

Fall of a pass defense: Once feared Broncos secondary being picked on

By Ryan O'Halloran
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The play did not cost the Broncos a chance at winning last week at Baltimore — too many other things would go wrong later. But it was emblematic of how far the team's previously-dominant pass defense has fallen.

The Broncos led 14-7 late in the first half. The Ravens faced third-and-10 from the Broncos' 43-yard line. A sack of quarterback Joe Flacco or an incomplete pass would result in a punt.

The Broncos got soft.

Cornerbacks Chris Harris, Issac Yiadom and Bradley Roby lined up eight, eight and nine yards beyond the line of scrimmage, respectively. Flacco held the football for 2.41 seconds and threw a nine-yard pass to Michael Crabtree, short of the first down but in kicker Justin Tucker's range for a 52-yard made attempt. A free three points.

Long gone is when the Broncos would dictate that play. They would jam receivers at the snap, knock them off their route downfield or use speed to track the deep pass. The Broncos finished ninth, first, first and fourth in fewest passing yards allowed from 2014-17.

Through three weeks this season the Broncos are allowing 61.9 more passing yards per game (up to 262.7) and opposing quarterbacks have completed 69.5 percent of their attempts (up from 59.9) and have posted a 102.2 passer rating (up from 91.9) compared to last year.

A pass defense that used to be feared is now below average. The self-titled "No Fly Zone," has become the "Frequent Fly Zone."

The defensive backs had a series of players-only meetings this past week and defensive coordinator Joe Woods also met with the group. Ideas, concerns and suggestions were discussed.

"I do that every week," Harris said with a laugh. "Hopefully they listen. I think they listen to me."

Said Woods: "In the meeting, we talked through a lot of different issues. I listen 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."

The Broncos' secondary may feel they're in a good place, but they may also be facing the wrong team (Kansas City) at the wrong time (Monday night). Quarterback Patrick Mahomes and his fleet of weapons will test the defense's resolve.

The Broncos feel they have the run defense and pass rush to compete in the AFC West. But neither component will mean much if the secondary can't play better. Let Mahomes play pitch-and-catch like

Flacco and Oakland's Derek Carr did the past two weeks and the Broncos' season will splinter beyond repair.

"We have to play with confidence and we have to challenge these guys," coach Vance Joseph said of the Chiefs. "If not, it can get bad quick."

It kind of already is bad.

Breaking down the breakdowns

How did the Broncos get to this point, where Joseph said opponents have a "blue-print" of how to attack his defense?

Defensive coordinator Wade Phillips departed after 2016 and his decades of knowledge and in-game adjustments can't be overstated. ... Top cornerback Aqib Talib was traded to Phillips' Los Angeles Rams during the offseason. ... Roby, a former first round pick, was moved from No. 3 to No. 2 on the depth chart and seems worried about getting beat deep instead of trying playing press coverage and then running step for step with the receiver. ... Brendan Langley, a third-round pick in 2017, was cut in camp and is on the practice squad. ... Veterans Tramaine Brock and Adam Jones have battled injuries. ... Yiadom is a rookie who needs more seasoning.

Three times in the last five years, the Broncos held quarterbacks below 60 percent completions. Just two years ago, passers had a woeful 69.7 rating against the Broncos.

"They just don't have the same kind of players that are shut-down players at corner that can play as consistently as Aqib could," said ESPN analyst Louis Riddick, a former NFL defensive back and player personnel executive. "And they're not playing with as much confidence as they did in the past."

A sure sign of a confidence shortage is playing too far back in off coverage. Carr threw 32 passes against the Broncos and 27 traveled nine or fewer yards in the air. The dink-and-dunk game kept Oakland ahead until a late Broncos' rally.

Teams are throwing quickly, but not because they have to. Any quarterback who sees "off" coverage is going to throw in two seconds for the short profit.

Would blitzing six and seven players more often (if the opponent's personnel allows for it) produce more quick throws into traffic? Do the Broncos need to disguise their coverage looks more often, as Harris has suggested? Should Harris, the team's best cornerback, stay outside and Roby move inside to see if that can get him going?

Even though the season is three games old, all ideas must be explored, which is why Woods met with the players and the players met with each other.

"We know going into this game that it was going to take extra effort," safety Justin Simmons said. "We know in the back end a lot of the pressure lays on us and that's how we like it and that's how it's been in the past."

Woods succeeded a coordinating legend in Phillips and the attention in times of struggle is now focused on him.

“The players were great when Wade was there, but he’s also good at setting them up for success,” Riddick said. “Joe has to continue to help them out and his role will be even greater now because they’re not as strong (personnel-wise) as they were in their heyday.”

Broncos aren’t alone

The Broncos aren’t the only team searching for a pass defense answer.

“I think (offenses) are being aggressive,” Joseph said. “Offensive football, right now, is hard to stop.”

Compared to Weeks 1-3 of 2017:

*Teams are averaging 20.1 more passing yards per game despite only 7.6 more attempts. Teams have 31 more touchdown passes.

*The league completion percentage is only 1.3 points higher (64.2 vs. 65.5), but seven teams are allowing opposing passers to complete at least 70 percent of their attempts.

*Slightly up is 300-yard passing games (from 23 to 25) and touchdown passes of at least 40 yards (from 19 to 24). But there is big uptick in 100-yard receiving games — 26 last year and 48 this year.

*Three teams (New Orleans, Kansas City and Tampa Bay) are allowing 335-plus passing yards per game, 10 teams (including the Broncos) have an opponent’s passer rating of at least 100.

“I said this before the season — we were going to see an offensive explosion the likes we’ve never seen because of the way the rules are and effect it’s going to have on defensive players and how they attack the game and how they play the game,” Riddick said. “Don’t discount that. Defensive players look very timid now.”

Cornerbacks may be concerned about illegal contact, defensive holding or pass interference penalties. Safeties may be worried about getting penalized for personal fouls on bang-bang hits that dislodge the football or deflect it into the air for an interception. It appears most teams have adopted a tackle-the-catch mantra. Don’t get beat deep. Defend the first-down marker. Tackle soundly after allowing the completion.

Harris has three pass break-ups, but Roby has none while allowing 14 completions in 16 targets in man coverage.

While expressing confidence in Woods’ play-calling and the ability of his teammates, Harris has spoken with an honest edge since the post-game locker room last week. A Super Bowl champion and All Pro, he had a right to be semi-agitated about how passive the Broncos have played.

“You can’t be scared,” Harris said. “If you’re scared, go to church. You’ve got to be ready to challenge everybody.”

Broncos Journal: Familiar complaints arose after debacle in Baltimore

By Ryan O'Halloran
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In the aftermath of the Broncos' 27-14 loss/stink-fest at Baltimore last week, familiar refrains were sung.

Bench left tackle Garrett Bolles.

Acquire new Nos. 2-3 cornerbacks.

Wow, the 2017 draft class is no help.
Fire everybody.

Heading into Monday night's game against Kansas City, a look at said refrains:

1. Bench Bolles.

The rub for coach Vance Joseph: Even if he wanted to make depth chart changes in an effort to spark a team that could easily be 0-3, he doesn't have the available tools.

Bolles is Exhibit A. The Broncos can't bench him. Moving right tackle Jared Veldheer to left tackle shouldn't be an option because then they're weakening two positions.

Bolles played a clean game in the Week 1 win over Seattle, but allowed quarterback Case Keenum to get knocked down three times (two hits and a sack) and had one penalty in the Week 2 win over Oakland.

Things fell apart at Baltimore last Sunday. Bolles had two penalties, allowed one sack and three other pressures. Monday night against Kansas City is huge for him. He can't let the Baltimore game carry over. He must play with confidence and improved technique.

"It's encouraging him and (letting him know) that we all believe in him," Keenum said. "I don't think there's anything extra to say because he's our guy, he's our teammate, he's in the huddle and he's one of the 11. We have all the faith in the world in him."

2. Get help at cornerback.

Just about every team this side of Jacksonville is looking for cornerback help. Broncos fans have had enough of Bradley Roby and have demanded via email that Tramaine Brock be replaced, too.

Teams that have good cornerbacks don't trade them (unless you're the Broncos and have Aqib Talib).

The current free agent list is underwhelming. Sean Smith, David Amerson, Marcus Williams and Jeremy Lane. The Broncos dipped into this pool in late August by signing Adam Jones.

The Packers signed veteran Bashaud Breeland during the week when backup Davon House (shoulder) was put on injured reserve.

If the Broncos are to fix their secondary, it has to be via an in-house improvement.

3. Lamenting the 2017 draft class

General manager John Elway and his cabinet can't be blamed for tight end Jake Butt's left ACL injury Thursday. A fine draft pick, he was on the way to making an impact this season.

The rest of the class' failures have limited the coaching staff's options.

Of the eight-player class, only Bolles and backup quarterback Chad Kelly will be active Monday. The Broncos raised their hands and moved on from third-round receiver Carlos Henderson (cut from practice squad) and saw sixth-round running back De'Angelo Henderson choose the Jets' practice squad. Third-round cornerback Brendan Langley and fifth-round receiver Isaiah McKenzie are on the practice squad.

Second-round defensive lineman DeMarcus Walker has been a healthy scratch in all three games.

Meanwhile, as many as seven 2018 draft picks plus undrafted running back Phillip Lindsay will be active against Kansas City.

4. Everybody needs to go.

Thirteen penalties for 120 yards, including two for unnecessary roughness, one ejection (Lindsay), an offside flag that allowed Baltimore to convert a third down ... ugly.

Shoddy clock management at the end of the first half that gifted Baltimore three points... ugly.

A huge seven days is coming up for Joseph, who needs to hit the right notes behind the scenes and then lead two clean games. Beat Kansas City and the New York Jets and the noise will temporarily soften. Split the games and the Broncos at least have a pulse. Lose both? Uh-oh.

Inside the game: Broncos rookie Josey Jewell adapts to new NFL defensive scheme

By Kyle Fredrickson
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Josey Jewell earned his nickname, “The Outlaw,” over four seasons and 49 games leading Iowa’s defense from his middle linebacker spot.

But keeping Jewell’s rugged reputation in the NFL required a shift of perspective when the Broncos picked him No. 106 overall (fourth round) in April’s draft. Jewell thrived as the lone inside linebacker in the Hawkeyes’ 4-3 scheme. Now, he’s playing alongside either Brandon Marshall or Todd Davis with a pair of rangy linebackers on the edges in Denver’s 3-4.

“Early on in OTAs,” Jewell said, “it was a bit of a learning curve.”

The Broncos removed Jewell’s training wheels, quickly, as a knee injury to Marshall advanced the rookie’s role in base-and-nickel packages through three games. Jewell’s defensive snap count progressed from seven (Seattle) to 14 (Oakland) to 38 (Baltimore). He’s totaled eight tackles, including one for loss.

“A lot of learning lessons for me, especially, coming in early like that and playing on the defense,” Jewell said. “A lot of things that you realize after a week, you look at the film, think about it, watch it by yourself and you understand what you did wrong. You try to improve yourself every day.

“Getting these early ones, I think you try and critique yourself even harder. Because if they’re going to put you in, you better be able to go out there and fit.”

Back in the Broncos locker room, Jewell does his best not to revel in the early playing time, no matter how dream-fulfilling it might be, as he enters the first of what he hopes are many Monday Night Football appearances as an NFL linebacker.

“I haven’t really thought about that yet and I’m trying not to think about it,” Jewell said. “I’m going to try and live in the moment and understand what I need to do week-to-week and day-to-day.”

Kickin' it with Kiz: Will Broncos coach Vance Joseph get taken to school by K.C.'s Andy Reid in Monday-night mismatch?

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
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Kansas City's Andy Reid will make Vance Joseph look like a youth football coach.

G-man, football philosopher

Kiz: There's not much good to say about Joseph's record as coach of the Broncos, except the fact he's 3-1 at home against the AFC West. In this matchup against Kansas City, maybe there's only one big box to check in Denver's favor: orange thunder. If the Broncos win Monday night, the 12th man will deserve a game ball.

You do nothing but badmouth all Denver's sports teams. Now you want to try to write some column giving the Rockies a compliment? Go away, you miserable piece of journalistic garbage.

Alex, having tough day

Kiz: Can I offer you a beer, Alex? Let the anger drain from your face. Pull up a chair and sit a spell. Before the season, I predicted the Rockies would win 92 games. So their success makes me happy, not to mention nearly 100 percent correct.

Wins matter in baseball, just not when it comes to an individual pitcher. It doesn't matter which pitcher is assigned the loss. Wins and losses matter to the team, not the pitcher. This isn't hard to understand. Rockies starter Kyle Freeland could have a 0-10 record and made exactly the same overall impact to his team.

A.B., Austin, Texas

Kiz: The stat goblins, who insist all offensive numbers at Coors Field are hopelessly inflated, have pounced on me for lauding Freeland's 10 victories, with a 2.40 earned run average, at Coors, the hardest place in the majors to pitch. Yes, I understand: Wins are an overrated measure of pitching success, especially for boosters of Jacob deGrom for the Cy Young Award. Life is often random. But wins do matter, and what Freeland has achieved is far from meaningless. If you discount Freeland coming up big in big moments to help his team win big, your name might be Mr. Crabbypants.

Hey, Kiz. Last year you said the best quarterback playing in Colorado was Sam Darnold of Southern Cal, when the Trojans visited Boulder. Well, fact is, the best QB in the state right now is CU's Steven Montez.

Eddie, Buffs backer

Kiz: Might want to slow that roll. Montez has firmly established himself as a legit NFL prospect. That's cool. The Buffaloes are bound for the top 25 of the national polls. That's awesome. Before crowning

Montez as better than Broncos quarterback Case Keenum, however, the staff here at Kickin' It Headquarters would like to see CU beat a team with anything close to a winning record.

And today's parting shot is smack talk from Kansas City, where some folks are irked about my theory quarterback that Patrick Mahomes is spectacular, but the Chiefs are soft.

You don't play for the Donkeys' defense, so you can't cash the check you just wrote, Kiz. I imagine you didn't play football, but in the shocking event I'm wrong, your career probably ended in high school. I hope you motivated Kansas City as much as you did me, and the Chiefs put a severe beating on the Donkeys.

Dave, wants piece of the Vonster

Von Miller on playing Mahomes, Chiefs on Monday night: "I have an opportunity to be great"

By Mike Klis

9 News

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Von Miller has an idea how NFL fans watch a game involving their favorite team play.

Bronco fans, for instance, might see the opposing offense rolling, a first down here, a touchdown there.

The Broncos' secondary is, at best, thin, leaving fans to exhort: "Come on, Von, just get in there!"

Sacks still come for Von Miller, but they are so much harder than they used to be. Isolate on Miller now, and when he beats his offensive tackle, his pass rush is just getting started. He needs another move to get by the tight end or running back.

And with all due respect to Bradley Chubb, the Broncos' other outside pass rusher who was the No. 5 overall draft pick, opponents aren't nearly as worried about him, yet.

"When you start off in the National Football League and guys don't really know about you and you're getting sacks, it doesn't matter if you have 18 sacks, they just let 'em rush," Miller said this week in a sit-down interview with 9News. "But do it consistently – once you start making plays, this is the National Football League, teams are going to find ways to slow you down. It's my job to stay consistent and not let them slow me down."

It helps explain why Miller's career high is still 18.5 sacks, which he got in his second season of 2012, even if he is a much better all-around player now.

Broncos head coach Vance Joseph said this week that big-time players need to step up in big games.

The game Monday night against the Kansas City Chiefs at Broncos Stadium at Mile High is as big as it gets for week 4.

Win, and the Broncos are 3-1 and serve notice they are a legitimate playoff contender. Lose and the Broncos will have lost their second in a row and fallen too far back to pose any serious threat to 4-0 Kansas City for the AFC West title.

The game is big and the Broncos don't have a bigger star than Miller.

"It's year eight," he said. "I can feel it. I know I have a great moment in time and I have an opportunity to go out there and be great. That's what drives me."

Perhaps, it would help if Miller played a little more than he did last week in Baltimore? More than in their first two games, the Broncos employed a four-man pass-rush rotation where Shaq Barrett and Shane Ray got considerably more snaps at the expense of Miller and Chubb.

Miller has bought in.

“We’ve got four great outside linebackers and we’ve got different packages to get these guys in,” Miller said. “We’ve got a NASCAR package where we get either Shaq or Shane in with me and Chubb. To get those guys more playing time, you’ve got to get the guys who are on the field out. I’m completely comfortable with those guys going in and making plays. Both of those guys would be starters on other teams. That’s just how it is.

“I would love to play more – and I will play more. We’re still trying to figure out the rotation. But the priority is to get Shaq and Shane reps.

“And it’s still early in the season. If these guys take reps away from me and Chubb, then over the course of the season it will keep us healthier as well. It’s our strategy that we have this season. We’ve tried it in the past but we’re really going for it this season.”

Miller has now played long enough and well enough that opposing coaches and quarterbacks have begun bestowing him with predictions of a bronze bust and gold jacket.

“Nobody does it better than Von,” Chiefs head coach Andy Reid said in a conference call with the Denver media this week. “Von is a future Hall of Fame guy.”

Heady stuff, but while Miller’s 87.5 sacks in a little more than seven seasons already has him tied for 48th on the NFL’s all-time list, he’s perhaps three more Von-like seasons away from becoming a first-ballot Hall of Famer. Maybe less, considering he already has a Super Bowl 50 MVP in the bank.

The Hall of Fame, though, is not on Von’s close-range radar. A more immediate goal is NFL Defensive Player of the Year. With 3.0 sacks and two forced fumbles in the opener and still tied for the league lead with 4.0 sacks entering week 4, Miller has a chance.

“It’s something that’s evaded me,” he said. “I’ve finished second twice (in 2012 and 2016). It’s something I really want to do. I’m very passionate about it and I go into games thinking about it every single game. With losses and not getting sacks like we did last week (at Baltimore), I feel that more than anybody. This week is a great test for us, a great challenge and I’m up for it, 100 percent.”

This week is against the Chiefs and Patrick Mahomes, who threw three games has 13 touchdown passes and zero interceptions. Miller played half the snaps in the regular-season finale last year, a game that was otherwise known as Mahomes’ debut. Miller had a quarterback hit on Mahomes, but the Chiefs rallied for a 27-24 win.

“When we played him last year, honestly, I’m thinking, they’re playing the second-string quarterback, get him some reps, this should be easy,” Miller said. “I couldn’t have been more wrong. He’s a great quarterback, great talent. I think some of the stuff he did in our game? That’s some of the same stuff he’s doing now. He looks way more comfortable.

“Last year he didn’t have his playmakers in there. He didn’t have Tyreek (Hill) or (Travis) Kelce and Sammy Watkins of course, but now he’s got all those guys and he’s got a great offensive line as well. Kareem Hunt.”

One of those offensive linemen is right tackle Mitchell Schwartz, the NFL's only blocker who has played in more consecutive snaps than Broncos' center Matt Paradis. Schwartz' iron-man streak is into his seventh season – three more than Paradis' run.

“Schwartz is the gold standard for tackles,” Miller said. “And not just for right tackles. He's the gold standard for tackles – he plays every game. It doesn't matter what pass rusher he goes against, he's going to be solid. He was great in Cleveland and he's even better in Kansas City.”

This will be the first of only three primetime games the Broncos have on their schedule this year. Beat Schwartz a couple times and strip-sack Mahomes and Miller will leave award voters with another indelible memory.

“I'm my biggest critic,” Miller said. “It doesn't matter how big the game is, it doesn't matter how small the game is, I have a certain drive about it. It doesn't matter what the score is, or what defense we're in or what the offense is doing. I have a different agenda and I go out there each and every week and I try to accomplish that.”

Chris Harris Jr. explains why he prefers outside to slot

By Mike Klis

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Chris Harris Jr. is cursed by his own skill set.

He would prefer to play on the outside at cornerback, but he happens to be the league's best slot defensive back of the past five years or so.

And so, until this year, whenever the Broncos brought in a third cornerback, it was Harris who moved inside. Bradley Roby came off the bench as the No. 3 cornerback and played right outside corner. Aqib Talib stayed at left outside corner.

Harris moved inside to cover the slot receiver. Smart, quick, instinctive, competitive and strong, Harris made first team All Pro primarily because of his superb inside play in 2016.

This year, with the departure of Talib and No. 3 newcomer Adam Jones familiar with the slot position, Harris is playing considerably more outside corner.

"I like being on the outside because that's where I can get more picks," he said in a sit-down interview with 9News this week. "I can read the quarterback more, I can use my coverage skills a lot more. I just think I can make more plays.

"In the slot, I'm always with my back to the quarterback, I'm man to man most of the time, I can't see where the ball's going. So, it's hard to make those plays. That's really the only reason why the outside is better. The outside should have way more picks than the slot."

Harris has been the caulk in a Broncos' secondary that otherwise has sprung some leaks. Denver ranks No. 22 in opposing pass efficiency with a 102.2 rating that is bolstered by a 69.5 completion percentage.

And here come the Kansas City Chiefs and quarterback Patrick Mahomes, whose 137.4 passer rating leads the NFL.

"He's definitely the real deal," Harris said. "Their offense – not just him, everything that they do. (Head coach) Andy Reid, he has so much misdirection and it's so much like a college offense. The way they use Tyreek Hill with the Jet motion, give him sweeps, running back, putting him at receiver, he's all over the field.

"It's their offense as a whole, but Mahomes, he's definitely getting into his playmakers' hands."

The Broncos, meanwhile, are adjusting to having back-to-back, third-round cornerbacks – Brendan Langley and Isaac Yiadom – not being quite ready for significant roles. The Broncos improvised by bringing in two, 30-something veterans, Adam Jones and Tramaine Brock, to fill in.

Jones and Brock, though, have already been hampered by leg muscle strains, forcing Yiadom to play, ready or not. And Roby, who is adjusting to his promotion from No. 3 corner, where he played about 50 percent

of the time, to No. 2, where he is playing nearly 100 percent, stayed long after practice Saturday to work on technique with defensive coordinator Joe Woods.

“We’re trying to get some consistency at corners,” Harris said. “It’s hard going out there and playing when this week I’ve got Pacman (Jones), next week I’ve got T-Brock and then I’ve got Isaac – I don’t know who’s going to be out there with me.

“We’ve got to get that chemistry down. I think that’s what’s really delaying the secondary, we don’t have that continuity with some consistency at the cornerback position.”

It’s a scary predicament, especially when Mahomes has begun his first season as a starting quarterback with 13 touchdown passes against 0 interceptions in the Chiefs’ 3-0 start.

“I’ve seen him roll to the right and throw a post to the opposite hash off one leg,” Harris aid. “I mean he can make all the throws and he’s gutsy, man. He will throw it in triple coverage, double coverage because he believes his guys can get the ball. Those are the times when we’ve got to make him pay.

“If you’re a safety you would love to play Mahomes because he’s going to give you a chance, he’s going to test you in the middle of the field to see how good you are at the safety position. If I’m a safety I’m licking my chops, for sure.”

After the Broncos dominated the AFC West from 2011 through 2015, the Chiefs assumed control really starting with the second-half of the 2015 season. They have won five in a row from the Broncos, including the past three games played in Denver.

Still, is Harris surprised his Broncos are 4.5-point underdogs at home Monday night to the Chiefs?

“Oh no, I’m not surprised,” he said. “Those guys are hot. They’ve owned the division the last two years, so I’m not surprised at all. We’ve got to get that turned around. That’s our main goal is to get that mind control back in the division like we’ve had, and this is a good test right here.”

“It’s must-win for sure. In my eyes. When you’re at home it’s automatically must win. On top of that, division game.”

Brian Parker has mixed feelings about replacing Jake Butt

By Mike Klis

9 News

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Emotions are forever in conflict in the NFL.

Brian Parker considers himself not just a teammate but a friend of Jake Butt and wishes nothing but good will for his fellow tight end. Yet, sometimes a player like Parker would not get a chance to play until someone like Butt got hurt.

Cruel? You bet. A reality in the NFL? That, too.

Parker, a tight end, was promoted from the practice squad to the 53-man roster Saturday, a move that was expected since Butt suffered a torn left ACL during a non-contact special teams drill Thursday.

"It was a freaky thing," Parker said Friday, before he was officially told he was promoted. "Sometimes these ACLs are like that. They don't feel pain, they just kind of go down.

"It was a tough day emotionally for all us. Part of me is excited because I get a chance to play but I feel bad for Jake. I know it's tough. Trying to keep his head up."

Parker, a third-year player from the University of Albany, played in nine games for the Kansas City Chiefs in 2015. He will backup Jeff Heurman and Matt LaCrosse in the Broncos' game Monday night against his former Chiefs.

Brock officially doubtful

Broncos veteran cornerback Tramaine Brock is not expected to play Monday night against the Chiefs. He is listed as "doubtful" on the injury report. He has tightness in his groin/thigh area.

A cornerback who is even more of a veteran, Adam Jones, is listed as questionable with a hamstring/thigh strain. Jones, who turns 35 on Sunday, is on the probable side of questionable, as is linebacker Brandon Marshall, who is questionable with a sore knee but expected to play. Backup safety/special teamer Dymonte Thomas is questionable with a strained oblique.

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.

The five most intriguing NFL games of Week 4

By STAFF

The Athletic

September 30, 2018

Week 4 has fewer obvious must-see blockbusters than some of the matchups from the first three weeks — plus, the best game of the week almost surely already happened, on Thursday night — but there will still be plenty to keep an eye on. The Titans, who've been overlooked by many so far, (including, according to some, us in our Week 3 Power Rankings) sit at 2–1, with a chance to make a huge statement against the Super Bowl champion Eagles. Meanwhile, the Bengals face a high-powered NFC South team for the second straight week, the Broncos will try to curb the seemingly unstoppable Patrick Mahomes, and the classic rivalry between the Ravens and Steelers will add another chapter. But first, we head to Foxboro, where there could be a sign of a pretty significant change in AFC East supremacy this season if the Dolphins notch a fourth straight victory over the reeling Pats.

Miami Dolphins at New England Patriots

Sunday, 1 p.m. (ET)

From the Dolphins' side (by Chris Perkins)

What I'm Watching

Miami is attempting the implausible — go into New England, a place where it is 2-14 over the last 16 years, and defeat the Patriots. The last Dolphins victory at Gillette Stadium came in 2008, in the Wildcat game, when quarterback Tom Brady was injured and didn't play. The second most recent victory came in the 2005 season finale, when Brady exited in the first quarter. If the Dolphins win in Foxborough, where quarterback Ryan Tannehill is 0-5, and coach Adam Gase is 0-2, they take a commanding lead in the AFC East. Miami would improve to 4-0 while New England would sink to 1-3.

The Dolphins Win If ...

Miami sticks to its winning formula, and then some. That means the Dolphins must take care of the ball (they are tied for second in the NFL in turnover margin at plus-4), get big plays on offense and defense (Miami has five touchdowns of 30 or more yards, and seven interceptions, which is tied for the NFL lead), and stop the run (Miami is seventh in run defense at 89 yards per game). Some continued creative play-calling from Gase would also help, along with Tannehill's continued statistical mastery (seven touchdowns, two interceptions, 121.8 passer rating).

As for "then some," well, Miami must be ready to make in-game adjustments to any new wrinkles Belichick might have ... and there will be new wrinkles.

Super Bowl Meter

Win at New England and this instrument becomes somewhat of a reality. Until then, it remains an imaginary device.

Game Prediction

Dolphins 24, Patriots 21. What the heck? Let's bring turmoil, chaos and hope to the AFC East. Let's give Miami legitimate playoff hopes for 2018. In a league that over the last few years has seen Carolina go from 7-8-1 to 15-1, and Jacksonville go from 3-13 to 10-6, is it unfathomable to think Miami, which was 6-10 last year, wins at New England in Week 4?

From the Patriots' side (by Jeff Howe)

What I'm watching:

The fight, the attitude, the resolve, the pushback, the character. In the past when the Patriots have been flat out of the gate, they've still found ways to win or at least be more competitive. That's largely been missing during this season's early two-game skid. Sure, they gave themselves a shot in Jacksonville before Dede Westbrook's 61-yard touchdown, and the Pats put two strong series together in the second half against the Lions before the backslide. But the X-factor, their Patriot attitude, has been absent during this September malaise. The players have talked a good game for a couple weeks, and there haven't been any signs of dissension or turmoil. If they show some fight against the Dolphins, then OK, it could be the start of something. If they don't? It'll be the longest season in memory.

The Patriots win if:

They perform on third down. Defensively, they have allowed a 48.7 percent conversion rate on third down, which is the third-worst mark in the NFL. Offensively, their 28.6 percent conversion rate is the fourth worst in the league. No one else is ranked in the bottom four in both categories. It's one thing for the defense to be working through some early-season struggles, but it's shocking that the offense has been so lifeless in clutch situations.

Super Bowl meter:

Tepid. The Patriots have a lot to prove. There is no question they're capable of getting to the Super Bowl if they figure out their early woes, but the past two weeks were as ugly as any in years. Point blank, the Patriots would have lost to any team in the NFL with their performance Sunday night in Detroit, but we all know they aren't that bad. But that was still a situation in which their backs were against the wall and they showed almost no resistance. So right now, the belief that the Pats will turn it around is based on past seasons, and not this one. This is a character-defining day against the Dolphins. If the Patriots look like the Patriots, the back-to-back losses could be the best thing that ever happened to them on a grand scale for the 2018 season.

Game prediction:

Patriots 24, Dolphins 23. I won't believe the Patriots are cooked until I see it.

Cincinnati Bengals at Atlanta Falcons

Sunday, 1 p.m. (ET)

From the Bengals' side (by Jay Morrison)

What I'm Watching

Running back Giovani Bernard had a strong performance carrying the load for the injured Joe Mixon last week, averaging 5.1 yards per attempt and scoring a touchdown in the loss to the Panthers. But the

Bengals trailed for much of the game and most of the RPOs ended with the ball in the air. They can't afford to play catch up — or worse, keep up — against the Atlanta offense. Bernard logged 12 of the 13 carries last week as the Bengals went into the game with only two active running backs, the other being rookie Mark Walton, whom the Bengals don't trust yet. Walton had one carry (negated by penalty) last week, despite Bernard going out a couple of times to shake off a thigh injury that's had him limited in practice this week. This week, Thomas Rawls, whom the team signed off the street last week, should be up to speed and ready to help a thin run game that will be vital to keeping the explosive Atlanta offensive off the field.

The Bengals Win If ...

They find a way to get off the field on third down. The Bengals' defense is allowing conversions 52 percent of the time, the worst rate in the NFL. That's resulted in opponents running 43 more plays through the first three games. The Bengals don't travel their corners, which will allow Atlanta offensive coordinator Steve Sarkisian to dictate the matchups for his receivers, Julio Jones, Mohamed Sanu and emerging rookie Calvin Ridley. Dre Kirkpatrick has been the second-most targeted cornerback in the league this season while tied for fifth in receptions allowed. Because of the slow start, he said this game is personal for him. How he and fellow cornerbacks William Jackson and Darqueze Dennard play will dictate whether the Bengals get to 3-1.

Super Bowl Meter

If the Bengals had beaten the Panthers last weekend to go 3-0, maybe, possibly, they could have been in the "others to consider" conversation. But the only thing this team has designs on winning right now is more third downs than they lose.

Game Prediction

Falcons 39, Bengals 35. This game has all the makings of a shootout, which means there's a good chance it ends up 17-13. But I don't think so. This will be a case of what you see is what you get, and I don't either see either team playing good defense. The Falcons are a little better on offense, and they're at home.

From the Falcons' side (by Jason Butt)

What I'm Watching

With the Falcons down their top two safeties, everyone should have a close eye on Damontae Kazee, the second-year safety out of San Diego State who will step into a bigger leadership role. He'll be the last line of defense that Ricardo Allen did such a good job at, while ensuring the rest of the secondary is lined up in the right position. Sticking with the secondary, it will be interesting to see how Desmond Trufant, Robert Alford and Brian Poole matchup against A.J. Green and Tyler Boyd. Boyd has caught six passes with a touchdown in each of his past two games, making the Bengals a much tougher passing attack to defend than initially thought.

On the offensive side, the Falcons have had great success throwing the ball in each of the past two games. Rookie Calvin Ridley has played a major role in that with four touchdowns — three of which came in last week's loss to the Saints. The Falcons have seen a little bit of every kind of defense this season. What the Bengals do to try and slow the Falcons down will be key. While coverage will be important, Cincinnati will surely try to get Geno Atkins involved in the interior pass rush to disrupt Atlanta's offensive flow.

The Falcons Win If ...

Two things need to go Atlanta's way. It needs to win the turnover battle and notch a 65 percent red zone scoring percentage. The Falcons have scored on eight consecutive trips inside the 20-yard line, which has contributed to scoring 68 points in the past two games. Scoring as much as possible while limiting Cincinnati's opportunities will be the goal due to Atlanta's depleted defense.

Super Bowl Meter

HA!

Game Prediction

Falcons 34, Bengals 27. Over the past two weeks the Falcons have averaged 424.5 yards and 34 points. Both of these teams are in the bottom 10 in yards allowed, positioning this game for yet another shootout. This time, the Atlanta defense makes a few more plays than it did in the loss to the Saints and holds serve at home.

Philadelphia Eagles at Tennessee Titans
Sunday, 1 p.m. (ET)

From the Eagles' side (by Sheil Kapadia)
What I'm Watching

Let's go with the obvious answer: Carson Wentz. The most encouraging aspect of Wentz's return in Week 3 was that he looked mobile and elusive coming off of the left knee injury. Maybe he's not 100 percent back, but he was still able to escape pressure and extend plays. Having said that, Wentz was far from perfect. He turned the ball over twice, took five sacks and was somewhat inconsistent with his ball placement. Accuracy and decision-making will be what Doug Pederson is focusing on with Wentz in his second game back.

The Eagles Win If ...

They can find a way to create some explosive plays. The offense has produced just seven plays of 20-plus yards, which ranked tied for 26th entering Week 4. Wentz is a quarterback who likes to push the ball downfield, and even though his supporting cast is not at 100 percent, expect him to be aggressive in this game. Of course, those passes require adequate protection, and the Eagles will have to be prepared for the different blitzes and looks that the Titans will throw at them.

Super Bowl Meter

The Eagles have not looked their best so far, but the goal for the early part of the season was survival. Pederson wants this group to be peaking and getting healthy down the stretch. The NFC East looks as terrible as expected, and the Eagles are in the driver's seat in the division. At 2-1, they should feel good about where they're at. A return to the Super Bowl is still a realistic goal.

Game Prediction

The Titans don't have a lot of firepower on offense, but the Eagles' defense has had issues on the road. I expect Wentz to continue to shake off the rust and move the ball effectively against Tennessee. One wild card is special teams. The Titans have an edge on the Eagles in that area. If Tennessee can get a big play on special teams, it can pull off the upset. But I think the Eagles do enough to escape with the victory.

From the Titans' side (by Travis Haney)
What I'm Watching

When I told Titans OC Matt LaFleur this week that I hadn't seen bookend tackles Taylor Lewan and Jack Conklin in a game at the same time, he shot me a look.

"Me, neither," the first-year play-caller said.

Fair enough.

Conklin, following knee surgery, is expected to make his 2018 debut against the Eagles. The return of the former first-rounder should allow the Titans' run game, which has been all over the place due to injuries, to take shape. Derrick Henry and Dion Lewis are both admittedly frustrated — and they're both capable of something more than what they've shown (3.3 yards per carry on 85 rushes). Tennessee will again shoot for 30-something rush attempts in an effort to shorten the game. If the team winds up with over four yards a carry, including Marcus Mariota's dynamic running ability, the Titans have a legit shot for the mild upset. Conklin's return cannot be underscored enough in that bid.

The Titans Win If ...

They again win the turnover margin. It's a layup barometer, I know, but the Titans have gone the past two weeks without a giveaway. If they can force a couple of Carson Wentz mistakes, they'll again hang around and make this a four-quarter game. The more field goals, the more the odds go up for Tennessee.

Super Bowl Meter

I mean, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Can Mariota at least shed the Michael Jackson-looking half-glove he's sporting before we start talking Lombardi? (Looking way, way ahead, though: If the Titans did somehow win it all, maybe fans could wear those gloves to help scale greased-up light poles.)

Game Prediction

Titans 20, Eagles 13. Homer pick alert! The Titans have still got some mojo from winning shorthanded, and they're getting healthier. Bottom line: Wentz is due a stinker on his way back to form, and Tennessee's defense — especially the secondary — will present a much more formidable challenge than Indy's. A short field for the Titans is the difference in another one-score game for Tennessee. If this meeting were in a month, I'd feel very differently, but the Titans are catching the World Champs at a good time, still early in Wentz's comeback — and with a theoretically gimpy set of skill players.

Baltimore Ravens at Pittsburgh Steelers
Sunday, 8:20 p.m. (ET)

From the Ravens' side (by Jeff Zrebiec)
What I'm Watching

The Ravens have the league's top-ranked defense through three weeks, but we'll learn a lot more about the group Sunday night. The spotlight will be on first-year Ravens defensive coordinator Don "Wink" Martindale to devise a plan to slow down the Steelers' prolific offense. The Ravens have been taken apart by Ben Roethlisberger in recent meetings, especially late in games. Will Martindale do what his predecessor, Dean Pees, seemed reluctant to do at times and have his top cornerback, Marlon Humphrey, shadow Antonio Brown? Will the Ravens stay aggressive and constantly apply heat to Roethlisberger even if it leaves them vulnerable on the back end? The Steelers have continually attacked the Ravens linebackers and safeties in coverage, so it will be interesting to see whether middle linebacker C.J. Mosley, who is expected to try and play through a knee injury, will be able to hold up, because he'll be tested. The Ravens will also need their veteran safety tandem of Eric Weddle and Tony Jefferson to put together one of their best games.

The Ravens Win If ...

They can control the clock and establish a running game. The Ravens have to keep Roethlisberger and the explosive Steelers offense off the field as much as possible. To do that, they'll need their running game to be a whole lot more effective than it's been through three weeks. The Ravens rank 26th in the NFL in rushing yards per game (86.7) and 31st in yards per carry (3.1). Alex Collins hasn't rushed for 70 yards in a game yet this season. As long as the Ravens' offensive line holds up, quarterback Joe Flacco should have some success throwing downfield against a Steelers' defense that has given up some big plays. However, the Ravens are most dangerous offensively when they establish the run and everything works off of that. Having Flacco throw the ball 40-plus times has not been a great recipe. The Ravens badly need their running game to set the tone Sunday night.

Super Bowl Meter

Still pretty low. The Ravens have long been a very good team at home, so it's going to take more than two decisive victories at M&T Bank Stadium for them to be revealed as legitimate postseason contenders. At some point, they are going to have to rattle off a couple of quality wins on the road, which they've struggled to do since their Super Bowl season in 2012. If they are able to go into hostile Heinz Field and come out with a win against their biggest rival, that would get the meter moving upward a bit. But this team still has a ton to prove.

Game Prediction

Steelers, 31-23. The Ravens' offense is much improved, but it's still not equipped to win a shootout against the high-powered Steelers on the road. Seventeen of the past 23 meetings between these teams have been one-possession games and this one will probably be relatively close as well. The Ravens historically play well in Pittsburgh and they certainly aren't fazed by the opponent or the setting. However, the Steelers just have too many offensive weapons for the Ravens to handle.

From the Steelers' side (by Mark Kaboly)
What I'm Watching

Antonio Brown finally having one of those Antonio Brown-like games could be one thing to watch. Can Ben Roethlisberger continue his streak of 300-yard games to four consecutive is another. Will the Steelers be able to be gap-sound and stop the stretch run plays of Alex Collins — something they have had trouble with before? But the most interesting aspect of this game is whether this rivalry can generate the no-

nonsense, hard-hitting brand of football that it has provided the fans on both sides for years. Rule changes and extra emphasis on existing rules have turned the first three weeks of the season in a flag fest where players are afraid to hit anybody too hard in fear of repercussions. Can the old days of Joey Porter stomping onto the Ravens' bus locker for Ray Lewis after the game be revived?

The Steelers Win If ...

They limit the splash plays. It might sound like a broken record but the main issue with the Steelers has been that they give up chunk plays at an alarming level. Even with Joe Haden back from injury last week, Ryan Fitzpatrick was able to hit the in-shambles secondary with big play after big play. Joe Flacco has always been known, at least in Pittsburgh, as being a chuck-it-down-the-field-and-see-what-happens quarterback. In the past, pass interference calls were the Steelers downfall. With the Ravens having a much better wide receiving crew on hand compared to the past couple seasons make them scary, especially with former first-round cornerback Artie Burns a mess and splitting time with Coty Sensabaugh.

Super Bowl Meter

Skeptical. Even though they got their first win of the season last week against a good Bucs team on the road, the questions surrounding their defense have prevented nearly everybody from truly believing this currently constructed Steelers defense can do anything in the playoffs. The feeling is good that they can outscore any team in any game but even the best offenses have a bad week or two. Unless they clean up the other side of the ball, this isn't a Super Bowl team.

Game Prediction

Steelers 34-33. After watching the Steelers' defense over the past eight quarters — 71 points and 904 yards allowed — I will quote William Somerset played by the great Morgan Freeman from the movie Seven: "If John Doe's head splits open and a UFO should fly out, I want you to have expected it." If there are 200 points scored in this game ... if Ben Roethlisberger throws for 600 yards ... if Alex Collins rushes for 350 yards ... I want you to have expected it.

Kansas City Chiefs at Denver Broncos
Monday, 8:15 p.m. (ET)

From the Chiefs' side (by Nate Taylor)

What I'm Watching

The football world is eager to watch Patrick Mahomes on the grand Monday Night Football stage. That's understandable, but I'll also be watching running back Kareem Hunt and the Chiefs' offensive line. Hunt has been serviceable in the Chiefs' 3-0 start, but this game figures to an important one for him. The Broncos' front seven is impressive and the Chiefs will likely need to run the ball well to have success. The Chiefs have beaten opponents with Mahomes' rare gifts and coach Andy Reid's brilliant play design. The Broncos will prepare for such factors, which should give Hunt his opportunities to have a strong performance. If Hunt fails to produce against the Broncos, the Chiefs could suffer their first loss.

The Chiefs Win If ...

The defense has a takeaway or two. The Chiefs' defense has been strong in the first quarter, which has helped the offense operate with freedom to push the ball downfield. An issue, though, is that the Chiefs haven't created a big advantage in turnover differential. Safety Ron Parker's interception in the season opener is the unit's only takeaway. If the defense can't capitalize on a Broncos offense that has been sloppy with the ball, then the Chiefs will be in a tight battle. Collecting turnovers on the road can demoralize the Broncos and give momentum to the Chiefs' powerful offense.

Super Bowl Meter

The Chiefs have so much firepower that other teams in the AFC are starting to sweat profusely. A win Monday night to stay undefeated will put the Chiefs as the clear frontrunner for the Super Bowl in the weakened conference.

Game Prediction

Chiefs 24, Broncos 20. The Broncos should make this a very intriguing game in the fourth quarter. Coach Vance Joseph should do everything possible to keep the game close and to make the Chiefs play from behind for the first time this season. Mahomes can be electric, but I wouldn't expect another four-touchdown performance. The Chiefs' biggest advantage is tight end Travis Kelce. If Mahomes can find Kelce in the middle of the field often, the Chiefs should create enough successful plays to win the game late.

From the Broncos' side (by Nicki Jhabvala)

What I'm Watching

For the last three seasons the Broncos' defense has ranked first, first and fourth against the pass. This year, after trading away Aqib Talib in the offseason, the Broncos rank 22nd in passing defense (262.7 yards allowed per game). After the loss at Baltimore in Week 3, cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said the Broncos "didn't play up to standard" and that "we gotta figure out a way to try to confuse some quarterbacks."

"We're making it too easy for them," he said. "They already know where to throw the ball, so we got to confuse them."

Compounding the issue is the health of veterans Tramaine Brock and Adam Jones. Both are dealing with thigh injuries and both missed last week's game, leaving the Broncos to rely on rookie Isaac Yiadom at the third corner spot.

Can the Broncos fix their defensive problems against the most prolific quarterback and offense in the league on Monday Night Football? It's a tall task, but a necessary one if the Broncos are going to pull out a victory against their AFC West rivals.

The Broncos Win If ...

They minimize their penalties and score in bunches. The Broncos had 13 penalties for 120 yards at Baltimore. Many players said after that they beat themselves before the Ravens could. Despite their mistakes, the Broncos managed to stay within two scores of the Ravens.

But 14 points won't cut it against the Chiefs. Consider: The last three teams to play Kansas City averaged 30.7 points per game — and they all lost. The Broncos haven't scored at least 30 points since Week 2 of last year, when they put up 42 on the Cowboys.

The Chiefs' league-worst defense (474 net yards) and second-to-worst pass defense (362.7 yards) should open up opportunities for Case Keenum and his receivers to gain ground. They'll have to do that to get points on the board early and often.

Super Bowl Meter

If the Broncos turn in a dud like the one they left in Baltimore, their Super Bowl meter may go into hibernation. Through three games, the Broncos are 2-1, but they eked out their first two wins with fourth-quarter comebacks and imploded in their lone road game.

For this team to move forward, the offense has to reduce the turnovers (five interceptions for Keenum so far) and the defense has to come up with a better coverage plan to work in conjunction with its pass rush.

"We always want to be an attack football team here," Harris Jr. said. "That's our motto here. It's been like that ever since I've been here. That's always what we've done: been in attack mode, not sitting back, being aggressive and giving them different looks. That's what we've got to do. We've got to try to confuse them and give him something that he hasn't seen. Andy Reid's played against us a lot of times, so we've got to try to change it up and try to trick him a couple times."

Game Prediction

Chiefs 27, Broncos 17. The Broncos need an upset victory at home on Monday night against the Chiefs' electric offense. But I don't think they'll get one. The two wins the Broncos earned this year have been against Seattle, which ranks 27th in net yards, and Oakland, which is winless and ranks 28th in scoring.

Broncos Injury Report: CB Tramaine Brock doubtful for Monday's game vs. Kansas City

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

September 30, 2018

The Broncos may be shorthanded in the secondary on Monday, as cornerback Tramaine Brock (thigh) was listed as doubtful on the team's final injury report before Denver's game against Kansas City.

Brock did not participate in practice on Thursday or Friday and was limited on Saturday.

He exited in the first half of last Sunday's game against the Ravens with a groin injury.

The Broncos also listed safety Dymonte Thomas (abdomen), cornerback Adam Jones (thigh) and linebacker Brandon Marshall (knee) as questionable. All three players were limited during Saturday's practice.

Tight end Jake Butt (ACL) will also miss Monday's game, but he likely could be moved to injured reserve before kickoff to allow the Broncos to add a healthy player to their active roster.

Broncos place Jake Butt on IR, promote Brian Parker to active roster

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
September 30, 2018

The Broncos officially placed tight end Jake Butt on injured reserve and promoted tight end Brian Parker from the practice squad to the active roster on Saturday, the team announced.

Butt suffered a torn ACL in his left knee during Thursday's practice and is expected to miss the remainder of the 2018 season.

"I felt for Jake right away," Head Coach Vance Joseph said Friday. "He's worked so hard for the last two years to get himself back to this point. He was improving every day. He was making plays for us on Sundays. You can see the special ability this player had and the passion. This guy was the same guy every day — happy, fully engaged every day, a very smart football player. It's a shame that it ended that way on that kind of play, but his teammates also felt for him because he's worked so hard. But, he'll come back. He'll be fine."

Parker, who initially joined the Broncos in January, will take Butt's roster spot. He was signed to the team's practice squad after Denver cut its roster to 53 players in early September.

Parker caught three passes for 43 yards during preseason action.

Broncos place Jake Butt on IR, elevate Brian Parker

By Mike Florio

Pro Football Talk

September 30, 2018

The Broncos lost tight end Jake Butt to a torn ACL during practice this week. He has now officially been placed on injured reserve.

Butt's roster spot was taken by Brian Parker, a member of the team's practice squad who was promoted to the active roster.

Parker, also a tight end, appeared in nine regular-season games and two playoff games in 2015 with the Chiefs. He also spent a brief period of time on the Jets' active roster in 2016.

With Butt gone, tight end Matt LaCrosse is expected to have an expanded role.

Before new ad campaign, Nike almost dropped Kaepernick

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
September 30, 2018

The month began with Nike rolling out a major ad campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick. Before that, the company almost severed ties with him.

As explained by Julie Creswell, Kevin Draper, and Sapna Maheshwari of the New York Times, Nike debated severing ties with Kaepernick in the summer of 2017, and Nike “very nearly did.” Per the report, a “top communications executive” at Nike eventually made a persuasive case for keeping Kaepernick on the corporate roster of athlete endorsers. Kaepernick stayed there for a year, basically in mothballs.

Then came the 30th anniversary of the “Just Do It” campaign, and Nike decided to dust off its relationship with Kaepernick, and to take it to an unprecedented level.

In the end, Nike balanced the risk of alienating the NFL, for which Nike has been the exclusive apparel provider since 2012 and will be until at least 2028, against the “credibility the company would gain with the young, urban market it has long targeted.”

And that’s exactly the point that should have been widely made after the deal emerged. Nike isn’t doing “the right thing.” Nike is doing what it believes will be the profitable thing. Because Nike, as a publicly-traded company, has a fiduciary duty to its shareholders to make as much money as possible.

So far, it has worked. To the point where Kaepernick’s supporter and partner in protests has finally gotten an NFL contract, and the world somehow has kept spinning.