

Kansas City QB Patrick Mahomes is the AFC West's newest problem

By Ryan O'Halloran

Denver Post

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The AFC West has a problem, and he is only 23 years old and has four career starts.

Kansas City quarterback Patrick Mahomes arrives for Monday night's game against the Broncos as one of the league's best stories.

During a 3-0 start, he has ranked first in touchdown passes (13, an NFL record for games 1-3), passer rating (137.4) and completions of at least 25 yards (12).

The transition normally reserved for a young passer has been replaced by consecutive lights-out performances against the Los Angeles Chargers, Pittsburgh and San Francisco.

"He's throwing the (heck) out of the ball to everybody," Broncos linebacker Von Miller said. "He's definitely a handful and he's hot, extremely hot."

An extremely hot quarterback facing an extremely beleaguered secondary. Not a good matchup.

Mahomes debuted as a starter in last year's Week 17 win at the Broncos, and just a few months later, he is inviting comparisons to the league's all-time greats.

"People say he's a (Brett) Favre or a gunslinger, but this kid is just different," said ESPN analyst Louis Riddick. "I remember playing against Warren Moon, and he's a bit like him. Pat can throw the ball from so many angles, and he's got a confidence of forgetting the last play and moving onto the next play."

Perfect fit

The Chiefs moved up 17 spots (No. 27 to 10), costing them their 2018 first-round pick, on the opening night of the 2017 draft to select Mahomes. Before joining ESPN, Riddick worked the previous six years (2008-13) for the Philadelphia Eagles, who were coached and built by current Chiefs coach Andy Reid.

When the pick was announced, Riddick saw a natural Reid-Mahomes fit.

"Andy can teach the position as good as anybody who has ever taught it in terms of transferring information in the classroom from him to the player, walking through it on the practice field, having them execute it 11-on-11 and then putting him in position on game day," Riddick said.

Veteran Alex Smith remained the Chiefs' unquestioned starter after Mahomes' arrival. For all of last season, Mahomes observed how Smith worked and led Kansas City to a division title.

"He helped me a ton by just being himself," Mahomes said. "He came in every single day and worked hard and I watched the blueprint he had of what he needed to do during the week to be successful. I built my own blueprint, taking stuff he did and things I liked."

Said Reid: "For a young player to be in a (quarterback) room like that and for Alex to not build a wall between them, it was priceless for the kid. Alex wasn't asked to teach him anything, but he allowed (Mahomes) to be there for his whole routine. He left his door open."

In 1999, Reid drafted Donovan McNabb in Philadelphia but didn't start him until the team's 10th game. That Eagles team, though, was rebuilding.

"Who knows what the (right) answer is?" Reid said of having a first-round quarterback watch as a rookie. "(Eagles coach) Doug (Pederson) played (Carson) Wentz (right away), and he was pretty good."

Things worked out for Smith and Mahomes. Smith was traded to Washington in March and signed a four-year, \$94 million extension.

The Chiefs used the available money by signing Los Angeles Rams receiver Sammy Watkins to join receiver Tyreek Hill, tight end Travis Kelce and reigning league rushing champion Kareem Hunt to give Mahomes a supreme cast of weapons.

Kelce has 16 catches and Watkins and Hill 14 receptions apiece, and Mahomes is completing 66.7 percent of his passes.

"It's not just Patrick Mahomes. It's their whole entire offense," Broncos cornerback Chris Harris said.

Said Reid: "He's not trying to be the hero. That's not his deal. He's trying to play the position within the offense and do his thing. And if things don't work out, he moves around and tries to get it in the guys' hands."

Concerns erased

The outside concerns about Mahomes weren't about his arm strength (awesome), pocket awareness (terrific) and leadership skills (highly regarded). It revolved around Texas Tech's "Air Raid" offense. Would Mahomes be able to make the transition? He was exclusively in the shotgun offense with short play calls and no huddles.

Reid saw no issue, pointing to Mahomes' 1,349 college pass attempts.

"One thing I mentioned before Pat came here is Alex came from the spread thing," said Reid, referring to Smith's career at Utah playing for coach Urban Meyer. "The positive is guys are throwing the football. You're not bringing in a guy who was running the wishbone. (The spread) fits into the NFL as far as throwing the football. They're not the same routes, (but) I've always looked at it as a positive."

The Chiefs' offense is full of wrinkles in terms of presnap movement and route concepts. Mahomes was under center for only nine snaps (not including kneel-downs) last week against the 49ers, but the Chiefs run all kinds of plays from the shotgun and pistol formations, including jet sweeps and bubble screens.

"I don't know if it's necessarily my favorite plays from Tech, but (Reid) has an understanding of what I like in his offense," Mahomes said. "There haven't been new plays, but definitely plays he likes and I like and we're on the same page about."

Riddick agreed and said: “There is some of that when they’ll go empty (backfield) and basically run five verticals — they streak down the field, and Pat picks the one that’s open. They’ll do a little bit where it looks like you’re watching Baylor vs. Oklahoma State, but this is a lot more multiple than any Big 12 offense has been in terms of the running game and using heavy personnel. You don’t see any fullbacks playing in the Big 12.”

Mahomes knows how to extend the play but does so to throw, not run. Against the 49ers, he scrambled for 7.38 seconds before throwing a touchdown to receiver Chris Conley. And Mahomes has the arm to make any throw.

“He’s fearless,” Joseph said. “He takes chances, but it’s aggressive chances and it’s worked out for him. He’s a young guy that’s playing at a high level and playing like a veteran.”

How can the Broncos slow down Mahomes? It begins with making sure Hunt doesn’t get going.

“It has to start up front,” Riddick said. “You never want to be gutted right up in the middle, and if Kareem Hunt gets going, just forget it. If you can stuff Kareem on the first couple of runs, it plays on a play-caller’s psyche because they’ll start throwing it. The only thing to neutralize (the Chiefs) is make them one-dimensional, and Von and (Bradley) Chubb have to play their best game of the year.”

Mahomes is only getting started, but he and Reid have already served notice that their partnership will be one of consistent productivity.

“He’s let Pat still be Pat while teaching him some of the important things he needs to have to play quarterback and it’s just taken off,” Riddick said. “When players feel that kind of love and support and sponsorship from the head coach ... they’ve got it going on.

“Good luck to the rest of the league.”

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

By Kyle Fredrickson

Denver Post

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GAME PLAN

WHEN THE CHIEFS RUN

Chiefs rookie sensation Kareem Hunt was crowned NFL rushing champion last season (1,327 yards) but is off to a cool start in Year 2 with just 168 yards on the ground through three games. Meanwhile, Denver's run-stopping ability has proven to be the strength of its defense by limiting Seattle, Oakland and Baltimore to a combined 77-yard rushing average. Hunt is bound to explode for huge gains at some point moving forward, but Denver's defense has done enough to inspire confidence Monday night. Edge: Broncos.

WHEN THE CHIEFS PASS

No NFL quarterback has been more electric in the early season than Mahomes, in his first year as the Chiefs' full-time starter, with an NFL three-game-record 13 touchdowns passing. Tight end Travis Kelce leads the team in catches (16), and there is great speed outside, featuring wide receivers Tyreek Hill and Sammy Watkins. The Broncos will probably rely on rookie cornerback Isaac Yiadom at times as veterans Adam Jones and Tramaine Brock continue to recover from injury. This is a most difficult test for Denver. Edge: Chiefs.

WHEN THE BRONCOS RUN

Rookie Phillip Lindsay was on his way to another breakout performance at Baltimore when a flurry of punches for the football led to an ejection. He's back Monday night alongside fellow first-year running back Royce Freeman. Those two help combine for the NFL's No. 3-ranked rushing attack (144.7 yards per game). The Chiefs' rush D hasn't been tested much, with opponents forced to throw to combat their offensive production. But San Francisco's by-committee approach resulted in 178 yards on the ground against Kansas City last week. Edge: Broncos.

WHEN THE BRONCOS PASS

Quarterback Case Keenum has teetered on average through his Broncos introduction with three touchdowns passing and five interceptions. The loss of tight end Jake Butt (ACL tear) strips Keenum of a quality target. But should any game provide Keenum a platform to exceed his current play, the Chiefs matchup appears a prime opportunity. Kansas City has allowed a league-worst 474 yards per game through the air and has just one interception. The Broncos have elite talent at wide receiver. They must prove it Monday. Edge: Broncos.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Broncos' decision to add punter Colby Wadman to the practice squad tells you everything you need to know about how well Marquette King has performed. Denver is also unsettled returning punts, with Adam Jones listed as questionable. The Chiefs have no such problems. Punter Dustin Colquitt leads the league with a 49-yard net average. And Tyreek Hill already has one punt return for a touchdown. The Broncos have strength on field goals with Brandon McManus a perfect 4-for-4. But the Chiefs are truly elite on special teams. Edge: Chiefs.

THREE THINGS TO WATCH

1. Third downs. For all the flack surrounding the Chiefs' defense, they have been ultra-successful getting off the field on third downs with a stop rate of 25.8 percent that leads the NFL. Quarterback Case Keenum and the Broncos have found success converting those plays 42.9 percent of the time, good for a top-10 ranking. Denver must keep pace with Kansas City for any chance at victory, and sustaining drives on critical downs could prove the difference.

2. Press coverage. The first step in fixing Denver's leaky pass defense is an emphasis on press coverage, which wouldn't allow Chiefs receivers ample space in the quick passing game — which has so far shredded the "No Fly Zone." An extra dose of aggressiveness alone won't stop K.C. through the air with an on-paper talent gap between teams. But the Broncos must show a fearlessness to compete.

3. Tight end targets. Denver moves on without Butt at tight end with options to replace his receiving production. Jeff Heurman, the veteran of the group, was targeted eight times through three games. But don't be surprised if Matt LaCosse, a third-year pro who was undrafted from Illinois, steps into a more prominent pass-catching role. LaCosse scored two preseason touchdowns.

INJURY REPORT

Broncos: Questionable (three) — LB Brandon Marshall (knee), CB Adam Jones (thigh) and safety Dymonte Thomas (abdomen). Doubtful (one) — CB Tramaine Brock (thigh). Out (one) — TE Jake Butt (knee).

Chiefs: Doubtful (one) — S Eric Berry (heel).

STAFF PREDICTIONS

Mark Kizsla: Broncos 24, Chiefs 23

Best thing Denver has going for it? Desperation. If coach Vance Joseph can't lead his men to victory here, then when?

Record: 3-0

Ryan O'Halloran: Chiefs 42, Broncos 39

Spent all week trying to figure out a way the Broncos could win a shootout against Kansas City. Gave up around Thursday night.

Record: 2-1

Kyle Fredrickson: Chiefs 49, Broncos 31

The Patrick Mahomes star will shine brightest against vulnerable secondaries. Add Denver to his list of those conquered.

Record: 2-1

Chubbtown: A legacy of family strength for Broncos' Bradley Chubb

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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Bradley Chubb, a proficient pass-rush prospect, was the fifth pick overall in the April draft by the Denver Broncos.

But there's more, a lot more, to Chubb, whose name alone is a slice of history.

Bradley's father, Aaron, understands his son is expected to be an impact player. But Aaron, despite his own football career at the University of Georgia, didn't set out to raise a football player with a sizable future.

No, he and his wife, Stacey, wanted to raise "the kind of person who could be anything he wants to be, and be successful at it, football or not. We wanted to send our boys into the world ready to treat people how they're supposed to be treated."

At a time when many NFL players are focusing on social justice through peaceful protest, Aaron's desire for his sons to honor their history is about their future.

And why the story of Chubbtown, Georgia, matters.

It matters because of the history and the people. How they all fit together affects the present and the future. It matters to Aaron that in a time of slavery, his ancestors still found a way to carve out a life when so many others like them were forced to live in servitude.

"With all that's going on in the world, with all of the issues we face, it's important to know our family history for our boys," Aaron said. "Because I think it's just behind everything we do, how you treat people, how you live. It was important for us to share -- the history, where we came from, what it means and how we can keep with it."

A place deep in history

What remains of Chubbtown is a patch of ground, rich in heritage for all who carry its name. It's tucked just south of Rome, Georgia, where Cedartown Road and Chubbtown Road intersect just inside the Georgia-Alabama line.

The Chubb Chapel United Methodist Church remains, as well as a cemetery. It dates back to the time of slavery but was a community of free black men and women who carried the same name, who lived a largely self-sufficient existence.

Several documents and historical accounts say the rest of what was Chubbtown washed away in a flood in 1916. It was founded by John Henry Chubb, with his wife and eight sons, who came from North Carolina somewhere between 1850 and the end of the Civil War.

They were not slaves. The family founded the community, whose place was so unique the Chubb descendants say Union Gen. William T. Sherman left it untouched in his March to the Sea. During the campaign, in late 1864, Sherman and roughly 60,000 Union soldiers set fire to many buildings along the way. Sherman wrote that the objective was to “make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war.”

The Chubbs took care of themselves, farming the land and making most of their household goods. They also traded with whites in nearby communities. At its peak, Aaron said, Chubbtown’s businesses included a post office, sawmill, blacksmith and meeting hall.

“I remember going a lot, and that my dad [Henry] -- he lived around the area around Cedartown -- let me know why it was important for us,” said Cleveland Browns running back Nick Chubb, who is Bradley’s second cousin. “All of my uncles, those were the people who let you know what it meant.

“It’s the heritage of my last name, that pride you feel for something like that. The people founded the town in the hard times they lived in, how hard they worked, how they persevered through the adversity we might not even be able to really comprehend sometimes, how they just dealt with all the obstacles that were thrown at them.”

That doesn’t mean Aaron’s sons, as they discovered they were their own people, immediately took to the lessons.

Bradley and his older brother, Brandon, weren’t yet teenagers when Aaron began to turn the pages on the family’s story. But to Aaron, it was “just so important,” so he kept revealing the pieces. To Bradley, it sounded like something between fable and myth.

“It was just one of those stories your parents told you about how it was when they were young or something. ... I didn’t believe him,” Bradley Chubb said with a laugh. “I didn’t. That was maybe before sixth grade or right about then. But when I was in eighth grade, he took us, and it really kind of sunk in on that trip.”

The message matters

The lessons of hard work and the ability to respond to what life has in store finally sunk in. And whether Brandon, who is a linebacker for the Detroit Lions, or Bradley found themselves in a corner office, on an assembly line or in an NFL locker room -- “whatever they choose to do,” Stacey said -- those traits will always matter.

“They were self-sufficient. That had to be the kind of hard work most people don’t have to deal with,” Bradley said. “That’s where I feel like I can look back and see where hard work comes from in our family, I really feel that way. Nick and I have talked about it, how our parents, and their parents, and their parents, could just lean on how much people had done before them and how it got passed along.”

When the Broncos did the customary vetting of the 20-somethings on their draft board, Bradley’s football potential leaped off the game video. Broncos coach Vance Joseph called him “a rare player.” But in discussions with Bradley, and those who knew him, there was something else.

Broncos president of football operations/general manager John Elway has said it's often not what's on the film that makes the difference in finding a player who reaches his potential or a player whose talent becomes little more than a starting point to an unfulfilled journey.

"Just in his demeanor, how he plays, how people said he interacted with his teammates, how he practiced, how he handled school," Elway said. "You see how he does things is important to him. That comes from his family. You see it."

Aaron said watching his sons go through the NFL draft experience was a lot to take in. And like most parents, he said, he and his wife hope they've done enough to prepare their children for what's to come.

But that history can help because it still matters.

"Did he believe us about all this at first? Of course not. You know how kids are -- they don't believe you, Daddy don't know anything, you know?" Aaron said. "But it is quite a story. But once he saw it, both [Bradley and Brandon] knew immediately what we were talking about, and [what] I saw was an appreciation for what we've been telling them, what people had done, their elders had done, before them. They can carry that around always ... maybe they don't always need it or want it, but they always have it with them.

"You learn from people. You learn from life. And all of us in our family have learned from that place."

How to bet Kansas City Chiefs at Denver Broncos

By STAFF

ESPN

Oct. 1, 2018

Where does the betting value lie in Monday's prime-time matchup? Warren Sharp and Preston Johnson provide their picks to help you place your bets.

Note: All odds courtesy of the Westgate Las Vegas SuperBook as of Sunday afternoon.

Kansas City Chiefs (-4) at Denver Broncos

Total: 55

PickCenter public consensus pick: 61 percent Kansas City

Sharp's take: The Chiefs enter hostile territory with the No. 1 offense and No. 32 defense. However, they've played a very easy schedule of opposing defenses and a very difficult schedule of opposing offenses. The Broncos offense and defense is right in the middle of the pack, so the Chiefs offense shouldn't look quite as strong. But they should have the edge in the passing game, as the Broncos are much better defending the run (No. 5) as compared to the pass (No. 19).

Every team the Chiefs have faced has trailed early. Most of them rally late to make the final score respectable. But those teams had solid quarterbacks in Philip Rivers, Ben Roethlisberger and Jimmy Garoppolo. It will be much more difficult to envision Case Keenum rallying the Broncos in the second half. As such, the Broncos likely will start off the game with their run-heavy offense against the Chiefs' No. 30 run defense. If that strategy is successful, I envision the Broncos having a great chance. But if the Chiefs force Keenum to beat them and in turn, the Chiefs passing offense has success against a weaker Broncos secondary, expect the Chiefs to have a two-score halftime lead.

ATS Pick: Pass

Johnson's take: This game presented one of my bigger edges this week on the NFL card. My personal projection is Chiefs -2.2, so the Broncos side at +5 was one I jumped on. We know that Kansas City has been the early-season darling, but in many cases this type of start can offer us opportunities in a market that tends to overreact week-to-week.

Patrick Mahomes in Mile High Stadium is going to be his toughest test yet. I wasn't eager to jump in and back the banged-up 49ers squad in Kansas City last week despite the numbers telling me to, but this is one we shouldn't pass up. I still think there is plenty of value to warrant a play on the Broncos at the current spread of +4. There will be an extra 2.5 percent of the time a +4 pushes in this instance versus a winning ticket if one were holding +4.5 or +5. I would recommend decreasing your standard bet size in this case and take the Broncos for roughly 75 percent or 0.75x at +4 if you are unable to find a +4.5 in the current market.

ATS Pick: Broncos +4

Broncos' defensive line embraces a Bill Kollar hallmark: the batted pass

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

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The Broncos' opportunities to make up for lost time were fading fast. The fourth quarter had just begun at Baltimore and the Broncos, already nine penalties deep, trailed by two scores as the Ravens lined up in their own territory.

Joe Flacco scanned the defense and fielded the snap, signaling Derek Wolfe to begin his rush. After lining up between Baltimore's right guard and right tackle, Wolfe quickly moved inside, only to be met by Ravens center Matt Skura.

So Wolfe did what he was taught and, as soon as Flacco took his hand off the ball, he raised his arms to swat the pass and force Baltimore into a third down. As the ball bounced to the ground, Wolfe left one hand raised to claim credit.

"If you think about it, it's just as good as a sack," Wolfe said. "You stop the play. You shut down the whole pass play. That's essentially what a sack is — you stop them from throwing the ball."

Although they went for naught in a Broncos loss marred by penalties and mistakes, Wolfe was credited with two batted passes against the Ravens. Adam Gotsis had one too, to bring his total on the season to three.

Through the first three weeks of the season, the Broncos' line ranked second behind Cincinnati, a feat that is critical to Denver's defense but also a hallmark of Bill Kollar's 28 years of teaching in the NFL.

Each day in practice, the line runs through drills specifically to hone knocking down passes. Those that succeed in games are highly rewarded because if sacks are priced at the value of gold, batted passes are more like platinum for the Broncos' linemen.

And the thinking has been ingrained in his linemen.

"This is specifically a Kollar thing because I can honestly say this is my fourth team and none of my other teams practiced getting your hand up," defensive end Shelby Harris said. "And if we did (bat a pass), it was like, 'Oh, good job.' But here, they care about sacks and batted balls."

The first three quarterbacks the Broncos faced this year — Russell Wilson, Derek Carr and Flacco — have averaged 2.78, 2.49 and 2.72 seconds to throw, respectively, according to Sportradar (measurements differ by outlet).

Monday night, the Broncos face Kansas City's Patrick Mahomes, who has averaged 2.8 seconds to throw, but has been sacked only four times and has thrown more than four touchdown passes a game.

The pass rush will be critical in trying to contain and rattle Mahomes, but should the Broncos be stymied by Kansas City's offensive line, they know the next-best option.

"Especially nowadays, the ball is coming out so fast and it's going out to the sides on quick slants or stuff," Gotsis said. "Instead of us just standing there, get your hands up and you might be able to bat one of them down or tip it and someone catches it and it's a big play."

Last season, as the Broncos' first year under head coach Vance Joseph took a nosedive after a promising start, Gotsis and Harris still combined for seven batted balls.

The year prior, in Gary Kubiak's final season as head coach, defensive end Jared Crick tallied five to tie for fourth in the league.

And during the Broncos' Super Bowl run, which was Kollar's first year as their defensive line coach, Malik Jackson had seven, tied for the second-most in the league that year and in Broncos history, behind Alfred Williams' 11 in 1996. The Broncos' line, collectively, batted down 11 passes in 2015.

Jackson, meanwhile, hasn't recorded more than four in any of his other five NFL seasons.

But to really appreciate the Kollar effect, you have to go back further.

Go back to 1997, when the Atlanta Falcons' defensive line under Kollar totaled 21 batted balls. Atlanta also had 55 sacks that year to rank second in the league.

Go back to 2003, when the then St. Louis Rams' defensive line under Kollar totaled 15.

Go back to 2008, when the Buffalo Bills' defensive line under Kollar had 25 batted passes.

And then, of course, go back to Kollar's stint in Houston from 2009-14, his last NFL stop before arriving in Denver. J.J. Watt had 10 batted passes to go with 20.5 sacks in 2014 — just two years after recording an NFL record 16 of his line's 30 passes defensed.

"That year he had 18," Kollar clarified. "Two of them didn't count because if you bat a pass but the receiver catches it, it doesn't count. But he had a hell of a knack for it."

Since 1994, when pass breakups for defensive linemen were tracked by STATS LLC, Kollar's defensive lines have averaged 13.75 per season. At its current clip, the Broncos' line is on pace for nearly 27 this year.

"(Kollar) is known for that," defensive coordinator Joe Woods said. "Obviously, if you rush the passer and you can't get there, we want to get our hands up in the throwing lanes. He does a great job of teaching those guys that."

But like a blocked shot in basketball, batted passes at the line of scrimmage require a small but perfect storm — good timing, quick reflexes, keen awareness and a bit of luck.

"You have to be in the right place at the right time," Wolfe said. "A lot of times it can hurt you because you'll get a rush started. What I do is wait for (the quarterback) to take his hand off the ball. When he

takes his hand off the ball, that's when he throws it. 'OK, I'm going to stop my rush and try to bat the ball.' Well, sometimes they'll pull it because they see that you're trying to bat it and then somebody else goes and gets the sack."

It happened to Wolfe in Week 2 against the Raiders. On a rush on first down, Wolfe had Raiders right guard Gabe Jackson beat, but when Carr looked to throw, he saw Wolfe raise his hand to try to swat the pass. So he pulled the ball back down, allowing Von Miller another fraction of a second to move in for the sack.

Wolfe didn't get his, but the play was shut down. Mission accomplished.

"Quarterbacks hate that, because a lot of times it's when a guy is wide open," Wolfe said. "There will be a guy wide open and you bat the ball and they'll be like, 'Damn!' They really hate that."

Sometimes defensive backs do too. Like receivers who clamor for extra touches on offense, defensive backs bristle at negated opportunities for interceptions. And the Broncos' DBs aren't afraid to let their linemen know.

"You don't know how many times I've heard, 'Oh, that was going to be an interception,' " Harris said. "Yeah, right."

But in the meeting rooms and on the practice field, the voice the linemen hear the most is Kollar's baritone, yelling at them to get their hands up. And they know why.

"(Because) if you can't get home," Harris said, "the next-best option is to knock the ball down."

Broncos' trouble at tight end continues into third year

By Arnie Stapleton

Associated Press

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The Denver Broncos have spent years trying to solve their tight end troubles.

Their inadequate coverage of tight ends and inability to get much production from their own are two of the biggest reasons they've fallen so far from their Super Bowl perch and have been looking up at the Kansas City Chiefs in the AFC West since 2016.

Both problems appeared to be fixed this season thanks to an influx of talent on defense and a return to health of Jake Butt, who missed his rookie season last year after tearing up his right knee in his final game at Michigan.

Yet, Butt's season is over after he tore his left ACL at a walkthrough practice Thursday and the Broncos haven't shown much progress in throttling opposing tight ends, either.

In their opener, the Broncos allowed Seattle's Will Dissly to become the first tight end in league history to top 100 yards receiving and score a touchdown in his NFL debut, one that included a 66-yard rumble featuring four missed tackles.

Butt's third ACL tear was the crushing blow, coming four days before the Broncos (2-1) host the Chiefs (3-0) on Monday night .

"I felt for Jake right away," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said. "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."

The Broncos promoted third-year tight end Brian Parker from their practice squad Saturday when Butt joined rookie Troy Fumagalli on IR.

That means the Broncos' tight end group now consists of two undrafted players in Parker and Matt LaCosse and 2015 third-round draft pick Jeff Heuerman, who has just 23 career catches and two touchdowns.

"He's been a good pass-catcher for us," Joseph said. "He's always been a pretty good pass-catcher. 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."

Offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave said, "We're all just broken up about it."

His loss is a big blow to the Broncos' special teams, too.

"It's a huge loss," special teams coordinator Tom McMahon said. "He's a great pro, he loves football. I love Jake. This football team loves Jake. How he acts as a man, if my boys can be that guy 10 years from now, I'll be a very proud dad."

Covering tight ends has been Denver's Achilles heel for two years.

It was a big reason they didn't make the playoffs in 2016 and last year they allowed the third-fewest yards (3,395) in the NFL, but tight ends accounted for 1,023 of those yards — third-most in the league.

After focusing on fixing that all offseason, Dissly's debut was a downer for the Broncos, who also allowed four catches for 49 yards to Oakland tight end Jared Cook the following week and Ravens rookie tight end Mark Andrews' 12-yard TD catch last week.

Up next is Chiefs star tight end Travis Kelce, who had a 133-yard game against the Broncos last year.

"He's just a guy that is hard to put a linebacker on because of his ability," defensive coordinator Joe Woods said. "He has the size to match up with safeties. He's really like a wide receiver and tight end. He's definitely a difficult matchup, but I have a lot of confidence in the guys we have — Justin Simmons and our whole safety crew.

"I think we have a chance to go matchup at times against him and win our fair share."

Paul Klee: Case of the Mondays: How the Broncos can party like the Rockies

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
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For once, after a great while, the adoring eyes of Colorado are not on the Broncos.

They are on "big-game pitcher" German Marquez, as Trevor Story put it in a confident clubhouse on Sunday. They are on Charlie Blackmon's cycle, Nolan Arenado's glove (and two-home run bat), on the sweet, sweet sound of "Beat L-A! Beat L-A!" echoing through Coors Field. They are on the 91-win Rockies and Game 163 at Dodger Stadium on Monday.

"Theodore Roosevelt said it best," manager Bud Black joked Sunday, waxing poetic and pulling our chains before they decide the National League West title. "You guys know it best from Teddy."

Has it been that long since the Broncos stepped aside and let someone else take center stage for more than one year in a row?

As members of the Avalanche watched the Rockies take batting practice on Saturday, two playoff teams joined at the cage, it was proof there's room enough in this robust sports state for more than one winner. The Broncos on Monday night are welcome to rejoin the party.

In no particular order, two things must happen for the Broncos to upset the Chiefs — weird as that sounds — and RSVP their intentions to attend the playoffs: Case Keenum must finally play like a \$36-million quarterback, and Mile High must summon its Monday night magic.

While all the hullabaloo of this AFC West showdown has zeroed in on shooting star Patrick Mahomes and the 3-0 Chiefs, it's the Broncos QB who must prove himself. To keep up with the high-scoring Chiefs in the division, Keenum must keep up with Mahomes on the field.

"I've been really pleased with how Case has played," coach Broncos coach Vance Joseph.

In the eyes of public perception, there's no room for error for Joseph. And there's no way Joseph really feels that way about Keenum's start to his Broncos career: three touchdowns, five interceptions and a total quarterback rating that's fallen to 28th in the NFL among starters. Who are they trying to fool?

But that's what should embolden the anxious masses. The Broncos truly feel fine and dandy about Keenum and the offense. As we creep into Rocktober, it was only one month ago that Broncos coaches and front office were happy campers over Keenum's early promise.

"He's better than he was last year," Joseph said.

The Broncos haven't wavered that Keenum has what it takes to lift the Broncos to the playoffs for the first time since Super Bowl 50 — for now, and from now on (this season and next).

"I guess you could say, overall, I'm still a long way from where I want to be," Keenum said.

"I feel like this offense can be really, really, really good. At times we are," he said. "At times we're moving, we're rolling, and other times, for whatever reason, we're getting off the field."

Jake Butt's knee injury hurts. Their top tight end is done for the season. But when Keenum said, "I've got so much faith in (left tackle Garrett Bolles)," that left no glaring holes elsewhere on offense, which makes their 20-points-per-game average more frustrating. That's 19th in the NFL, not good enough when paired with a proud defense that's lost a step and a proven coordinator.

Twenty points on Monday night against the Chiefs will equate to a double-digit defeat. The Rockies' magic number is one, and Keenum's Broncos must hit the magic number of 30. At least.

Score 30 points, and Joseph, Keenum and the Broncos can begin to flip a narrative that's gaining steam only three weeks into Joseph's second season here and Keenum's first: it's the wrong coach and the wrong quarterback and the Broncos aren't playoff-bound any time soon.

Then the Broncos can rely on Mile High's signature Monday magic to do the rest. The stadium might not have a long-term name, but it has a long, dramatic history on Mondays. The Broncos are 24-11-1 at home on Monday Night Football. They've won four straight. The last time Denver hosted Kansas City on a Monday night it was "Broncos 30, Chiefs 10" in 2005.

Thirty.

This is only the second time in almost 30 years (27) the Broncos (+4.5) are home 'dogs to the Chiefs. It's been about that long since the Chiefs had a quarterback like Mahomes worth writing home about.

The old question in Kansas City: "Huard or Thigpen?" The new one: "How many glasses of water did Patty turn into wine?"

To reverse their course, and potentially join the Avs and Rockies in the postseason, Keenum must rise up to the big-game challenge and keep up with the opponent.

"I think our best defense is when Von (Miller) is over on the sideline pumping up the crowd, and I'm out there trying to get them to be quiet while we're moving down the field," Keenum said.

Do that, and Mile High usually does the rest.

"Growing up a Rockies fan I grew up disliking the Dodgers quite a bit," Kyle Freeland said.

Beating the Dodgers and Chiefs on the same day? Now that's a good case of the Mondays.

Broncos' blues make a return

By Woody Paige
Colorado Springs Gazette
Oct. 1, 2018

At the end of Monday Night Football, the Broncos crave to shout out to the Chiefs a derivative of the famed Linda Ronstadt song:

“Blue by you.”

The Broncos’ Blues are back.

Nobody in Denver loves the blue jerseys more than Broncos Boss John Elway.

“I never lost in blue,” Ol’ No. 7 told me, out of the blue, on the eve of his 50th birthday in 2010.

“Really?”

“Look it up,” he said.

John was absolutely right.

The quarterback achieved an amazing 20-0 record after the Broncos introduced a new blue jersey in 1997.

However, he hadn’t seemed so comfortable out of orange in a Nike-designed significant color, uniform and logo change at a Pat Bowlen press conference when the owner insisted the Broncos, nevertheless, would remain “predominantly orange.” The uniform with the navy blue jersey and white pants featured orange only in a white panel down the side. The helmet was blue, too, with a fresh stylized horse (with a subtle Nike brand “swoosh” in the nose).

Bowlen’s Broncos’ Blue wasn’t a big, bad bust.

Instead, the Broncos beat the Packers in the Super Bowl that season – in blue.

And Elway was perfect in blue – winning all eight home games in the regular season, defeating the Jaguars in the one playoff game at home (revengeing a puzzling playoff loss, wearing an orange jersey, the year before), and, finally, the Pack of, yes, Green Bay.

The following season the Broncos again won all eight regular-season games at Mile High Stadium, then whipped the Dolphins and the Jets in the postseason in blue before wearing white (as the visiting team) in the Super Bowl victory over the Falcons.

Elway retired with back-to-back championships and without a setback over two seasons in a blue jersey.

No wonder he still was proud of those successes 21 years later.

At the time of our June conversation in 2010, Elway was becoming somewhat engaged again with the Broncos. After his retirement, John's once near-brotherly friendship with Mike Shanahan was fried. Even though Elway desired to become a Broncos' executive one day, he was shut out from Dove Valley. But, with Shanahan gone because he had been fired at the conclusion of the 2008 season and replaced by Josh McDaniels, a 2010 golf outing with Bowlen consigliere Joe Ellis led to Elway's reunion.

He was asked by Ellis to represent the Broncos in London before their upcoming regular-season game against the 49ers and perform some additional promotional duties. John was hopeful that he would be more involved, particularly in the draft.

Little did he know what was ahead soon.

Before the season ended, McDaniels was fired (partially because the team's videographer taped part of the 49ers practice in London, and the aftermath of the Patriots-like illegal act), and Bowlen, in a dinner with Elway at the restaurant in Cherry Creek with his name on the front (where we had our interview), asked if John was interested in returning in a capacity as general manager or possibly minority owner.

By January, Elway was the team's chief executive of the football operations.

However, in 2012, at the urging of Ellis, the Broncos went back to actually being "predominantly orange" with orange jerseys. Blue became an "alternative jersey."

Ironically, the Broncos are 0-4 wearing orange in Super Bowls.

The Broncos haven't been as successful in blue without Elway as the quarterback. Manning did win in blue, too (once throwing five touchdowns in navy). He also wore a different blue with the Colts, so blue would be one of his two favorite colors. The other was orange – also the primary color of his alma mater (Tennessee).

There was some consideration in 1983, the year Elway was a rookie, of switching to blue jerseys, but that idea never got beyond a paper design. The Broncos did get away from their original brown-and-gold colors and vertically-striped socks.

Occasionally, the Broncos wear the color-rush all-blue (jersey and pants) uniforms.

Last year the Broncos broke out the blue jerseys and pants, and promptly were defeated by the Giants.

The team announced recently that the Broncos will wear totally blue against the Chiefs and totally orange against the Steelers.

Against the Browns, the Broncos will wear blue jerseys and white pants – the Elway Combo.

When the Broncos played the Panthers in Super Bowl 50, they were the designated home team.

Elway chose for the Broncos to wear all white.

They won.

Mason's Mailbag: Andy Janovich paving the way

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
Oct. 1, 2018

Send questions using the submission form or by tweeting @MaseDenver with the #AskMase hashtag!

Moving Demaryius Thomas to tight end would create so many mismatches. I think would open up the offense tremendously and get all your studs on the field at once just like Kansas City's doing.

-- Eric Plummer

You're not the only person to suggest this, but this is not realistic. Let's start with the size factor; Thomas is 229 pounds. Denver's four tight ends -- including Jake Butt, who was placed on injured reserve Saturday -- have an average weight of 256 pounds, with none lighter than 250 pounds. There are tight ends whose weight is near that of Thomas; the 240-pound Evan Engram of the New York Giants is a good example. But he is essentially a wide receiver by a different position name, capable of running routes from the X, Y and Z receiver spots.

Converting Thomas to a more traditional tight end role during a regular season is a stretch. This isn't Madden, where you can conceivably plug and play players all over the field.

Where do you think the Broncos will turn to now that Jake Butt is out for the season? Practice squad or a free agent?

-- Dan Staub

They'll fill the roster spot with Brian Parker, who was promoted from the practice squad to the 53-man roster Saturday. But the player who is likely to see the biggest bump in playing time and targets is Matt LaCosse, who had two touchdown receptions in the preseason and could be used in a similar manner as Heurman.

There isn't a viable solution on the free-agent market, especially since Julius Thomas and Brent Celek announced their retirements in recent weeks.

Andrew, no question -- just a comment on the great blocking that Andy Janovich is providing for the running backs. They're getting great holes and the additional great blocks by AJ are making the running game exciting again. Credit also to the running backs for hitting the holes quickly with no hesitation.

-- Kevin O'Leary

This is why any mention of Janovich on "First and Ten at Ten" is quickly followed by one of us quoting former Broncos Special Teams Coordinator Brock Olivo saying, "Love Jano." How can you not love a player who is a) a team captain, b) a core special teamer and c) seemingly always making a key block anytime he's in the game on offense?

The Broncos are averaging 6.2 yards per carry with Janovich on the field and 4.8 yards per rushing attempt without him. Both are impressive paces. But when you consider Janovich's key role in two long gallops – Phillip Lindsay's 53-yard run in Week 2 and Emmanuel Sanders' 34-yard end-around last week – he has certainly earned continued work.

Are there any chances for the Broncos to sign a WR like Corey Coleman, for example?

-- Scott Thielemier

Why? Wide receiver is a position of ample depth, and is not a need. Coleman, at this point, is not better than any of the five wide receivers on the 53-man roster. Nor is he better than Jordan Taylor, who is on the physically-unable-to-perform list and could be activated if needed after Week 6.

@CAnderson1983

I'm trying to find some info on the Broncos when we wear our all-navy alternative uniforms. It feels like we play really well when wearing them but I'm having trouble finding solid stats, win-loss records and such. You got anything? #AskMase

They are 13-10 all-time in blue-on-blue. Most of those games came in a six-season stretch from 2006-11, when they went 10-8 in the all-blues. During that run, the Broncos had four years in which they wore them at least three times. In 2007, they went all-blue for a franchise-high five of eight home games -- against the Steelers, Packers, Titans, Chiefs and Vikings. The Broncos won four of those contests.

How TJ lived one day in Von Miller's shoes

By Ben Swanson

DenverBroncos.com

Oct. 1, 2018

TJ is a 12-year-old boy battling cystic fibrosis, and all he wanted was to be Von Miller for a day. With the help of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, the Broncos and Miller himself, TJ and his family flew to Denver from their home in Maine for a day in Miller's shoes, with meals, activities and other details picked out with Miller's help.

Breakfast like Von

To start off the day, TJ and his family had the option to eat the same breakfast Miller usually eats. So, after he told them what that meal is — scrambled eggs, turkey bacon and hash browns — that's exactly what TJ ordered, along with some pancakes. And he wasn't the only one to order Miller's usual meal; the rest of the family followed suit, too.

Meeting fans like Von

Occasionally, when you're an NFL star like Von Miller, you get unexpected visits from some of your biggest fans. TJ learned that Saturday from his booth at IHOP, and of course he was happy to oblige for a few autographs, including signing a salt shaker and a syrup container.

Ridin' like Von

Then it was off to UCHealth Training Center. But before they left, they needed a ride. Miller, a noted car enthusiast, was able to suggest one of his favorite car models for the group.

Vibin' like Von

It wasn't a long ride to UCHealth Training Center, but Miller still made that a custom experience, too. He picked out music for the drive, including tunes by The Temptations.

In the locker room like Von

After touring UCHealth Training Center, TJ's Broncos tour guides showed him to a very special surprise in the locker room: his own locker, set up right next to Miller's. A custom jersey awaited TJ in the locker, as well as a special backpack full of goodies Miller helped pick out.

Geared up like Von

The goody bag that awaited TJ in his locker was full of gifts that Von chose. Of course, there was a Broncos football. It also included one of his favorite movies, "Finding Nemo"; a hat from Miller's alma mater, Texas A&M; as well as an Adidas backpack and Carhartt sweatshirt, products from companies that sponsor Miller.

Watching practice like Von

After training camp ends, the Broncos' practices can only be seen by team personnel, aside from brief viewing periods for the media. TJ got the VIP experience, though, and was able to watch practice from the sideline, just like the players do, when they're not on the field in the middle of the action.

Shooting the breeze like Von

During their brief periods of rest between reps during practice, some of Miller's teammates took the time to walk over and meet TJ. But it didn't seem like many players had more fun in conversation than defensive linemen Shelby Harris and Zach Kerr, who are always very eager to laugh.

After that, practice was over, and the day was pretty much done. TJ met Miller after practice to share stories and get to know each other better, and Miller left him with one final gift: a personalized note on the back of TJ's jersey to remember a day TJ won't ever forget.

NFL could soon pull plug on DirecTV deal

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
Oct. 1, 2018

Most of the NFL's TV deals run through 2022. The NFL has the ability to exit one of those deals prematurely.

The league has the power to pull the plug on the Sunday Ticket arrangement with DirecTV. If exercised, the contract would expire after the 2019 regular season.

Despite some speculation and scuttlebutt of a looming announcement that the league will exit the DirecTV deal early, a source with knowledge of the situation tells PFT that the decision isn't final, and that the league ultimately may decide to stick with the current deal.

The question for the league to address, as it relates to the Sunday Ticket package, is whether streaming has overtaken satellite. Of course, the league could do both, selling the global streaming and satellite rights for Sunday Ticket to, for example, one of the major tech companies, which could then carve out the satellite rights and sell them, maybe back to DirecTV.

Regardless, there's plenty of money to be made by the NFL when it comes to Sunday Ticket, and it would be a surprise if the NFL chooses not to exercise its prerogative to give up the bird in the hand for a couple of big fat ones in the bunch.

MMQB: Two Sides of Risk-Taking in NFL Week 4

By Albert Breer

MMQB

Oct. 1, 2018

I saw it last week for the first time, and sure enough it was there again after the Titans beat the world champion Eagles at home in overtime. And it's not like Mike Vrabel's crew coined it. "For the Boys" was the name of a movie a couple decades ago, and part of a tweet that went viral and became a line of Barstool merchandise last year, and was worn out plenty in other ways in the years in between.

That said, for one reason or another, it really fits what Vrabel and his staff have been looking to build in Nashville over the last 10 months. So For the Boys it is.

"I've always talked about the team and putting the guy next to you in front of you, in your concerns and thoughts," Vrabel said over his cell, a couple hours after that dramatic win over the Eagles. "And they've embraced that, and they've kind of put it a new spin on it—For the Boys. It's whatever you gotta do for the team, whatever you need to do for the guy next to you, guys are willing to do it.

"They care more about the guy next to them than they do themselves."

It might sound a little corny. But it sure is working.

The Titans opened the year with a twice-storm-delayed 27-20 loss in Miami that took almost seven hours to complete. Since then, they've been on a tear. First they took down Vrabel's old team, the Texans. Then they went into Jacksonville—with the Jags flying high off a convincing win over New England—and knocked off the reigning division champs. This week it was the NFL's kingpin feeling their wrath.

In that game was one of two big fourth-down decisions made during the 1 p.m. window on Sunday. The other one, in Indianapolis, didn't work out for the coach pushing his chips in and betting on his offense. This one did. For the Boys.

The situation: Late in overtime, with the Titans trailing the Eagles 23-20, Marcus Mariota scrambles for 15 yards to turn third-and-17 into fourth-and-2 with 1:16 remaining in OT. Vrabel sends Ryan Succop out for a 50-yard field try to tie the game at 23. Then the rookie coach calls timeout. Succop returns to the field after the timeout, then the field goal unit comes off, and the offense goes back on. Eagles timeout. Vrabel puts the offense back out there a second time.

From there, Mariota dumps a little swing pass off to Dion Lewis in the right flat. A block from receiver Tajee Sharpe on Philly linebacker Jordan Hicks springs Lewis to get past the sticks, and Lewis beats Ronald Darby one-on-one, paving the way for a 17-yard gain. The game-winner is three plays away.

Mike Vrabel.

James Kenney/AP/REX/Shutterstock

When I asked Vrabel if he hoped his players took the gutsy call as a vote of confidence, he didn't skip a beat.

“I don’t think I have to hope that, I know that,” Vrabel said. “They tell me that. I tell them we’re going to be aggressive. They’ve embraced that. And so they know I have confidence in them. I don’t have to hope about that. They’re excited about that.”

The For the Boys thing is just one example of how things in Tennessee are starting to fit together into one of the better stories of this NFL season at the quarter-pole. You might not have noticed the Titans much before yesterday. But you should probably start paying attention.

Week 4 is in the books, and we’re down to two unbeaten, and there’s only one winless team left—meaning we go into October with 29 teams within two games of each other. That’s to say, we don’t know much yet, even if there is a lot to get to today, including:

- The fourth-down call that didn’t go quite as well for the offense in Indianapolis as it did for the Titans, and why that may have saved the Texans season, at least for now.
- Matt Nagy’s Bears offense finally catching up with its searing-hot defense in a blowout of the Buccaneers in Chicago.
- The resurgent Bengals outgunning the Falcons in Atlanta.
- The rookie running back who came to re-establish the Patriots’ identity.
- The Cowboys’ savior—or the man who’ll have to be one for the team to salvage a retooling offense in the short term—coming up huge against the Lions.
- The Raiders taking a big step against the Browns at home, and the difference a week of practice made in Oakland.
- One of the most unique players in the NFL is a Chargers rookie, and he made another game-changing play on Sunday.
- And we’ll also bring you plenty from a wild Saturday in college football, including the identity of a quarterback who’s making a serious run at going first overall next April, should he decide to declare for the draft.

But we’re starting with the Boys.

Before Sunday’s game, Vrabel told me, he went up to his quarterback and delivered a pretty simple message: “Man, I can’t wait to watch you play today.”

And that was as much about what Mariota went through to get to Sunday as anything else. In the opener, the fourth-year quarterback took a hit from Miami’s William Hayes that left him with a tingling feeling in his fingers. It’d be scary for any player, and made more so by the trouble Mariota had gripping the ball thereafter. He didn’t play the next week against Houston, and came off the bench in Jacksonville.

“He’s put the team first through this whole process,” Vrabel said. “He was honest with us, when he first got injured, about what he could do, about what he couldn’t do. He wanted to be out there, but he also felt like there were things he couldn’t do. That’s why we originally went with Blaine [Gabbert]. And he started to feel better, he was able to do more things, as was evident today.”

The fourth-down decision showed that the trust goes both ways, because putting the game on the line in that situation had as much to do with Mariota’s ability as anything else.

NFL

Patriots Remind Everyone That They Are the Class of the AFC East

There were other factors too, of course. One was offensive coordinator Matt LaFleur having confidence in the play he had dialed up for the situation, which he relayed to Vrabel in a convincing enough fashion to erase any doubt the head coach might have had. Another was that the team had played well enough in the second half to win—wiping out a 17-3 deficit in the process—which made the idea that they could punch it in after converting the fourth down seem likely.

The rest, as the former NFL linebacker Vrabel saw it, was up to the 11 guys he and his staff were sending out onto the field. And based on what he’s seen this September, he had no reason to think they wouldn’t win the game. So he wasn’t playing for a tie.

“That’s why we were doing it, to score a touchdown,” Vrabel said. “I don’t want this to come across the wrong way, but I’ve said it before—making that decision is easy. What’s hard is executing it, and that’s what the players did. They got the call, and they executed it well, correctly. Making that call, man, that’s the easy part. It really is. The hard part is what the players have to do, execute it against a great defense.”

Mariota did. Sharpe did. Lewis did. And then, Mariota finished the job three plays later, less than three weeks after losing feeling in his throwing hand, delivering a strike into traffic in the end zone on third down, and giving big-bodied second-year receiver Corey Davis a chance to box his man out for the game-winning points.

In those plays, and plenty more, For the Boys kept showing up.

“It shows up when your quarterback makes a mistake, the offense makes a mistake and throws an interception before the end of the first half, and the defense doesn’t bitch. They run out, and hold them to a field goal,” Vrabel said. “And it shows up when we get the ball and we’re down two touchdowns, and we’re able to go down there and score points and touchdowns.”

Vrabel also brought up how the defense mitigated damage at the end of regulation after a long punt return by Philly’s DeAndre Carter, with a red-zone stop forcing a field goal that sent the game into overtime. And how no one pointed fingers in any of these spots, instead picking each other up.

After the Titans’ converted on fourth down, Corey James hauled in the game-winning TD from Marcus Mariota.

Mark Zaleski/AP/REX/Shutterstock

All you have to do is listen to see how much this coach likes his team, and how much the guys on it like each other.

“Absolutely,” Vrabel said. “That’s the most important thing—they care about each other, they play hard for each other, they take the coaching. It’s not always perfect, never going to be a perfect game, never going to be 100 percent. But they fight. They compete. And I think it’s an easy group to coach, because they care about each other. I’m lucky to be able to coach them.”

It’s more than luck that has them here now. On Sunday it took guts. As a result the Titans are running neck-and-neck with those Jaguars at 3-1 atop the AFC South, with a win in Jacksonville already in their back pocket.

AT INDY, THE OTHER SIDE OF GOING FOR IT

Last year, those Eagles made their money, and won a championship, riding risks, and their offensive coordinator then was Frank Reich. So maybe it shouldn’t surprise any of us that, in just his fourth game as Colts head coach, Reich would roll the dice in a very major way.

Andrew Luck was 40-of-61 for 464 yards and four touchdowns, and had just hit tight end Mo Alie-Cox for 17 yards to turn third-and-21 into fourth-and-4. The problem? Indy was at its own 43, and with just 24 seconds left, and a turnover on downs would leave the door wide open for the Texans to get in position to kick a game-winning field goal.

Another thing to consider: A prideful but winless Houston team was being challenged.

And with their season on the line, the Texans rose to that challenge. Houston had gotten after Luck, and so Reich dialed up a quick hitter at the sticks to receiver Chester Rogers. The ball was out almost instantly, and low, and veteran corner Johnathan Joseph, defending Rogers, did just enough to disrupt the play.

“It was a massive play,” J.J. Watt said over the phone as he leaving Lucas Oil Stadium. “There’s no question about it. It was a massive play. And I’m very happy with the result. We should’ve put it away earlier than we did, obviously, but that’s the situation we were in, and we had to find a way to get it done. And we did, so just very happy with that. There’s no question, it was a huge, huge play.”

On the next snap, Deshaun Watson hit a crosser to DeAndre Hopkins on, and Hopkins took it 24 yards into chip-shot field goal range. Watson hustled to the line, spiked the ball, and then Ka’imi Fairburn knocked through the game-winner from 37 yards out.

For Watt personally, just being part of something like this win—a tooth-and-nail battle to the end—is worth appreciating, after he missed most of the last two seasons, spending much of last year sidelined with cornerstone teammates like Watson and Whitney Mercilus. So even the thought of being out there for that fourth down, forget the result, brought a smile to his face.

“When the game’s taken away from you, and you’re taken out of the competition and everything you love is taken away from you, you definitely appreciate being back in situations where it matters and where there’s wins on the line and you’re out there battling with your brothers,” Watt said. “These last couple weeks have been tough, obviously, for us as a team. But even just being out there is a lot of fun for me.”

He's playing pretty well too. Watt went into last week's loss to the Giants without having registered a sack in more than two years (which is obviously heavily injury-related). He's had five in the 120 minutes of football since, and on Sunday hit 80 career sacks, getting there faster than any player in the NFL history other than Reggie White.

Watt will tell you now that the switch really flipped for him in the second half of the opener at New England. But having the stats to back up how he's playing, and he's gotten them against the Giants and Colts, isn't totally insignificant.

"Today's world is very much a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately world," Watt said. "Whatever I accomplished a few years ago, people forget very quickly. So it's nice to prove to myself I can do it, and prove to people out there that I can still do it. Now I have to keep it going, but it's definitely nice to be able to go out there and play the way I know I'm capable of playing."

Oh, and by the way, Watt said he wasn't surprised by Reich's decision. "You play this game to win, you don't play to tie. And I respect their decision."

Reich, for his part, was just as resolute as Vrabel after the game that he'd do the same thing again, if the opportunity arose.

A BEARS OFFENSE THAT CAN MATCH THAT D?

Good news and bad news on the Bears offense. The bad news is that coach Matt Nagy expects it could take more than two seasons to get the offensive operation to where he wants it around Mitch Trubisky. The good news is if what the football world saw Sunday is a sign of how Chicago will grow in the interim, and that the process in getting there might not be so painful after all.

Trubisky was nails Sunday—shredding the Bucs for 354 yards and six touchdowns on 19-of-26 passing, beating the Tampa Bay defense every which way en route to a 38-3 halftime edge and 48-10 win. And really, as Nagy sees it, this represented just the beginning of how he and his offensive staff are starting to learn to call plays and build an offense around the 24-year-old, something he went through with Alex Smith during his years as Chiefs quarterbacks coach, then offensive coordinator.

"You saw it in Kansas City, it was a good two-and-a-half years before you start really, truly feeling good not only as a player in the system, but as a coach too," Nagy said late Sunday night, after getting home as his team's bye begins. "I have to retrain my brain on how to call plays for Mitch, which is totally fine, but it's something I have to do because he's totally different than Alex. And that's the fun part."

"I have to kick my brain back to year one in K.C. and not be in year five with a 13-year vet quarterback who was the No. 1 pick. It's different. We're talking about a quarterback who played 13 games in college, 12 games [as a rookie], 25 games as a starting quarterback, and now here we are in Week 5. It's going to take time."

But what happened Sunday wasn't totally out of nowhere. Nagy says he actually saw it in Friday's practice, which was focused on red zone work—"I'm not sure a ball touched the ground, he was on fire"—and so did offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich, quarterbacks coach Dave Ragone and backup Chase Daniel. Those whispered about what they were watching as it was going on.

As you might imagine, the Bears couldn't wait to get in the red zone on Sunday, and Trubisky didn't disappoint, throwing touchdown passes on all four of Chicago's trips inside the 20. The second one, to big-ticket free-agent acquisition Allen Robinson, was the one that best signified where Trubisky is headed, according to Nagy. On the play, Trubisky threw ahead of Robinson's break on a corner route, which flashed the anticipation he'd shown in practice against a coverage Nagy and company knew they could draw.

"That's a big-time throw, that was not an easy throw," the coach said. "So when you see those throws, you know he's feeling good about the situation."

Going into the bye, the Bears have to be feeling good about their situation too. At 3-1, they're sitting alone in first place in the NFC North. Khalil Mack and the defense have been off the charts through four weeks. And that's led to the offense trying to stake its own claim, which it did against Tampa.

Trubisky tossed six TDs in a blowout of the Bucs.

David Banks/AP/REX/Shutterstock

"Our defense has been carrying us the first three games," Nagy said. "Other than two quarters against Green Bay, they played basically 10 quarters of lights-out defense, I mean on another level. They've been carrying our team, and everyone understands that.

"In team meetings, we discuss how easy it'd be for a side of the ball to be complaining and bitching and moaning—'We're doing our job, you're not doing your job.' That [the Bears D doesn't do that] speaks volumes about who they are."

Right now they're a first-place team. And when they play again, in Miami in two weeks, they'll have a quarterback coming back with something pretty significant to build off of, which, as Nagy intimated, has been a long time coming in those parts.

WHAT'S NEW, AND MAKING A DIFFERENCE, WITH THE BENGALS

If you were following along last December, you might consider it an upset that as we sit here, on October 1, Marvin Lewis is still coaching the Bengals. And if you remember all that was going on regarding this team, it might be an even bigger surprise that they're 3-1 and tied with Baltimore atop the AFC North.

But here we are, and the Bengals are looking a lot more like the Cincinnati playoff teams of 2011 to '15, rather than those that went 13-18-1 the last two years.

What gives? Well, when Lewis decided to stay, he committed to change. And yes, yesterday, it was a couple old faces—QB Andy Dalton and receiver AJ Green—making the game-winning play to outgun the Falcons 37-36 in what looked like a Big 12 game at Mercedes-Benz Stadium. Plenty around them, though, has changed, which is part of what's enabled those two veterans, and a lot of others, to get back to where they were.

"I'm not going to say there is one thing, but a couple of changes have made [a difference]," Dalton said on the team bus to Hartsfield. "We have some new players, we have some new staff, it feels different than it has felt the last couple years. It's been a good thing for us. And for us to be where we are at right now, 3-1 to start the year, it's a good way to start it, and we've got to keep it going."

NFL

How the Jaguars Built a Bortles-Based Offense

So where have the changes come?

1. Lewis has new coordinators on both sides of the ball—Bill Lazor on offense and Teryl Austin on defense—which is significant, because his staff went through a pretty serious period of attrition, losing respected assistants Jay Gruden, Mike Zimmer, Hue Jackson, Vance Joseph and Matt Burke, among others, over a three-year period, that may have made a reset necessary.

2. Green finally has threats around him to replace the long-since departed Mohamed Sanu and Marvin Jones. Former first-round pick John Ross has emerged (though he got hurt Sunday), as has former second-round pick Tyler Boyd.

3. The offensive line has been rebuilt around new left tackle Cordy Glenn and center Billy Price (who sat Sunday with an ankle injury), re-establishing a longtime team strength hurt by the defections of Andrew Whitworth and Kevin Zeitler, and the failure of high picks Cedric Ogbuehi and Jake Fisher.

All of those factors played into the game-winning touchdown on Sunday. Dalton had time to throw, and even with Tyler Eifert (who suffered about as ugly an injury as I've seen) and Ross down, the Falcons couldn't overdo it to cover Green. Moreover, Lazor has been emphasizing playing matchup ball and was able to generate one for his superstar, which made the whole thing academic for Dalton.

"He had a corner route, and with the coverage they were playing, they didn't think far enough into the end zone for them to take it away," Dalton said. "You just give A.J. a chance to go make a play on it. And with him, you just gotta get it around him, for him to make a play. It's one of those things at the end of the game—you got a shot to throw it to your best player and he is going to come down with it."

A.J. Green slides in with the game-winner for the Bengals.

John Amis/AP/REX/Shutterstock

At that point, there were seven seconds showing on the clock, and a 16-play, 75-yard drive in the rear-view mirror giving the Bengals the lead, and soon the win, in a shootout in which neither team ever led by more than seven.

"It shows what we can do," Dalton said. "There are different ways to win games. If we have to drive down at the end of the game to win it, we can do it. Sixteen plays. Our guys were gassed at the end, and they fought through it. When we needed to make a play we did. There were a couple fourth downs in there that were huge that brought us down to have the opportunity to score at the end. It shows a lot."

And it's showing up in the standings too.

WEIGHING UP THE BODY WEIGHT RULE

The competition committee had a call last week and put out an instructional video that was telling in two ways. First, the initial clip in the video was of an Anthony Barr's collarbone-breaking hit on Aaron Rodgers last fall, which was impetus for the new roughing-the-passer emphasis in the first place. Second, neither Clay Matthews' hit against the Vikings from Week 2 nor his hit in Washington in Week 3 made the cut for the instructional video.

Which leaves us ... still asking a lot of questions. I'm told, in fact, that when this rule was discussed in officials' meetings with teams over the summer, the officials had difficulty answering when coaches asked them what they're supposed to teach the players to do to avoid penalty. And that's the crux of the matter: Can the change be taught?

In an effort to find out, I did a quick text poll of defensive coaches across the league last week about the rule and teaching to it. Here's some of what I heard:

NFC defensive coordinator: "We've worked on it some in terms of tackling drills, but really haven't spent a ton of time on it. I think it's a terrible rule and it needs to be changed. ... I'm OK to call a foul if they pick the quarterback up and pile-drive him. But on a normal tackle I think it's B.S."

AFC linebackers coach: "I'm just really about educating them on it. Team meetings, we show clips. Players get pissed off, but they are calling it so they need to understand it. Therein lies the issue. I think players understand the rule but it's sometimes physically impossible—if your momentum is going forward—how do you not land on the QB? What do you tell Clay Matthews to do different? These calls are changing games. I'm all for safety and helping the future of game, but it's football—you're going to land on a player. That's different to me than driving a player into the ground."

AFC defensive coordinator: "'Dropping weight' on a QB was a term used by every staff on every defense at every level. ... It's a tough rule, but we're telling guys to roll tackle and try to get to a side on the quarterback. Not an easy thing to do when you're running full speed trying to make a play."

NFC linebackers coach: "I think in general over the last few years people have really had to pay attention to how they're teaching tackling. Shoulder leverage, keeping your helmet out of it, legally tackling defenseless receivers. ... The quarterback thing is something we show examples of, we talk about, we preach safety and how the QB is protected. But at the end of the day it's grown men playing incredibly fast, and it's a judgment call by the referee."

AFC secondary coach: "Everyone is teaching the same things. Head to side, strike zone, no head shots, don't lift. They have been teaching same thing from day one. ... [But preventing these hits], you can't do it. Not possible."

AFC defensive coordinator: "We're trying. We have to drill it like a rodeo gator tackle. It's hard with bigger QBs."

AFC defensive coordinator: "We have to try to give our guys answers. It's a hard rule to coach. We are trying to teach them to grab and roll. Which is fine until someone snaps a QB's leg doing it."

NFC defensive coordinator: "I think the rule is making it very difficult for the players more so than it is the coaches. As coaches we preach tackle the ball. The quarterback is the worst ball-handler on the team. It's easy to teach and drill a perfect tackle. But when the bullets are flying and every millisecond counts, the player is trying to do one thing—get the guy down. They aren't worried about how they land. My point is that it's leading to indecision in the heat of battle. There's tons of gray area in the rule for live situations, and it's slowing down defensive players. When defensive players have to think about something that is supposed to be very natural, injuries will happen. Just like it did to the kid in Miami."

... OF THE WEEK
TWEET

Give the Bills' social media people credit for making fun of themselves – last week, they had one of these flight maps landing them somewhere in Wisconsin to play the Vikings. This time around, they got the location of Green Bay right on the map, but that “W” might as well have stood for “without points”, which is how they left Lambeau following a 22-0 loss to the Packers.

QUOTE

“I think it's really disrespectful. The game's already over. They already have the game in the bag. All they could have done is run the clock out at that point. At the same time, I think it's up to us to gain that respect from other teams. If teams are disrespecting us, it must say something about us. I took it really personal. And I didn't like it at all.”

Jets DL Leonard Williams on Jaguars coach Doug Marrone going for two with 25 seconds left in a 31-12 game in Jacksonville. And this felt an awful lot like Marrone twisting the knife on a Jets' franchise that he thought would hire him after he opted out of his contract in Buffalo, following the 2014 season. It's pro football, but I can understand where the Jets would be ticked off over this. I probably would be too.

SIX FROM SATURDAY

1. The buzz around Oregon QB Justin Herbert is building big-time in scouting circles. Everyone who's been through Eugene leaves with a strong impression, and the last couple weeks those have been backed with strong performances against Stanford and Cal. “Herbert's a badass,” said one AFC exec. “He's gonna be special.” This exec sees the 6'6”, 233-pound 20-year-old as a real contender to go first overall in 2019, should he declare after his true junior season: “I see no reason why the discussion wouldn't have him in there with a handful of other guys.”
2. Another exec who hit me with Herbert as a name from this week, gave me another quarterback too: West Virginia senior Will Grier. The 6'2”, 223-pounder threw for 370 yards and three touchdowns on 27-of-41 passing to help beat back a late rally from Texas Tech and keep the Mountaineers unbeaten. Where Herbert's ability to push the ball downfield has wowed scouts, Grier's accuracy and proficiency running Dana Holgorsen's offense have jumped off the page too.
3. Did anyone think Kentucky would be in position to play in one of the SEC's biggest games when the calendar turned to October? Well, guess what? If the Wildcats can win at Texas A&M this week, they've got a good shot to get to their Nov. 3 home game against second-ranked Georgia unbeaten, with that one potentially determining the SEC East champion. And they're not without prospects: Both running back Benny Snell and pass-rusher Josh Allen are on the NFL radar.

NFL

The 'Other' Josh Allen Makes a Name for Himself in NFL Draft Circles

4. Florida State snuck by Louisville this week, but its problems remain, and what the scouts are saying is that the Seminoles' issues stem mostly from FSU's inability to put together a competent offensive line, which is on ex-coach Jimbo Fisher, probably more so (at this point, at least) than it is on new coach Willie Taggart.

5. Clemson slot Hunter Renfrow made another highlight reel catch during the Tigers' comeback win over Syracuse, and it's worth mentioning him here because while he may not be Julio Jones, he looks like the kind of player who'll find a way to stick in pro football for a long time. He's a great route-runner with top-end skill to catch the ball, and great history of showing up in the clutch. Add to that the increasing importance of slot receivers, with the spread everywhere in the NFL, and Renfrow will be intriguing to track.

6. Tried to tell you guys about Chase Young in last week's Game Plan. Hope you watched his statement performance in the win against Penn State—and saw why the Ohio State pass-rusher is likely a very high pick in 2020.

TEN TAKEAWAYS

1. Credit to the Raiders for finally closing out an opponent. Jon Gruden and his staff went out of their way to deliver their message on finishing games this week by challenging players during the final periods of practice. And whether or not that really made a difference, the results did change. Oakland outscored Cleveland 31-25 after halftime, after being outscored 64-17 in the second halves of its first three games.

2. Another week, another game-changing play for Derwin James. The Niners, down 29-27, had one more chance to upend the home-standing Chargers, and faced a second-and-6 from with 2:38 left. Which, as it turns out, was the right time for James to wreck it all. The first-round pick came absolutely screaming off the right edge and blew up San Francisco quarterback C.J. Beathard, popping the ball into the air and into the waiting arms of defensive tackle Isaac Rochell to seal the win, and illustrate James's mind-blowing versatility. What the Chargers have marveled at is how quickly he's been able to contribute, and excel, at all three levels of the defense—as a centerfielder, box safety and edge rusher. There aren't many players who can do that, and James is only four games in, showing the freakish athletic potential he showed as a true freshman at Florida State in 2015, before suffering a devastating knee injury his sophomore year that hampered him a bit as a junior. I'd heard the Kam Chancellor comp for him before, which made sense since he's playing for Gus Bradley. I think he can be better than that. And I'm not sure there is a good comp for him (Sean Taylor?)—which says it all about how unique he is.

Derwin James has been a game-changer for the Chargers.

Marcio Sanchez/AP/REX/Shutterstock

3. So as it turns out, Sony Michel is suddenly a key figure in New England. During this week, Patriots special teams captain Matthew Slater let the press in on how Bill Belichick says he can see toughness in a team—saying it's measured in how a team runs the ball, stops the run and covers kicks. New England wasn't good in those areas against Detroit last week, which is why it was a relevant talking point, and one that came to life on Sunday. At halftime of the Patriots' 38-7 rout of Miami, the hosts had 118 yards on 21 carries, to the Dolphins seven yards on seven carries, and the visitors' average drive start was at their own 30-yard line. And Michel was a key in setting the tone, with Jeremy Hill and Rex Burkhead on IR, carrying 15 times in the first half for 80 yards. His knee issues in college were significant, so his durability merits watching, but this was a big improvement over how he looked in Jacksonville and Detroit in Weeks 2 and 3.

4. Speaking of improvement, Dak Prescott was a lot better this week, in large part because the offensive line and Zeke Elliott were on their game. That's what the identity of the offense was built to be, and while Elliott was a monster on the ground (25 carries, 152 yards), he flashed the pass-game ability that made him a value in the upper reaches of the 2016 draft. Elliott looked like a receiver in hauling in a 34-

yard dime over Lions linebacker Jarrad Davis to set up the game-winning points in a have-to-have-it win for the Cowboys.

NFL

Jared Goff for NFL MVP? The QB Makes His Case as Rams Top Vikings on Thursday Night Football

5. Don't look now, but the Packers are developing ways to win around Aaron Rodgers that should serve them long-term. Green Bay finished a 22-0 shutout of the Bills with 141 yards on 32 carries, and new defensive coordinator Mike Pettine held Josh Allen and the Buffalo offense to just 145 yards from scrimmage. Green Bay's looked for incremental improvement in Rodgers' bone bruise, knowing it'll take time to heal, and they've gotten that. And if there's a positive to draw, it's the same one the guys who were around last year to play with Brett Hundley took from the experience—having to develop team strengths other than “let 12 go to work.”

6. While we're on Allen, the four rookies QBs drafted in the Top 10 lost on Sunday. And I know the temptation will be to pass referendums on each of them each week going forward. I'd resist that. Lots of people were down on Jared Goff coming out of the 2016 season, based on his demeanor on “Hard Knocks” and his play in a disjointed situation in the midst of a coach losing his job. Goff came out of that situation OK, I'd say. He just needed time. It's fair to afford Allen, Sam Darnold, Baker Mayfield and Josh Rosen the same.

7. The Ravens have been waiting for a youth movement on defense to take, and it seems to finally be happening after three drafts of stocking the cupboard on that side of the ball. Baltimore held Pittsburgh to 47 yards after halftime, and ESPN's Jamison Hensley had a pretty crazy stat in his story: The Ravens are the first team since 2006 to hit the quarter mark of the season without having allowed a second-half touchdown.

NFL

Are We Witnessing a Regression in Pittsburgh?

8. I thought this was kind of a strange quote from Bucs coach Dirk Koetter postgame, on whether or not Jameis Winston had earned his job back by playing OK (save for the two picks) in the second half of the team's blowout loss to Chicago: “Probably, but we'll worry about that on another day. Ryan Fitzpatrick didn't lose this game for us, either. Don't anybody think—if this is on any one person, it's gotta be on me, OK? So if you're gonna put one person on there, put it on me.” I don't think anyone was blaming Fitzpatrick (it was the Bucs defense), but the quarterback didn't play great, which Koetter has already told us would open the door.

9. Credit to the Seahawks for climbing back to .500 after a brutal start to the year. The team has been staving off a rebuild, and Pete Carroll felt good about his young guys—replacing some of the Seattle mainstays—for a while now. Digging out of an 0-2 hole with a team so accustomed to contending, but without many of the big names of its past, is nothing to sneeze at.

10. Finally someone slowed down Michael Thomas—the Saints star had just 47 yards on four catches against the Giants at the Meadowlands. Unfortunately for the hosts, that only worked to help spring Alvin Kamara for 134 yards on 19 carries, and 47 yards on five catches. And the Saints showed a pretty good quality in this one: The ability to win in different ways. Drew Brees was just 18-of-32 for 217 yards, and didn't throw a touchdown pass. And New Orleans still won by 15.

FIVE-DAY FORECAST

It'll be interesting to see how being in national spotlight challenges Patrick Mahomes tonight, with a trip to Denver on tap for the Chiefs. And it'll be interesting too to see how the Broncos attack him.

Denver is Mahomes' first division opponent since the opener and will be the first defense to play him a second time (the Broncos saw him in Week 17 last year), giving Von Miller and company perspective that, to this point, other defenses have lacked. For his part, Mahomes knows that adjustments are coming.

"As teams get more and more tape, they're going to try different stuff," Mahomes told me a few weeks back. "They're going to try to confuse me, to have success as a defense. But at the same time, coach [Andy Reid] prepares me for every situation, we make adjustments through the whole game, and that's something that I'm going to keep working on, keep getting better at, being able to make adjustments quick on the fly, and then get the ball into the hands of all these playmakers I have and let them make the plays."

That sounds good. Making it happen is tougher. But it should be a fun environment to see Mahomes in.

And ultimately I think he's up to the challenge. So give me the Chiefs, 27-21.

Oh, and one other thing to look for this week: a slew of players coming back from suspension, including Patriots WR Julian Edelman, Saints RB Mark Ingram, Ravens CB Jimmy Smith and Bengals LB Vontaze Burfict.

FMIA Week 4: The NFL at the Quarter Pole and an Overtime-Filled Sunday

By Peter King
Pro Football Talk
Oct. 1, 2018

You know what's great about the NFL? Thievery.

It's an admirable trait. You're a coach in the NFL, you see something you like, you take it, and then you give props—or at least you should give props. And I've found most coaches give credit where it's due.

Take rookie Tennessee coach Mike Vrabel, Sunday night, over the phone from Nashville. When Vrabel walked to midfield after the Titans' 26-23 overtime win, he said to innovative Super Bowl champion coach Doug Pederson, among other things: "I appreciate you letting me lean on you at times."

Bold copycatting is one of my 10 Stories of the NFL at the Quarter Pole. Let's go through them, and then I'll take you to Nashville, and to Chicago, and to that Competition Committee meeting the other day trying to wrangle this out-of-control roughing-the-passer mystery. In the NFL's 99th season, here are the big storylines, in no particular order:

1. Offense has too much of an edge. The recent history of 400-yard passing games shows that as well as anything:

2014: 11 400-yard passing performances in 256 games
2015: 10
2016: 12
2017: 8
2018: 12 ... through 62 games!

"The game is becoming far less physical, and the intimidation factor is gone," said former defensive tackle and current ESPN Monday night analyst Booger McFarland. "The quarterback know they can get hit, but not really hit like they used to." Agreed.

2. The Rams rule. Since Sean McVay arrived last season, the Rams are 15-5 and average 30.9 points per game. They're the best team in football, the only 4-0 team as October dawns, and except for the Chiefs, it's not very close.

3. The Browns aren't the best team, but they might be the most compelling. They might have gotten replay-jobbed out of a two-game winning streak in Oakland on Sunday, but with Baker Mayfield at the switch and a defense that is easy to love, these Browns are swashbuckling fun, even at 1-2-1. Prediction: the 45-42 loss in Oakland won't be the last WAC-type game these guys play this year.

4. Seattle seems like a powderkeg. Narrow wins over Dallas and the Cardinals can't put deodorant on the Earl Thomas story. One of the best players in franchise history, Thomas, who reluctantly reported to the team during a bitter contract dispute in September, broke his leg in Arizona on Sunday. On his way off the field, he showed his middle finger to the Seattle sideline. We're all guessing because Thomas did not

speak after the game. But it's not a tough guess. Thomas held out for the hope of a new contract, or to be traded to a team that would give him a new contract. When Thomas was getting wheeled off with the busted leg, his face didn't show pain. It was a ticked-off look, for getting hurt before he could get a new contract. The next time Thomas is on the field, it will be for another team, at age 30, coming off a broken leg. Not exactly a great negotiating position. Bizarre story for a team that used to sing Kumbaya but now looks like it's disbanding.

5. No one knows what roughing-the-passer is. I had an NFL offensive coordinator tell me Saturday, "We just want to know what the [roughing-the-passer] rules are now. We don't know." When top league officials and the eight-man Competition Committee conference-called the other day, they looked at approximately 30 plays. The Competition Committee recommended, among things, that the infamous Clay Matthews roughing call on Kirk Cousins in Week 2 is not the kind of penalty officials should call. Awkward. The officiating department doubled-down on the veracity of that call. But the Competition Committee saw what America saw: You can ask a defender to take his head out of tackling the quarterback, and to tackle the quarterback in a zone from sternum to thigh, but you can't ask the defender to totally lay off the quarterback unless you want 51-42 games. In this conference call, the body-weight sack was deemed fine and flaggable, the Matthews-type hit unacceptable.

6. It's hard to get back to the Super Bowl. The Eagles are 2-2, with losses to Tampa Bay and Tennessee. The Patriots are 2-2, with losses to Jacksonville and (a desultory one to) Detroit. Who'd have thought the Eagles and Vikings would meet in Week 5 with a combined 3-4-1 record? I say the Eagles will rebound when Carson Wentz gets accustomed to playing real football after missing it for nine months with his knee injury. The Patriots ... well, no team improves from September to December traditionally better than New England. Not even close. That 38-7 Patriots win Sunday was a ridiculously dominant performance over a Miami team that entered Foxboro as contenders but left less than pretenders. Let me remind you that the Patriots have won five Super Bowls in the last 17 years, and the five championship teams had these records after four weeks: 1-3, 2-2, 4-0, 2-2, 3-1. As Kevin Bacon once said, "ALL IS WELL!" And as running back James White told me Sunday: "No one wins a championship in three weeks. We had no concern at all. We just knew we had to play with more urgency, which we did today."

7. Jimmy G's wounded knee. What a bummer, bonus-baby Jimmy Garoppolo kayoed in his first full San Francisco season by an ACL injury eight days ago in Kansas City. The Niners paid him \$27.5-million a year, average, last February, and the frustrating thing for the team is he needs to take snaps. He'll enter 2019 at age 27, having had just 10 starts, and the team unsure how good he'll be. "The frustrating thing is that Jimmy just needs to play," GM John Lynch said last week.

8. Patrick Mahomes looks like a million bucks. The numbers are ridiculous entering tonight's game against Denver: 3-0 record, 13 touchdowns, no interceptions, a 137.4 rating. "We're not surprised at anything," his godfather and former MLB reliever, LaTroy Hawkins, said after Mahomes outdueled Ben Roethlisberger in Week 2. Football people are buying in too.

9. The Raiders, a proper 1-3, got karma-ed by trading Khalil Mack. Oakland needed every break in the world to beat the Browns in overtime Sunday to avoid going 0-4. The Grudenmen will be haunted by dealing Mack to Chicago ... and the Bears will thank their lucky stars every game Mack dominates some poor quarterback.

10. Chicago got its first big game from Mitchell Trubisky, and look out if it's the first of many. The six-touchdown-pass masterstroke to rout Tampa Bay on Sunday was so different from Trubisky's first three mediocre games. Coach Matt Nagy told me: "The teaching moment for me this week was just letting Mitch know that no matter what happens, we are all in his corner." Something worked. Trubisky had five touchdown passes by halftime. If Trubisky is even a B-minus QB the rest of the way, this defense is going to make the 3-1 Bears very hard to beat.

The Lead: Mike Vrabel

Mike Vrabel has this in common with Doug Pederson: He seems totally unimpressed with what he's doing. Last year, nine mornings before the Super Bowl, I was with Pederson at a Wawa convenience store in south Jersey. No one knew who he was. He liked it that way.

So there was Vrabel, coaching against Pederson and his Super Bowl champs Sunday in Nashville. The game was in overtime. Philly led 26-23 with 77 seconds left. The Tennessee quarterback, Marcus Mariota, had been drafted for moments just like this one, and for last week, when the 1-1 Titans had gone into Jacksonville and eked out a 9-6 win over one of the AFC favorites. Mariota, playing with some numbness in his throwing hand, got the game ball for last week's win, and before the game against Philadelphia, Vrabel said to him: "I can't wait to watch you play this team."

Fourth-and-two at the Philadelphia 32. Tennessee kept the field-goal unit on the field during a Titans timeout. "But I knew we were going for it," Vrabel told me. A couple of players urged him to go for it, and Vrabel said, "Relax, the offense is going back out."

So how did he reach this decision? A few things. The 50-yard field goal try to Ryan Succop wasn't a gimme. Vrabel knew his players wanted to go for it. And strategic conscience, assistant to the head coach John "Stretch" Streicher, had given him good advice from his perch in the coaches' booth upstairs. "If you're going to go for it," Streicher said through the headphones, "make sure you leave enough time so you can run enough plays to score." Vrabel met Streicher when he was an Ohio State assistant, and Streicher got some football experience as director of football ops at James Madison and Texas State before Vrabel called him to come to Nashville last winter.

"Stretch has been valuable for me and our staff," Vrabel said. "He advises me on replay, timeouts, the clock. In this case, even when the field-goal team was on the field for us, I thought we should go for the win. The odds of making a 50-yard field goal are probably slightly better than making a fourth-and-two at that point in the game against that defense. But I just thought of our players—they love going for it. I thought how tough Marcus was, and how much confidence I had in him. Plus, I guess ties help you, but I don't know. We didn't want a tie, even against a great team like this one."

"The risk, though," I said. "How do you weigh the risk?"

"I think people are more conscious of making [risky] decisions like this than ever before," Vrabel said. "I studied Philadelphia a lot this offseason. Doug is the gold standard when it comes to making bold moves like this. We talked at the owners' meetings and I've called him a few times about things. I'm lucky he's been approachable about some of the things he does. So I've done a few things. We threw a pass on a punt to a gunner [for a touchdown] against Houston."

By the time Tennessee sent its offense back on the field, the Eagles burned a timeout to match up. Then Mariota hit Dion Lewis—one of the go-for-it cheerleaders on the Titans sidelines—for 17 weaving yards.

Three plays later, on third-and-10 from the 10, Mariota threw a high-ball in the end zone that 6-3 Corey Davis needed every inch of his Dwight Clark-like reach to nab. Touchdown. Sixteen plays, 75 yards.

In the locker room, the collegiality of the Titans was there for all to see. At 43 and cut like an NFL linebacker (which he was till 2010), Vrabel ping-ponged between players, whooping and hollering at the realization that they'd beaten two of the final four teams from 2017 in back-to-back weeks. "We're not where we need to be!" Vrabel shouted. "But we're 3-1 after the first quarter [of the season]!"

Later, Vrabel said, "I don't think we're the most talented team in the NFL. But I know they love to play, and they play hard every day. Making decisions like I had to make today, that's the easy part. Executing is hard. And they're executing."

The Week 4 Report

10

The Other Mega-Call in Overtime

The situation: Texans 34, Colts 34 ... overtime ... 27 seconds left ... Indy ball, fourth-and-four at the Colt 43. "We're going for it 10 times out of 10," coach Frank Reich said.

In 2016 and 2017, Reich was Doug Pederson's offensive coordinator. He loved Pederson's guts, and not just because it's fun to go for it on fourth down—within reason. But because he saw the benefit with the team. It built confidence within the offense. Reich is convinced that Pederson's confidence in Nick Foles when Foles was struggling late in the regular season and in the first playoff game for the Eagles was a major factor in the backup quarterback turning into such a force in the NFL title game and the Super Bowl.

So here was Reich on Sunday, with Andrew Luck having one of the best days of his pro career—40 of 61 at this point, and in full command of his offense. Reich had two timeouts left and needed 25 yards to be in safe Adam Vinatieri field goal range. Punting would likely ensure a tie. If he went for the first down and made it, then Vinatieri might get a chance to win it. If he went for it and failed, the Texans would need maybe 13 yards to be in good field-goal range.

I see the tie faction. But I see going for it too, particularly on a day when Luck was hot. I think I would have gambled on Luck and Vinatieri and gone for the win. The larger issue: You know you're probably not a serious playoff contender, and you're trying to show your team you believe in them, and you've got a hot quarterback and a Hall of Fame kicker.

The Colts wake up 1-3 this morning instead of 1-2-1. Big deal. I doubt the players are saying, What's wrong with my coach? My guess is the players would have been ticked off to punt the ball inside the 20 instead of going for it.

Stream of consciousness, Trubisky chapter

Sunday could have been a landmark day for Mitchell Trubisky. We'll see. His rookie coach, Matt Nagy, thought the day with six touchdown passes and no interceptions in a 48-10 win over the Bucs could be a turning point for a young quarterback who'd been struggling. Nagy and Trubisky both felt the pressure in the City of Broad Shoulders, and the weight was getting heavy. The Bears defense was playing like classic Midway Monsters since Khalil Mack arrived a month ago. But the offense ... 77, 83 and 73-passer-rating games from Trubisky, and the Bears were 27th in passing yards per game entering Sunday. Not very good for a quarterback savior.

What did Trubisky do about it? Got to work, according to Nagy.

Nagy on his quarterback and what it's like to start a football game touchdown-punt-touchdown-touchdown-touchdown-touchdown-field goal-touchdown:

"All I want him to worry about is what I think about as a quarterback and nobody else. That's no slight to anybody. We need to do this our way. When you bring in a Khalil Mack and the defense starts playing the way they're playing, you start winning some games. When you're not playing up to par right away or matching your defense, there's instant frustration from a lot of people. Mitch understands that. Our lessons this week was let's just sit together and let's figure out why we're struggling on our offense and see if we can find some answers. We on offense had by far our best week of practice all week long. More specifically, in the red zone, because that's where we've been struggling, to go 4-for-4 in the red zone is a tribute to the players.

"What keeps getting used with our offense is, are we pulling back? We're not pulling back. What we've done though is just dissected a little bit. Maybe tweaked a few things, whether it's the progression of a play for Mitch, whether it's too many options at the line of scrimmage. I think the combination of that and just really guys offensively honing in on, worrying about what they do best and worrying about their own position and not worry about anybody else. See the difference in practice. You know sometimes, you start getting tight in these situations. You start trying to get perfect. We did the opposite of that this week. Everybody was loose in practice. We were just letting the ball fly. We didn't have that tightness where sometimes you get into that funk. I think that reflected in the game.

"What the difference was, there was more of an aggressive mentality with the players executing any type of downfield throws. It would have been easy to pull back and just go right back to the run and try to get out of the game. Our players and coaches didn't want any of that. We were wanting to just keep rolling. They were in that quote unquote zone. They felt it.

"After the game I told him just how proud I am of him. I told him about three different times that this is just the start. I want this to be his offense. I want him to understand that he can take this offense to another level. He's gone through a lot here in the last couple weeks and it's not easy. But these are the days and the games that you never forget.

"I go back to this week. When everybody was gone after practice, Mitch stayed after practice and threw about 50 to 60 deep balls into a stationary net about 50 yards downfield. Him and Dave Ragone, our quarterbacks coach, they were dropping back ... Dave was giving him some pressure in the pocket. Mitch would slide his feet and just throw. There was a span there where he hit 10 out of 12 into the net. Just like Michael Jordan shooting threes. [GM] Ryan Pace and I were standing back there watching him doing it and we just looked at each other. We said, This kid's in a zone. He's out there after a three-hour practice. For it to come to fruition today and see him have success with down-field throws, it was really cool."

What you'll read about this week

- Ingram's baaaaack ... already. The Saints' charter from Newark, bringing the team back from the 33-18 win over the Giants, landed at the New Orleans airport at 12:01 a.m. When the players and coaches cleared the secure area maybe a half-hour later, they had a guest waiting: running back Mark Ingram. The NFL suspended Ingram for four games for testing positive for a PED. With Ingram eligible to return

to the team today, he wasted no time in doing so. Ingram hugged coach Sean Payton and GM Mickey Loomis, and while most of the players and staff headed to their cars, the last two Saints in the airport were Ingram and his running mate in the backfield, Alvin Kamara. Cool scene. Kamara and Ingram will be job-sharing over the next three months (longer, if the Saints make the postseason) and they're good friends.

- That gigantic call in Oakland. The NFL has done a much better job this year at not micromanaging replay challenges, and not overturning calls made on the field unless the evidence is indisputable. There was a very big reversal in the Browns-Raiders game, and I still haven't seen indisputable evidence for the change of the call. The situation: Cleveland ball, Browns up 42-34, 1:41 left in the fourth quarter, third-and-two at the Cleveland 17. Carlos Hyde rams up the middle and lands on his back right at the yellow stripe, the TV gadget showing a faux first-down line, with the ball breaking the plane of the TV stripe. That stripe, of course, is not official. There's a measurement, and by the nose of the football, the crew signals a first down. If it stands, Cleveland can run out the clock, most likely. Oakland has no timeouts left.

But the play was reviewed. While it was under review, analyst and former NFL VP of Officiating Dean Blandino—who preceded the current VP, Al Riveron—said on FOX: “I don't see any way they can change this call.”

Upon further review, ref Walt Anderson and the New York officiating command center overturned it.

“Shocked,” was Blandino's reaction.

Officiating czar Al Riveron told me Sunday night the first-down line was “north of the 19-yard-line,” and Hyde didn't reach it, in his view. “When his wrist goes down, it goes down at the same time as the elbow ... everything hits the ground at the same time. The helmet [of Hyde] is barely breaking the plane of the 19, and the ball is not breaking the plane. We can clearly see when the wrist, forearm and elbow hit the ground, it's short of the [first-down] line.”

On the TV replays I saw, I didn't see the line that Riveron and crew figured; I just saw the yellow TV stripe. Sometimes the ball is near a yard marker or some other landmark, but it wasn't the case here. So I didn't see what Riveron saw. I'm not saying I'm right; I'm saying I didn't see what Riveron saw.

“What's your reaction to what Blandino said on TV?” I asked.

“If I were to comment on everything said by people who once sat in this chair,” Riveron said, “I won't know where I would start and where I would end.”

None of this will salve the angry Cleveland fandom today. But that's the league's reasoning.

What I Learned

'I understand football now. It's a business'

Retired Giants pass-rusher Osi Umenyiora, who once had six sacks in one game, on coming to the understanding that the lords of football are going to protect the quarterback at all costs—even if it means enforcing rules that don't make a lot of sense.

“It took me a while to learn this, and I don’t think people understand the reality of the game sometimes. Football is a multi-billion-dollar business. Decisions are made based on dollars and cents and profits. Football is a great game. Maybe it takes away from the luster of it, but it’s more a business than a game, and the business part of this requires that your best players be on the field.

“When I came into the NFL [in 2003], we were taught to think of the NFL as a game. But then you see the quarterbacks and what they mean. I mean, Von Miller and Rob Gronkowski and Odell Beckham are huge players in the NFL. But nobody determines the outcomes of games like franchise quarterbacks. Watch what happens to the 49ers now; watch the viewers turn them off with Jimmy Garoppolo down now. Look at what happened to the Packers last year when Aaron Rodgers went down. Those guys get hurt, and the TV numbers, the viewership numbers, go down. So you see the NFL—what do they do? They keep doing more to protect the franchise quarterbacks. They’re protecting their investment. The quarterback stays on the field, business is good. The quarterback is off the field, business is hurt. If there was another position that determined the success or failure in a game as much as quarterback, I guarantee they’d be doing the same thing to protect that position. But there isn’t one, so the league doesn’t do it. It’s sad, but it’s reality.

“Once you’ve learned that, you understand the actions of the league a lot better.

“I understand how tough it is to get to the quarterback. They throw the ball quicker and quicker. And I understand the pain of the pass-rusher today. It’s a really, really difficult job now, a tough position to be in. You’re asking guys to change the way they play football. I hate to see it. But those are the rules that are going to be enforced.

“I also think it’s 100 percent possible for the pass-rushers to change. My teammates on the Giants used to make fun of me when I tackled—Justin Tuck, Michael Strahan, Dave Tolleason. I wouldn’t land full on the quarterback. I’d always go for the ball. Look at the game I had six sacks—I don’t think I landed full on the quarterback once. Maybe once. [One of the six sacks of Donovan McNabb in 2007 was a fall on McNabb’s torso—which likely would have been flagged today.] My focus was on knocking the ball from the quarterback’s hands instead of driving through him. When you knock the ball from a quarterback in the pocket, that counts as a sack and a forced fumble. One of my line coaches, Mike Waufle, used to say, ‘Get the trifecta!’ That was the forced fumble, the sack, and fumble recovery. We called it the holy grail. It’s a bigger play than just a sack—that’s what I tried for all the time.

“I think rushers are going to find a way to adjust. They have to. The officials are going to err on the side of protecting the quarterback.”

Umenyiora, who had 90.5 regular-season and post-season sacks in 11 NFL seasons, works as an NFL TV host on a twice-weekly football show on BBC in London.

The Award Section

20

Offensive Players of the Week

C.J. Beathard, quarterback, San Francisco. Kyle Shanahan kept saying all week the Niners would be competitive with Beathard replacing Jimmy Garoppolo. And it’s not only that Beathard needed to be good on the road against a quality team, the Chargers; it’s that San Francisco had to get over the devastation of losing their franchise quarterback with 13 games left. Beathard was more than competitive. He was very good—23 of 37, 298 yards, two touchdowns and two picks (one that bounced

off a receiver in what should have been an easy catch). Down 26-17 late in the third quarter, Beathard threw an 82-yard catch-and-run TD to tight end George Kittle to cut the Chargers' lead to 26-24. Then Beathard led a field goal drive to take the lead in the fourth quarter, 27-26. It's hard to reward a player from a team that lost, particularly when they were so many worthy performances, but what Beathard accomplished gives the Niners hope that they can be a competitive franchise all season.

Ezekiel Elliott, running back, Dallas. This is the kind of game Dallas needs to play to win: max Elliott touches. He had 29 touches in all, for 240 scrimmage yards (25 carries for 152, and four catches for 88 yards and a touchdown). Dallas needed all of it in the 26-24 last-second win over Detroit.

Cooper Kupp, wide receiver, Los Angeles Rams. You know your receiving corps is in fine fettle when the number three guy, Kupp, is on pace to catch 86 balls for 1,392 yards, 16 touchdowns and a 14.5-yards-per-catch average. Kupp beat linebacker Anthony Barr for one touchdown catch Thursday night and two corners for the other one in a nine-catch, 162-yard, two-TD night against Minnesota. Kupp's a possession receiver and a field-stretcher.

Mitchell Trubisky, quarterback, Chicago. Four touchdown passes in the first 21 minutes against the Fitzlostmagic Bucs, six in all. Trey Burton, Allen Robinson, Tarik Cohen, Joshua Bellamy and Taylor Gabriel all caught TDs in the first half. Trubisky (19-26, 354 yards, 6 TD, 0 interceptions) finally looked at ease and confident. By the way, no Bear quarterback has had five touchdowns in a game in the past 60 years. Trubisky had five in the first 25 minutes of this game.

Defensive Players of the Week

Tony Jefferson, safety, Baltimore. In the annual Ravens-Steelers grudge match at Heinz Field, the Ravens took an early 7-0 lead on their first drive. When the Steelers got the ball back, Ben Roethlisberger threw a third-down pass to tight end Vance McDonald in the left flat. Jefferson, the physical former Cardinal, stole the ball from McDonald while tackling him. Jefferson just ripped the ball out of tight end's muscular grasp. With a purring offense, the Ravens scored on the ensuing possession, and it was 14-0 before all the fans were in the stadium.

Jadeveon Clowney, outside linebacker, Houston. Texans (0-3) went down 7-0 four minutes into a division game at Indy. On the next two Colts' series, Clowney turned the game around, totally. First series: Clowney jumped on a fumble in the end zone for a touchdown; 7-7. Second series: Clowney careened past left tackle Le'Raven Clark and nailed Andrew Luck for a third-down sack back to the Indy 10. With the short field after a punt, Houston drove for a quick touchdown, and it was 14-7, Texans. Late in the third quarter, Clowney forced an intentional grounding on Andrew Luck. For the day, Clowney had a touchdown, two sacks, and four tackles for loss. With the inconsistency of Houston's offense this year, it's going to be up to star-studded front seven of the Texans to stay competitive.

Kyler Fackrell, linebacker, Green Bay. The Packers pressured Buffalo quarterback Josh Allen from the first snap in his second career start in holding the Bills to 11 first downs and zero points. Fackrell, constantly buzzing around the backfield, sacked Allen three times, a career best.

Special Teams Player of the Week

Adam Vinatieri, kicker, Indianapolis. It wasn't the toughest kick of his career; it wouldn't have been the toughest kick of his high school career. But Vinatieri's 42-yard field goal just before halftime against Houston was the 566th of his career, breaking Morten Andersen's all-time NFL mark of 565 field goals.

Vinatieri's 44-yarder in overtime put the Colts ahead, but the Texans went on to win. Barring injury, the 45-year-old Vinatieri should break Andersen's scoring record by midseason.

Brett Maher, kicker, Dallas. Speaking of non-tough kicks, Maher made four of them—from 32, 43, 22 and 38 yards, the final one winning the game as the clock ran out, 26-24 over the Lions. For all the pressure Maher has been under replacing one of the best kickers in football, Dan Bailey, a game-winner with the searing glare of Jerry Jones looking on from on high is worth praise.

Taysom Hill, quarterback/punt-team upback, New Orleans. Another brave call on special teams by coach Sean Payton, and one of his favorite players, Hill, executed. Midway through the first quarter, on fourth-and-two from the Saints' 33, Hill, the upback on the punt team, took the short snap and fired a 10-yard pass to defensive back/gunner Justin Hardee. Cool play. Smart play. The Saints went on to drive for a field goal.

Justin Tucker, kicker, Baltimore. Heinz Field is, historically, a bit of a Bermuda Triangle for kickers. Except for one. Tucker was four-for-four in field goals Sunday night in the 26-14 victory over the Steelers. In fact, Tucker was the only person to score in the second half in this game. He hit on field goals of 47, 49, 28 and 31 yards after halftime. Now he has a streak of 17 straight at Heinz Field, and the most accurate field-goal kicker of all time stretched his lead over Dan Bailey to almost two full percentage points. Tucker, number one, has made 90.2 percent of his kicks. Bailey, number two, is at 88.3 percent. That seems like a wow to me.

Coaches of the Week

Mike Vrabel, coach, Tennessee. The Titans have gone bold this season because Vrabel likes to play that way. From the cool fake-punt touchdown throw by safety Kevin Byard in Week 2 to the gut-feeling go-for-it on fourth-and-two in overtime against the Super Bowl champs Sunday, he's fine with putting his developing rep on the line—and he told me it's largely because his players love it, and he thinks it makes for a tighter team, all pulling together. Whatever it is, the Titans have beaten two of the NFL's final four teams from 2017—Jacksonville and Philadelphia—in the last eight days, and they're 3-1 with the tiebreaker edge in the AFC South after a quarter of the season.

Sean McVay, coach, Los Angeles Rams. When McVay got to southern California 20 months ago, job one was fixing quarterback Jared Goff, who had a lousy rookie year that left his confidence shaken. Since then, Goff has rebuilt his mechanics and footwork and confidence, and he has been one of the most efficient, explosive quarterbacks in the game. The five-TD master-show by Goff in the win over the Vikings reinforced all the work McVay has done with him. Wrote Sam Farmer of the Los Angeles Times post-game: "[McVay] is the quintessential Goffensive coordinator, drawing up plays that allow his third-year quarterback to pick apart opponents with surgical precision." True.

Quotes of the Week

"I'll just address it now. We are not playing to tie. We're going for it 10 times out of 10."

—Frank Reich, the Indianapolis coach, on going for the first down in a tie game with 27 seconds left in overtime, on fourth-and-four from the Colts' 43. The attempt failed, Houston took over on downs, and advanced to kick the game-winning field goal as time ran out.

“I loved it. We had a discussion before the play and I agreed. I didn’t give [wide receiver] Chester [Rogers] enough of a chance to make a play, and I’m sick about it.”

—Andrew Luck, who threw the incomplection that led to Houston winning.

“You know that Reich honeymoon? Yeah, it’s over. Took a month, but it’s over.”

—Indianapolis columnist Bob Kravitz, in his post-game column for WTHR-TV.

“Isaac Rochell! ROCHELL ROCHELL! WITH HIS FIRST CAREER INTERCEPTION!”

—CBS play-by-play man Andrew Catalon, channeling his inner “Seinfeld,” calling the decisive play in Chargers-Niners, the Charger interception halting the last San Francisco drive of the game.

“We were terrible on offense.”

—Aaron Rodgers, who curiously took some swipes at the play-calling after Green Bay put up 423 yards in a 22-0 shutout of Buffalo.

“My fault, Ben!”

—Tampa Bay defensive tackle Gerald McCoy, while steamrolling Ben Roethlisberger in the pocket last Monday in the Bucs’ 30-27 loss to Pittsburgh, captured by an ESPN mic.

This is what it’s come to in today’s football: In mid-play, pass-rushers are apologizing to quarterbacks.

“Jon Gruden, looking for his first NFL win in 3,591 days.”

—Scott Hanson, host of “NFL RedZone” on NFL Network, as overtime started in Oakland with the Raiders and Browns tied at 42.

Numbers Game

30

Comparing the Rams before and after Sean McVay is an exercise in why coaching matters. McVay is 20 games into his NFL head-coaching career after the Rams’ 38-31 win over the Vikings on Thursday night. So I charted his first 20 games versus the Rams’ previous 20.

Under McVay

Record: 15-5

Points Scored: 618

Points Differential: +222

Passer Rating: 104.1

Before McVay (Previous 20 Games)

Record: 7-13

Points Scored: 315

Points Differential: -152

Passer Rating: 72.7

Jared Goff's passer rating before McVay arrived: 63.6.

Since McVay arrived: 106.4.

Factoidness

One month. Six transactions. Unemployment. The recent life of Corey Coleman.

Before being a first-round pick of the Browns in 2016, Coleman, 30 short months ago, told NFL Network he was the best receiver in the draft. "I can pretty much do everything," he said. "I can return kicks, I can return punts. I can play in the slot. I can play outside."

Well, he can. But only if someone will employ him.

The month of September for Coleman, picked 15th overall in 2016—32 spots ahead of Michael Thomas, 150 spots ahead of Tyreek Hill:

Sept. 1: Cut by the Buffalo Bills 26 days after they traded a seventh-round pick for him.

Sept. 7: Worked out for the Cardinals in Tempe, Ariz. Not signed.

Sept. 10: Worked out for the Patriots in Foxboro, Mass.

Sept. 11: Signed by the Patriots to a one-year contract.

Sept. 17: Cut by the Patriots after they acquired Josh Gordon from Cleveland.

Sept. 19: Signed by the Patriots to the Practice Squad.

Sept. 29: Cut by the Patriots from the Practice Squad.

September 2018: a month that will live in infamy, and anonymity, for Coleman.

Intelligent Football

40

Andy Reid should get credit for a few things in Kansas City right now. He wanted a quarterback he felt was smart and he thought he could win with when he got to the Chiefs in 2013, and so Kansas City acquired Alex Smith in trade from San Francisco. Smith got Reid's teams to four playoff appearances in five seasons, but Smith was limited with his deep balls and his January performance. So Reid (and then-GM John Dorsey) traded up to draft Patrick Mahomes in 2017. The rest is very early history.

But here's where Reid deserves a little more credit. In each of the past two seasons—through 16 games in 2017 and through three weeks in 2018—his quarterbacks lead the league in a stat Pro Football Focus calls Open Receivers. PFF judged the percentage of throws each quarterback in the league makes that are at least 10 yards downfield and where the receiver has at least one yard of separation on the coverman. In other words, downfield throws that are, in NFL terms, open.

Give Reid and his staff credit for play design and play calls. And give the receivers and quarterbacks credit for executing the throws and catches.

Transaction of the Week

From the NFL's Transactions Wire, last Tuesday:

Cleveland Browns

Signed TE Pharaoh Brown to the practice squad.

Released TE Pharaoh McKeever from the practice squad.

The 6-6 Pharaoh Brown, 24, had been waived by Oakland on Sept. 1.

The 6-6 Pharaoh McKeever, 24, had been waived by Pittsburgh on Sept. 1.

Newman!

50

To comment on the column, or to say anything about anything, you can reach me by email.

I want to know too. From Mack R.: "Please explain to me why the NFL can't have video review on penalties. I'm not blaming the refs for not being able to see if it's a penalty or not, but a simple video review or challenge would right a wrong."

I agree. I always will agree with you. In fact, I think every play should be reviewable. People who don't want this say it will unduly lengthen already long games. I say it might, slightly, but coaches would be judicious with their challenges because the only way I'd favor this is if the NFL didn't expand the challenge system. It's okay to have two challenges per team per game; I would be opposed to any more. But if a call is wrong, it's wrong, judgment call or not.

On Titans releasing Rishard Matthews. From Gary T., of Monroe, Ga.: "Heck of a risk Rishard Matthews is taking. He was set to make over \$8 million this season. I can't see any team signing him for anywhere near that amount."

You're a little high on the money, but I agree. Matthews obviously was frustrated with his involvement in the offense to this point—with just three catches in three weeks—but that's due to him missing most of training camp with a knee injury and working his way back into the offense in September. He would have been significantly more involved in the offense going forward. Matthews hasn't been happy, I've heard. But it's surprising he wouldn't stick around to build up some numbers and collect his \$300,000 a week (or so). That's more than he'd make anywhere else this year.

Do you haiku? From Jason G., of Intervale, N.H.: "As a huge fan of The Adieu Haiku, I thought I'd pass this one along.

Jimmy G, bum knee.

Kaepernick's available...

Politics or wins?

I can give you no higher compliment than to say I wish I'd thought of that one this week, Jason.

10 Things I Think I Think

1. I think these are my quick-hit thoughts of Week 4:

- a. I guess the Packers really couldn't have used Jordy Nelson. He told me in camp they didn't negotiate with him before releasing him. Watching him in the first month, he's been classic Nelson for the Raiders.
- b. Best throwback unis: Saints road whites.
- c. Hilarious moment of the day: Josh Rosen scrambles late in the first half of his first NFL start, and he goes down near midfield, and he reaches his hand up to Seattle middle linebacker Bobby Wagner; like, Hey, help me up, will you? Wagner looked at the outstretched hand and just walked away. Weird little educational moment for the kid.
- d. Jon Gruden will see that dropped 53-yard touchdown pass by Martavis Bryant in his nightmares for a long time.
- e. Marshawn Lynch, when he's right and when he's into it, runs as hard as any back in football, by far.
- f. Kyle Shanahan was right about C.J. Beathard: He is better for those five starts in 2017. Beathard played a competitive, strong game at the Chargers.
- g. J.J. Watt, it's like you never left. Two more sacks, one stripping Andrew Luck.
- h. When Josh Allen looks back one day on the dumb throws of his career, the first throw on the reel will be the pick he threw across his body, falling out of bounds, desperado-style, that was picked by Jaire Alexander at the goal line on a series the Bills desperately needed points.
- i. Remember when Ryan Fitzpatrick was an MVP candidate? Was that eight days or eight years ago?
- j. Khalil Mack: four games as a Bear, four games with a sack and forced fumble.
- k. But could the Lions' uniforms be any more drab? All light gray? Who in the Lions' hierarchy said, "Hey, let's go with the light gray socks, light grey pants, light gray jerseys, and white numbers and white names on the back of the jerseys? That's a great look!"
- l. Just what the Falcons needed with all the defensive injuries they have: Atlanta's Marvin Hall returned the opening kick to the Cincinnati 47, setting the stage for the Falcons' first touchdown of the game, just five minutes in.
- m. "I'm more than the Philly Special guy," Trey Burton told me in July in training camp, and the new Bear tight end delivered with an aired-out 39-yard touchdown catch from Mitchell Trubisky.
- n. So that's why the Patriots drafted Sony Michel: 25 carries, 112 yards.
- o. One of the offseason's underrated acquisitions, defensive end Henry Anderson, with a huge play for the Jets, sacking Blake Bortles and forcing the Jags to kick a field goal early.

- p. Malcolm Butler got badly burned by Jordan Matthews on his first touchdown back with the Eagles.
- q. That touchdown catch by New England wideout Phillip Dorsett, caught a few inches off the ground while somersaulting in the end zone, was a thing of beauty.
- r. Miami cornerback Xavien Howard, player of the week last week, was the picked-on player of the week Sunday in Foxboro.
- s. Awful coverage by Philadelphia cornerback Sidney Jones on the late go-ahead touchdown pass from Marcus Mariota to Tajae Sharpe in Tennessee.
- t. Johnny Hekker threw that fake-punt pass against the Vikes 49 yards in the air, and it was a perfect spiral. Would have been the play of the week except for the little matter of the incomplection.
- u. How the officials whistled Adam Thielen down when he was untouched on that first-half completion when he was clearly not touched ... beyond me. Officials are supposed to call what they see, not what they think they saw. Brutal error.
- v. Excellent job on Thursday night, with the upstairs spotter directing that the game officials should take an angry Adam Thielen off the field when he looked slightly woozy after a head-to-leg hit falling to the ground.
- w. Alvin Kamara and Benjamin Watson both getting two hands on passes in the end zone on the same drive, and neither coming down with the ball ... now that's not something I thought I'd be typing this week, or any week.
- x. Man, it's tough to watch Eli Manning when he's pressured. He seems so incapable when the heat's on.
- y. Baker Mayfield hasn't made a lot of dumb plays, but tied 42-42 and not taking a relatively sure 10 to 15-yard completion when he's at the Oakland 49 with 14 seconds to go, preferring to throw a prayer into heavy coverage ... not smart. It was picked. No field goal shot. Overtime instead.
2. I think Sunday was the first time I thought Todd Bowles has an expiration date on him. Not his fault that the offense looks like a green rookie is leading it. But not many teams in New York give a coach a fifth year after four playoff-less seasons, which is where the Jets are heading.
3. I think I support guaranteed contracts for players more than ever after watching the Tyler Eifert injury in Atlanta on Sunday. To put it mildly, Eifert's broken right leg was jarring and disturbing, his foot pointed grotesquely to the right instead of straight. It showed the danger every player faces on every play. Fight for those guaranteed contracts in the new CBA in 2021, players.
4. I think there is little question what the game of the year is now. And no one would have picked it even a month ago. Clue? Week 11. Another clue? Not in the United States. It's Chiefs-Rams on Monday, Nov. 19, in Mexico City. I'm not much of a gambler man. But as my good friend Brent Musburger would say, Take the over.
5. I think I know one of the big reasons the NFL is so psycho about the health of quarterbacks. Let me take you back to April, when I did my annual story on the NFL schedule, inside the room where the slate

is invented by NFL schedule-meister Howard Katz and his crew, including NFL director of broadcasting Mike North, who said this about the creating of the 2018 schedule:

“The fact that we had some new playoff teams from last year, the fact that we had some teams playing well at the end of the year—teams like San Francisco—means when we go into the scheduling process, we don’t necessarily have to rely only on the traditional brands. Yes, the Cowboys and the Patriots, and the Steelers and the Packers, and the Super Bowl champions are going to be on national television plenty. But ... San Francisco is going to be a really interesting story, early in the season.”

That bullishness on the Niners resulted in them getting the NFL limit of five prime-time games. None came in the first three weeks, when the starting quarterback would have been Jimmy Garoppolo. Incredibly, the NFL scheduled the Niners for five prime-time games in an eight-week span. The Niners’ schedule in prime time: Week 6, at Green Bay (Monday night, ESPN); Week 7, Rams (Sunday night, NBC); Week 9, Oakland (Thursday night, FOX); Week 10, Giants (Monday night, ESPN); Week 13, at Seattle (Sunday night, NBC). Sunday night flex rules allow the league to move the Niners out of Week 7 and Week 13 games on NBC.

Three points to make about those possible flex dates:

- Re: Rams at Niners, Week 7—Not a lot of great potential flex options here. I’d bet on New Orleans at Baltimore as the best shot if each has a winning record a week from today—if the league flexes. Moving New England-Chicago from the early Sunday window would give the Patriots an unheard-of five straight prime-time games. But if the Rams continue to be a juggernaut, the sexiness of McVay/Goff/Donald would make it tempting for the league to keep the game, even with C.J. Beathard the other quarterback. In the end, I think the league won’t want to flex this game unless the Niners looks like a lost cause a week from now. Deadline for flex: Oct. 9.

- Re: Niners at Seahawks, Week 13—Minnesota at New England, the current FOX doubleheader game in the late window that Sunday, could be interesting here. San Francisco at Seattle was compelling too because of Richard Sherman returning to Seattle for the first time, but if both teams are struggling and there’s a better game, this week will a better chance for a flex than Week 7.

- Just so you know, here are the prime-time rules: A team can be scheduled for as many as five prime-time games. A team can be flexed into a sixth prime-time game in any week from Week 5 through 16. And the league can choose any game in Week 17 to be the Sunday night game. Theoretically, then, a team scheduled for five prime-time games and then flexed into a sixth could still end up playing a seventh if it’s chosen for the final game of the season.

6. I think the Vikings are in trouble. They’re tie-loss-loss in the last three games, and they go to Philadelphia on Sunday ... probably without their best pass-rusher. Everson Griffen is undergoing some mental-health evaluation after a couple of bizarre episodes in Minnesota in the past week. Imagine a loss in the NFC title rematch, and the Vikings starting 1-3-1. Some thought the Vikings would lose three all season, never mind three in the first 30 days.

7. I think I don’t know why this injury hit me the way it did, but man, I feel for Jake Butt, the presumptive long-term starter at tight end for the Broncos. Butt tore his ACL in practice the other day. That’s three torn ACLs in four-and-a-half years, and now he’s torn the left and the right in a span of 21 months. “We feel terrible,” coach Vance Joseph said. How can you not?

8. I think this was a significant quote last week that got lost a bit but really should not. It comes from Mike Tomlin, after the Steelers' 30-27 win over Tampa Bay, a game that was slowed to a snail's pace by 28 penalty flags (with 24 of them accepted). The Monday night game plodded along at 3 hours, 19 minutes. Tomlin said:

"That probably wasn't a fun game to watch. The penalties were a significant element of the game. As somebody who appreciates the game and understands we're in the sports entertainment business, it is worrisome from the fan perspective. I do worry about what it's like to watch that game at home with penalties being administered at the rate that they were."

Why was it so significant? Tomlin is a member of the eight-man NFL Competition Committee, and I can tell you from my contact with the committee that he's highly respected on it. I am certain his voice about keeping flags in officials' pockets was heard on the committee's conference call the other day.

9. I think there are so many good football books out this fall. It's hard to keep track of them all, and I wish I could give them all the attention they deserve. One that caught my eye when it was in the blurb phase, and he reached out to see if I would read and provide a couple of thoughts for the cover, was Doug Farrar's "The Genius of Desperation: The Schematic Innovations That Made the Modern NFL" (Triumph Books). Farrar's theory was so valid. So often in football history, coaches and innovators have succeeded out of desperation and from trying things no one else had tried. It's easy to watch football and copy another coach's plays or approach; it's accepted and almost an honor to those having ideas stolen. But it's better, with a better chance to leave footprints and win big, if you invent something.

I asked Farrar about that aspect of his book. It was particularly rewarding, Farrar said, "to tell the stories of NFL innovators who blazed a revolutionary trail, but have never gotten their due. The first chapter is devoted almost entirely to Clark Shaughnessy, who started out as a consultant for George Halas and the Bears in the late 1930s. Shaughnessy brought motion and passing options to the T Formation that not only allowed Chicago to beat Washington 73-0 in the 1940 NFL Championship, but also catapulted Stanford from a 1-7-1 mark in 1939 to a 10-0 record and a Rose Bowl win in Shaughnessy's first year as head coach. Then, in 1949, he became the Rams head coach and created the modern three-receiver formation when he moved Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsch from tailback to receiver. When he returned to the Bears as defensive coordinator, he so effectively shut down Red Hickey's shotgun formation, it would be another 20 years before anyone really used it again. People don't really know who he is, and he has a remarkable history."

History books can be dry affairs. Not this one. This one breathes.

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

a. Sad week, mostly but not altogether, for our country. I watched TV all day Thursday (that was enough); I'm a slight political junkie, and I came away with a few thoughts.

b. I don't have any reason to not believe Dr. Christine Blasey Ford about the sexual-assault event that seems to have traumatized her. Her story that she was attacked by a 17-year-old Brett Kavanaugh more than 30 years ago was haunting and harrowing. Kavanaugh vehemently insisted he was innocent. No matter your side in this, if you had one, it's impossible for us to know exactly what happened. Maybe only two people on the planet really know what happened.

c. But what bothered me more than anything was this realization: The people who sat in majority control of this hearing, the 11 Republicans on the Judiciary Committee, are, in order: white male, white male. Their ages: 85, 84, 67, 66, 66, 63, 58, 55, 47, 47, 46. Think about that. Eleven white males, average age 62.2, sitting in judgment of a 53-year-old white male from the upper crust of society. There is a dispute, a she-said, he-said dispute. She is eminently believable. He is adamant about his innocence. Certainly it's going to be impossible to know with certainty what happened. But why is it in the United States of America in 2018—with a population of 327 million (median age 37.8 years old), of which 165 million are women—that the ultimate jury in this case is so non-representative of what this country really is right now? We are 50.8 percent women, and there are no women on the Republican side of the Judiciary Committee. We are 39 percent non-white, and there are no non-white Republicans on the committee. Incredible to me that in this day and time, the political process is stuck in 1969.

d. Why are so many people fed up with Washington and want to start over? That last paragraph.

e. Thank you for the outrage, Ana Maria Archila and Maria Gallagher. And thank you, Jeff Flake, for having the guts to call a timeout in these proceedings.

f. My friend Jenny Vrentas posted this from Good Reads, and I found it important reading over the weekend. What an educational read. Men simply can't know exactly what a woman's life is like when it comes to sexual harassment and assault.

g. Disturbing Media Story of the Week: by Robert Silverman of The Daily Beast, on the raunchy, over-the-top culture at Barstool Sports, particularly the instances in which female reporters who dare write about the sexist stuff are harassed.

h. Some of the skin-crawling stuff, led by Barstool founder Dave Portnoy, done to reporters like Laura Wagner of Deadspin, is a disgrace. It's Howard Stern gone too far. As Silverman reported:

“Portnoy filmed a Barstool blogger in the shower without his consent, then called his employee “crazy” after he vigorously and repeatedly objected; he also told another 20-year-old employee her looks would deteriorate in five years, such that she wouldn't be worth putting in front of the camera (the employee fled the radio segment in tears); Portnoy wondered on-air if Harvey Weinstein should be able to offer roles in movies in exchange for consensual sex, and he wrote blog posts mocking the appearance of Deadspin's editor in chief and the editorial director of Gizmodo Media Group, both of whom are women.”

i. Late in my tenure at Sports Illustrated, we were in discussions to do a Sunday NFL segment with Barstool personality PFT Commenter. It didn't work out and—though I like the clever weirdo PFT Commenter—I'm glad it didn't, after reading all of this misogynistic stuff in Silverman's story.

j. Not that it will generate a pebble-in-the-ocean effect, but I won't be appearing on any more of the programming in the Barstool empire.

k. Coffeenerdness: I've railed against this for some time, to no avail. The consistency at Manhattan Starbucks is nonexistent. I believe the trainers of the trainers need to be trained better.

l. Beer nerdness: I saw Good Natured American Blonde Ale (Good Nature Brewing, Hamilton, N.Y.) on the menu at a New York restaurant the other day, and, being the dad of Colgate alum Mary Beth King, and discovering that the brewery was just off campus, I had to try it. Good choice. A lighter ale, but hoppy and pleasant. Enjoyed it.

m. Story of the Week: from journalist Jeff Neiburg on what happens when, in the prime of your life, having just started a new job you're going to love, a doctor tells you that you have an inoperable tumor at the base of your brainstem? Well, you go to a baseball game with your dad.

n. Great humanity from Jeff Neiburg, sitting in his doctor's office, his mind racing: "When will I start experiencing double vision? Will that even happen? What if it doesn't grow? What if it grows fast? Why do I feel so completely normal and physically strong? Man, the brain is really fascinating. Science is wild. Can't I just stay here forever? Will I get to grow old with Lisa, the love of my life? How many more baseball games will I go to with my dad?"

o. The MMQB's Tim Rohan and I went to the final Jacob deGrom start of the year, his presumptive Cy Young-insurance game. I keep score of games, baseball weirdo that I am. You can see for yourself (assist: Rohan, for scoring for the couple of innings when I had to make a phone call), if you can read my writing.

p. On the occasion of the day after the regular season ends, this note: I'll miss the box scores for the next six months. I always do.

q. I will not miss this rotisserie baseball season. Every decision I made was wrong. I finished a desultory eighth in my 12-team New Jersey league. The last week was especially perfect. So sick of Ryan Braun hitting like a backup catcher for months, I benched him for the last week of the season, and of course he proceeded to hit five home runs in five days. I stink.

r. Best wishes in the job search to one of the very good ones, columnist Bob Kravitz in Indianapolis. He's honest and earnest and pointed and real. I love reading him. I hope I'm able to continue to do so.

s. Sad to see former Eagles safety Wes Hopkins, who I covered a bit but didn't know, and Hall of Fame wide receiver Tommy McDonald, who I didn't cover but go to know, both pass away last week. McDonald was one of the most interesting Hall of Fame cases I recall trying to adjudicate. He stood just 5-9, and was a classic NFL flanker in the fifties and sixties. At his peak, from 1960-62, he was the biggest receiving threat—arguably—in the game, averaging 19.2 yards per catch and 1,030 yards per season, with 36 touchdown catches. Those would be incredible numbers today.

t. Most notably, McDonald was the happiest Hall of Fame enshrinee I've ever seen when he got into the Hall in 1998. He wrote me (and I suppose all of the voters) a hand-written note declaring, in capital letters, "I JUST WANT YOU TO KNOW YOU'VE MADE AN OLD MAN VERY HAPPY!"

u. If Tiger Woods is such an intimidator, why has he won just 13 of 36 Ryder Cup matches he's played? Maybe he's the intimidatee.

v. Great tribute to the retiring and beloved David Wright by the Mets and their adoring fans Saturday night. The career wasn't as long as he'd have liked, but I'd be hard-pressed to name a classier New York athlete in the three-plus decades I've lived in and around the city.

w. Football Profile of the Week: Master Tesfatsion of Bleacher Report on Antonio Brown is special. The detail is what makes this so good. You just fly through it. My favorite detail: On the day Tesfatsion spent with Brown, the enigmatic Steeler receiver flossed his teeth three times.

x. TV Story of the Week: ESPN's powerful piece on Mike Tomlin going to Haiti to support efforts to end human trafficking, with a special focus on the case of one Haitian man with a harrowing story of loss.

y. The 1962 Mets lost 120 games. The 2018 Baltimore Orioles lost 115 games. That is all.

Monday, Monday

40

Kansas City 31, Denver 23. It's in Denver, but Kansas City has won three straight in Colorado and five straight in the series, and now they're playing with better weaponry for the Broncos to defend. But the big matchup is on Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes' right side. The last three times Von Miller has lined up at his customary left outside linebacker position across from Chiefs right tackle Mitchell Schwartz, Miller had zero-sack games. ESPN needs to have an iso camera on that matchup all night.

The Week Ahead

- Thursday ... Foxboro. Julian Edelman, at 32 years old and in a very short week of practice, returns from a four-game PED suspension, and the Pats' win Sunday makes his arrival significantly less urgent. But with a game against an Indianapolis defense that's one of the most surprising units in the first month of the season, the Pats hope Edelman will be a factor for his close friend Tom Brady, starting in the first quarter.
- Friday ... New York City. Jesse Palmer turns 40. Did you know in his pre-Bachelor life he once played football? In the National Football League? For the New York Giants? You didn't? Well, here's a little education. This is the 15th-anniversary season of his three NFL touchdown passes. Jesse Palmer Quiz: Who caught two of his three NFL touchdown passes? Oooh, the suspense. If you guessed Visanthe Shiancoe, you win a lifetime pass to read this column.
- Sunday ... Cincinnati. For better or worse (often times the latter), the Bengals have cast their lot with troubled linebacker Vontaze Burfict, who returns from his third suspension in three seasons (three, three and four games) when Cincinnati needs its leading tackler most. The men in stripes are surrendering 28.3 points a game, and the AFC East-leading Dolphins come to town first, followed by two of the league's top five passing games in succession—Chiefs and Steelers.

The Adieu Haiku

30

Chaotic day, but ...

Kudos to A Ballplayer.

Well played, Joe Mauer.

Drew Brees likely to break Peyton Manning's passing yardage record this week

By Michael David Smith

Pro Football Talk

Oct. 1, 2018

Peyton Manning's NFL record of 71,940 career passing yards is about to fall.

Saints quarterback Drew Brees is now just 200 yards away, with 71,740 career yards through Sunday's game against the Giants.

Brees has topped 200 yards in 11 consecutive games, so he's likely to top 200 yards again when New Orleans hosts Washington next week on Monday Night Football. When he does that, he'll move ahead of Manning for first on the all-time list.

The passing yardage record will be the second major career passing record that Brees will break this season, having already broken Brett Favre's record for most career completions.