hard part is doing something about it on Monday.

Kansas City has won 17 of its last 18 division games. And the Chiefs have never had a stretch where they've played this well offensively. They are attempting to become the third team in league history to score at least 38 points in each of its first four games.

"You can't be scared. If you're are scared, go to church," said cornerback Chris Harris Jr., who has made clear he wants an aggressive approach defensively after watching opposing quarterbacks complete 69.5 percent of their passes this season. "You've got to be ready to challenge everybody."

The test for coordinator Joe Woods is daunting. Even if the game plans have been sound, the in-game adjustments have not. The Broncos struggled to adapt against Oakland quarterback Derek Carr (29 completions in 32 attempts against soft coverage) and Joe Flacco, who said the Ravens could have thrown 55 times and won easily.

The matchups favor Kansas City this week. Receiver Tyreek Hill ranks as arguably the league's fastest player, Sammy Watkins provides a new physical presence on the outside, and tight end Travis Kelce has used the Broncos for a chew toy, collecting 394 yards and two touchdowns in his last three games against Denver.

Harris insisted a "championship" mentality is required this week. This is not a must-win game, not with the way the Chiefs are playing. But how Denver plays is important. Can the Broncos compete with Kansas City, building confidence for a victory at New York? Or does this game represent a loose thread pulled to begin a slow unraveling?

The Broncos are underdogs in the next three games. This season boasts a different feel. For that to be real, the Broncos must win at least one of these games. There's no shame in a .500 record after six weeks. Anything less places the postseason in doubt, leaving the Broncos climbing Pike's Peak in Crocs.

Chiefs at Broncos report card and prediction

By Paul Klee

Colorado Springs Gazette

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Offense

History's at work here. It was 24 years ago Joe Montana beat John Elway in a Monday Night all-timer no one can forget. And Montana was the last Chiefs QB to frighten Broncos Country. Enter, Patrick Mahomes, who makes K.C. a betting favorite at Mile High for only the second time in 27 years.

Advantage: Chiefs

Defense

It won't take long to learn the state of the Broncos' once-proud defense on Monday: the Chiefs are 3-for-3 on opening-drive touchdowns this season. It helps to have Adam Jones back from injury. Do you trust the 34-year-old "Pacman" on the blur, Tyreek Hill? One word: shootout.

Advantage: Broncos

Special teams

On the sports talk airwaves and in these pages, the heat's on Vance Joseph. And if this season slides into the abyss there will be more calls that John Elway whiffed on Kyle Shanahan. But it's Chiefs special teams coach Dave Toub who's been most impressive since his interview in Denver.

Advantage: Chiefs

Coaching

Including the Case Keenum vs. Patrick Mahomes square-off, this is the biggest edge for the Chiefs. Andy Reid's won five straight against Denver — the longest run of success for Kansas City since the 1970s. See, that's how you get the other half of Missouri to move to Colorado.

Advantage: Chiefs

Intangibles

Hey, what's with all the negativity? Talk about an opportunity for the Broncos: after they exit Mile High, the Chiefs play three teams with playoff hopes. One of Jacksonville, New England and Cincinnati is going to knock the Chiefs down a peg. Steal this one and the narrative flips.

Advantage: Broncos

Paul Klee's prediction

Chiefs 30, Broncos 27 (Line: Broncos -5.5)

Klee's season record: 2-1 straight up, 2-1 against the spread

Broncos Injury Report: Tramaine Brock misses Friday's practice

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
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Cornerback Tramaine Brock (thigh) did not practice for the second consecutive day, but Head Coach Vance Joseph said he remains hopeful Brock can play Monday.

“He ran today without pain, so we’ll see,” Joseph said. “It’s still early.”

Safety Dymonte Thomas (abdomen), cornerback Adam Jones (thigh), linebacker Brandon Marshall (knee) and Shelby Harris (ankle) were all limited.

On Saturday, the Broncos will announce injury statuses for Monday’s game.

Cameron Wake, as a defensive player to NFL: 'You don't care about my safety'

By Frank Schwab

Yahoo Sports

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The NFL topic of this month — since they fixed the catch rule, the helmet rule hasn't been a big deal and fans need some rule to complain about — is the roughing-the-passer penalty.

The strongest words on the topic to date might have come from Miami Dolphins pass rusher Cameron Wake, who wondered why the NFL seemed interested in only protecting quarterbacks.

"My knees mean just as much to my family and my ability to play and provide as [Dolphins quarterback Ryan] Tannehill's does," Wake told Barry Jackson of the Miami Herald. "I can't understand that his are more important than mine."

Wake told Jackson that when it comes to player safety rules, "If it's players' safety, everybody should be safe, not just certain players." There are a few flaws in Wake's argument, but it will surely resonate with defensive players who are being penalized more, and fined small fortunes for doing their jobs.

Cameron Wake doesn't think the NFL cares about all players' safety

Wake's teammate William Hayes tore his ACL trying to contort himself to avoid landing with his full body weight on Oakland Raiders Derek Carr last week. Carr said he would have rather had Hayes fall on him, rather than injuring his knee trying to avoid it. Many quarterbacks have said the new emphasis on roughing-the-passer calls have gone too far.

It makes sense why the NFL wants more protection for quarterbacks. Its product suffers greatly when we have multiple backups playing because of injuries. Just wait for the complaints when the C.J. Beathard-led San Francisco 49ers play multiple prime-time games later this season.

That doesn't mean defensive players have to like it.

"Don't piss on me and tell me it's raining. Just tell me you want to protect quarterbacks.... It's silly to say we care about all players," Wake told the Miami Herald. "You don't care about my safety."

A violent sport

The NFL, of course, has enacted rules to protect non-quarterbacks. Remember the helmet rule everyone complained about in August, until we moved on to roughing the passer this month? That was done to make defensive players safer. And, mostly, defensive players hated it.

Player safety rules are a constant struggle. Adam Thielen of the Minnesota Vikings is a receiver, but when he was pulled out of Thursday night's game out of concern he might have had a concussion, he screamed at the officials taking him out of the game. The NFL either gets criticized for not caring about player safety, or gets criticized for the rules it enacts in the name of player safety. The league can't win that way.

Wake understands the difficulty of making football safer.

“It’s an uphill battle. The crowd likes the violence. You see big hits, the oohs and aahs. They like that,” Wake told Jackson. “How do you make a violent sport non-violent?”

It’s one of the toughest questions the NFL deals with. Their attempts to protect quarterbacks aren’t necessarily noble and for player safety, but rather for the good of the product and TV ratings, but it has at least given everyone something to talk about.

NFL Week 4: Preview and Analysis for Each Sunday Game

By Andy Benoit

MMQB

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RAVENS AT STEELERS

After playing like an elder, sagacious field general in Pittsburgh's quick-strike offense the last few years, Ben Roethlisberger is suddenly back to being Big Ben. Some of the throws he's made under duress in sandlot mode have been jaw-dropping. Will we see more of that this week? No defense does more with zone coverage disguises than Baltimore. It's easy to envision Big Ben holding the ball and letting those disguises shake out. However, recall that last year in Week 14 against the Ravens, Roethlisberger threw a career-high 66 times. All but 13 of those throws were underneath, many of them on quick timing.

TEXANS AT COLTS

No defense is overachieving more than Indy's. It's a young group with limitations throughout its front seven and only a so-so secondary, but every week you see these players execute their zone assignments soundly and rally like hell to the ball. First-year defensive coordinator Matt Eberflus deserves a lot of credit. His unit has looked very well-coached in all three games.

BILLS AT PACKERS

This is a tough road mission for Bills rookie quarterback Josh Allen. His receivers don't match up well to Green Bay's zealous man coverage, and many of those man coverages have hybrid elements that put zone defenders inside. When Allen's reads are perfectly clear, he displays his awesome arm talent and even a little of the nuanced body language to manipulate zone defenders. But when the reads aren't clear, Allen looks like a deer in headlights. With Green Bay's scheme, a QB's reads are often unclear.

SAINTS AT GIANTS

New right tackle Chad Wheeler (or Mr. Not Ereck Flowers, as he's formally known to most Giants fans) faced J.J. Watt in his first start last week. To put it kindly, Wheeler had his hands full. This week? He gets Cam Jordan, whose energy, talent and technique last year garnered First Team All-Pro honors. Expect the Giants to often align a tight end on the right side to help their new tackle.

BUCS AT BEARS

It's evident in his play-calling that Bears head coach Matt Nagy feels QB Mitchell Trubisky must be brought along slowly. Trubisky seems to be most comfortable with misdirection concepts that work underneath. It'll be interesting to see how those play out against aggressive downhill linebackers like Lavonte David and Kwon Alexander.

DOLPHINS AT PATRIOTS

If safety Patrick Chung is out, the second level of New England's defense becomes slow. Linebackers Dont'a Hightower and Kyle Van Noy are pounders, not chasers. The Lions exploited this Sunday night with quick throws underneath. That's something the Dolphins do better than maybe anyone. Offensive architect Adam Gase tags a lot of slants, flat routes and wide receiver screens onto his run plays. QB Ryan Tannehill gets to the line, reads the D and checks accordingly. Chung's presence is crucial for the Patriots this week. Fortunately for them, he has practiced all week and seems likely to play.

LIONS AT COWBOYS

Thanks to Sean Lee's ailing hamstring, Cowboys linebacker Leighton Vander Esch is making his first NFL start. One thing the first-round rookie must be prepared for are "counter" runs out of shotgun from Lions rookie tailback Kerryon Johnson. Those runs tend to keep Johnson on his original side in the formation. In other words, if he's aligned left of the QB, the run will go left. It's a subtly unusual look that a linebacker, paradoxically, must diagnose both quickly and patiently.

BENGALS AT FALCONS

Cincy should try to recreate the success it had in Week 2 with throwing to receivers from the slot. Put A.J. Green in there and run him on vertical routes down the middle, where injuries to linebacker Deion Jones and safeties Keanu Neal and Ricardo Allen have depleted Atlanta's defense.

JETS AT JAGUARS

This is the first time in a while that Jekyll and Hyde QB Blake Bortles is coming off one of his Jekyll games. (Or is it Hyde? Which one is the bad one again?) Last week against Tennessee, Bortles was off-target on several routine throws. By the end, you could see his mental gears churning and confidence wavering as he started aiming the ball. The Jets, who are rich at safety and cornerback, should press Jacksonville's receivers and not let Bortles locate his timing and rhythm. Linebackers Avery Williamson and Darron Lee will be big in this equation; Jacksonville excels with rub routes and intersecting crossers (i.e. mesh concepts) to beat man-to-man. Williamson or Lee must help pick up receivers here.

EAGLES AT TITANS

Carson Wentz was overly aggressive early in his first game back, throwing deep and outside on several occasions that demanded throws short and inside. Twice he even went to No. 3 tight end Joshua Perkins against a starting corner who had sideline and/or safety help. EEEK! The Colts showed Wentz a lot of Cover 2 that game, and as the afternoon progressed, the young QB settled in. Now Wentz is facing a Titans defense that has prospered playing straight Cover 2 (last week versus Jacksonville) and uniquely disguised Cover 2 (two weeks ago versus Houston). It'll be interesting to see what the Titans show Wentz.

BROWNS AT RAIDERS

Let's see where the Baker Mayfield mania lands Sunday night after he's played his first game as a starter, on the road, against a defense that prepared for him. This is about as perfect of a defense as a new QB can face. The Raiders right now are rotating heavily at linebacker, slot corner, safety and almost everywhere along their defensive line. That speaks volumes about the unit's overall lack of talent.

SEAHAWKS AT CARDINALS

Cardinals first-year head coach Steve Wilks spoke this week about how important it is that he trust who he puts on the field. What does that say about linebackers Deone Bucannon and Hassan Reddick? Both are fast, dynamic young former first-round picks, and yet they're benched behind journeymen Josh Byner and Gerald Hodges (a player whom some coaches have explicitly NOT trusted at previous stops).

49ERS AT CHARGERS

The good with San Francisco's D? Reuben Foster and Fred Warner look like the future best run-defending linebacker tandem in football. (Foster's raw talent jumped off the screen in his season debut last week.) The bad? As pass rushers, Niners nickel defensive ends Ronald Blair and Cassius Marsh are barely better than you and me.

Chris Harris: We have to give Patrick Mahomes something he hasn't seen

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
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Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes hasn't run into too much difficulty in his first three starts and that run would create concerns for any Week Four opponent.

Given Broncos cornerback Chris Harris' laments about the team's pass defense after last Sunday's loss to the Ravens, Monday night's matchup would seem to be an even bigger worry for Denver. Harris said it is "very easy" for opposing quarterbacks because the Broncos aren't doing anything to disguise their coverages. He said that has to change on Monday if there's any chance for success.

"We always want to be an attacking football team here," Harris said, via the Broncos website. "That's our motto here. It's been like that ever since I've been here. It's always what we've done: just be in attack mode, not sit back; be aggressive and give him different looks. That's what we've got to do. We've got to try to confuse him and give him something he hasn't seen. [Chiefs head coach] Andy Reid's played against us a lot of times, so we've got to try to change it up, try to trick him a couple of times."

Despite his earlier criticism and their play in past weeks, Harris believes the Broncos "have a lot of tricks up our sleeve" to use against Mahomes, Reid and company. We'll see how many they put on the table when it comes time to close out Week Four.