

Denver Broncos

2012 Record: 13-3	Total DVOA: 36.5% (2)	2013 Mean Projection: 10.3 wins	On the Clock (0-4): 1%
Pythagorean Wins: 12.5 (2)	Offense: 22.1% (2)	Postseason Odds: 82.7%	Mediocrity (5-7): 8%
Snap-Weighted Age: 27.4 (7)	Defense: -13.8% (5)	Super Bowl Odds: 23.2%	Playoff Contender (8-10): 38%
Average Opponent: -6.8% (31)	Special Teams: 0.6% (13)	Proj. Avg. Opponent: -4.5% (29)	Super Bowl Contender (11+): 52%
2012: John Elway's \$18 million gamble pays off.			
2013: Likely defensive regression makes Denver <i>a</i> top Super Bowl contender rather than <i>the</i> top Super Bowl contender.			

Last year, Broncos Executive Vice President of Football Operations John Elway made an \$18 million bet that Peyton Manning would regain his form despite four neck operations. The bet paid off. The version of Manning that Denver got was very similar to the version that Indianapolis had long enjoyed.

Unfortunately, the similarities between Denver Manning and Indianapolis Manning included the type of disappointing playoff exit that, about a decade ago, had fairly or unfairly defined Manning's career. It's a little surprising that John Fox's reputation has not taken more of a hit for the ridiculously cautious—if not outright stupid—decision he made to take a knee at the end of regulation in the Divisional Round loss to Baltimore. The reason you pay \$18 million for a quarterback is so you don't have to even think about settling for overtime when your offense has first-and-10 on the 20 with 31 seconds and two timeouts still remaining. (At home, no less!)

Disappointing as the early playoff exit was for Manning and the Broncos, many still viewed their 2012 campaign as a wild success. Thirty-six years of age and four neck surgeries did not wind up significantly weakening the future Hall of Fame quarterback. Manning's arm strength noticeably improved as the season wore on—his average pass distance went from 8.1 yards in the first half of the season to 8.8 yards in the second half—and he finished just 12 votes shy of collecting a record fifth MVP trophy.

Elway made a more substantial bet on Manning this past offseason, picking up an option on the contract that guarantees the quarterback \$40 million over the next two years. This bet hardly feels like a gamble, though. For one, the Broncos have insurance in the event of Manning re-injuring his neck. Secondly, it's crystal clear that Manning is still a top-five (if not top-two or -three) NFL quarterback.

With Manning now much less of a risk than he was a year ago, it's no surprise that our projections call for the Broncos to easily win the so-so AFC West. Yet they are also projected to take a slight step back in 2013. This may seem counterintuitive. After all, Manning has now had a full year to regain his football physique and integrate himself (plus his system) with the rest of the organization. What's more, the Broncos offense, which finished second in DVOA last season, is even more talented this time around. They've added Wes Welker to a receiving corps that last year had the most prolific pair of wideouts in the NFL (Eric Decker and Demaryius Thomas

combined for a DYAR of 782; next highest was New Orleans' Marques Colston and Lance Moore with 698). Weaving Welker, the league's preeminent slot weapon, into the system shouldn't be hard; last year, the Broncos lined up with three wideouts 64.4 of the time, which was second in the NFL behind only the Buffalo Bills (73.7 percent).

In addition to the most dangerous wide receiver trio in the NFL, the Broncos with Jacob Tamme and Joel Dreessen also have a potent two-tight end section in their playbook. Statistically, neither Tamme nor Dreessen was particularly impressive last year (both had negative DVOA ratings). But what the stats can't show is how their position flexibility (and literal flexibility when it comes to route running and on-the-move run-blocking) lends a valuable dimension of versatility to Denver's offense. Defenses must make the tough decision about whether they should play nickel against Denver's two-tight end personnel or go with their base defense. If they go base, they become very predictable, especially given that they must respond to the quick tempo of Denver's hurry-up.

Manning's brilliance in conducting the passing attack (particularly in the pre-snap phase) has a trickle-down effect that dramatically aids Denver's run game. Whichever running back is in Denver's backfield is often facing simple seven-man boxes. This year, the Broncos appear set to go with second-round rookie Montee Ball, who has the quickness to the hole and ability to change directions required by this offensive scheme. Behind him will be second-year scatback Ronnie Hillman, with Knowshon Moreno (just a guy) providing depth.

Manning and these backs will be working behind a front line that was very good in 2012 and figures to be even better with mobile free agent pickup Luis Vasquez taking over for underrated veteran right guard Chris Kuper (who now gives the line some much-needed depth).

So yes, one of the best offenses in football has somehow improved. Conventional wisdom would say that the team as a whole should thus improve. But football teams do not thrive with offense alone. The Broncos' big 2012 season was powered just as much by dramatic improvement on defense, and that improvement will be much more difficult to carry over into 2013.

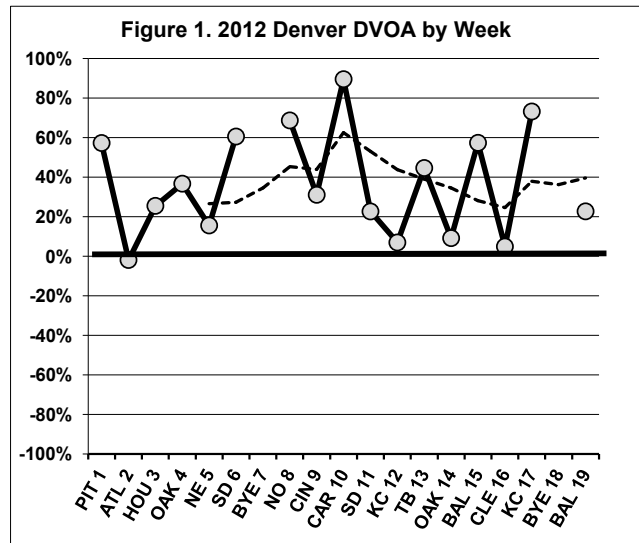
The din of the Manning buzz kept a lot of people from fully appreciating the fact that Denver ranked fifth in pass defense DVOA and fourth in run defense DVOA last season. Just like in Carolina, John Fox and Jack Del Rio worked well

2013 Broncos Schedule					
Week	Opp.	Week	Opp.	Week	Opp.
1	BAL (Thu.)	7	at IND	13	at KC
2	at NYG	8	WAS	14	TEN
3	OAK (Mon.)	9	BYE	15	SD (Thu.)
4	PHI	10	at SD	16	at HOU
5	at DAL	11	KC	17	at OAK
6	JAC	12	at NE		

together as head coach and defensive coordinator. They ran a fundamentally firm 4-3 base scheme, but the real magic was in the sub packages that housed their bevy of disguises and tricks. They did a fantastic job capitalizing on the rarer-than-rare talents of Von Miller. The second-year superstar posted 18.5 sacks mostly by coming off the edge, but he also brought tremendous value as a hybrid inside blitz and quarterback spy. (Seven-and-a-half of Miller’s sacks came from an unconventional rush, meaning either three rushers or some form of blitz.)

It helped that Denver had mid- and back-level defenders who could play man coverage. Cornerback Champ Bailey was a true No. 1 cover artist, handling opponents’ top receivers week in and week out with minimal safety help. No. 2 corner Chris Harris was solid on the outside and sensational when sliding into the slot. Undersized nickelback Tony Carter also proved to be an impressively athletic man-to-man defender. What set Denver’s scheme apart was they also had reliable man defenders up the middle in versatile safety Mike Adams and fluid linebacker Wesley Woodyard. This allowed the Broncos to conventionally cover most tight ends (i.e., quarterbacks’ safety outlets) one-on-one, which allowed for more aggression in disguises and blitzes.

Good as this defense was in 2012, the laws of statistical regression suggest that a decline in 2013 is inevitable. This starts with a general rule about defensive regression: defenses that play much better on third down than on first or second down tend to decline the following season. The 2012 Denver Broncos were sixth in defensive DVOA on first down,



18th on second down, and first on third down with a fabulous -47.8% DVOA. How fabulous? On third downs, the Broncos had the second-best defensive DVOA in our entire database, surpassed only by the 1991 Saints (-48.7%). Their third-down pass defense DVOA (-66.8%) was the best since the 2001 Browns (-69.2%).

As you might expect, teams with extremely strong defenses on third down see a lot of regression towards the mean the following season (Table 1). Prior to last year’s Broncos, 25 teams had third-down defensive DVOA of -30% or lower. These teams saw their overall defensive DVOA rise by an average of 9.4% the following season. Only two of the 25 teams improved on defense the following season, the 2001-02 Buccaneers and the 1992-93 Chiefs.

The third-down regression effect means that Denver’s defense would have a very hard time equaling last season even if it brought back all the same personnel. Of course, we know that the Broncos won’t have all the same personnel. Some players will get injured, some players will be older, and some players are gone for good. These are all additional reasons to expect decline.

Table 1. Best Third-Down Defensive DVOA, 1991-2012

Team	Year	3rd Down Def DVOA	All Downs Def DVOA	All Downs Def DVOA Y+1	Change
NO	1991	-48.7%	-24.5%	-18.3%	+6.2%
DEN	2012	-47.8%	-13.8%	--	--
BAL	2003	-46.7%	-25.0%	-19.9%	+5.1%
PHI	1991	-46.3%	-42.4%	-18.1%	+24.2%
CLE	2001	-41.6%	-13.1%	-5.1%	+8.0%
PHI	2002	-41.1%	-11.2%	3.0%	+14.2%
SF	1995	-39.5%	-23.7%	-15.8%	+7.9%
DEN	1999	-38.7%	-6.9%	-1.1%	+5.8%
PIT	2008	-38.5%	-29.0%	-4.6%	+24.4%
JAC	2006	-36.7%	-16.1%	-2.5%	+13.6%
GB	2006	-36.2%	-5.3%	-1.2%	+4.1%
TB	2001	-35.6%	-15.4%	-31.8%	-16.3%
AVERAGE		-41.5%	-18.9%	-10.5%	+8.8%

Injury: The Broncos’ defense was particularly healthy in 2012, finishing 11th in Adjusted Games Lost after finishing 28th and 24th the previous two seasons. Most of those Adjusted Games Lost came from defensive tackle Ty Warren and cornerback Tracy Porter, who were easily replaced in the lineup and won’t be back with the team this season. The odds suggest there will be more injuries in 2013, and more meaningful ones.

Age: Champ Bailey had a phenomenal season last year. However, he’s also going to be 35 years old this year, and his game-charting numbers had been declining steadily over the past few seasons before rebounding in 2012. (Until last season, Bailey’s Adjusted Success Rate had dropped every year except 2009.) Common sense says you should expect decline from any 35-year-old football player, but what about cornerbacks specifically? What can we learn now that Football Outsiders has eight years of game charting data on pass coverage?

Well, the numbers don't suggest that a 35-year-old cornerback will decline significantly, and they don't suggest that he will play as well as the year before. What they suggest is that he won't play much at all. In eight years, only five cornerbacks played enough at age 35 to qualify for our cornerback rankings (40 charted targets or eight games started): Nick Harper and Al Harris in 2009, Ronde Barber in 2010, Charles Woodson in 2011, and Antoine Winfield in 2012. These cornerbacks are outliers when it comes to the aging process, and obviously so is Bailey.

What's evident on film is that while Bailey is still an excellent corner, he's not quite the athlete he once was. Yes, overall he has still been performing at a high level. But at some point, his natural decline will drop him below the "high level" threshold. For discussion's sake, let's say that 2013 is the season when Bailey fulfills this inevitable prophecy and really declines. That would significantly alter Denver's defense, as they'd have to start giving more help to Bailey's side, either with a safety over the top or with linebackers buzzing underneath. That would take away from the resources that make up many of Fox's and Del Rio's disguises and blitzes. Another way to think of it: at the end of the day, football is a numbers game. The more help a cornerback needs, the less advantaged a defense becomes numbers-wise. Currently, Denver's scheme relies fairly heavily on the advantages Bailey creates.

The signing of veteran cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie could simply be a case of Elway jumping at the opportunity to sign a talented player for a relatively low price. However, considering they already had solid second and third corners in Harris and Carter, the signing of Rodgers-Cromartie could also be a hedge in the event that Bailey suddenly shows significant decline. (In that event, Bailey would likely move to safety.) Despite the inconsistency he has shown in his career so far, Rodgers-Cromartie profiles better than either Harris or Carter as the kind of No. 1 corner who could allow the Broncos to continue playing a similar defense. The coaching staff now has a year to use him and evaluate him. That should give them a sense of the possible alternative next offseason, when

the Broncos have to decide if it makes sense to let a 36-year-old Bailey take up \$9 million on the team's 2014 salary cap.

Departure: One thing the development of our annual team projection system has shown is that, in general, no single move has a greater impact on a defense than adding or removing a top pass-rusher. The contract timing snafu which caused the Broncos to lose Elvis Dumervil was a significant mistake that sent 25 sacks and hurries per year out the door.

It's possible that the loss of Dumervil will be offset by the natural progression of second-year defensive lineman Derek Wolfe, the addition of first-round rookie Sylvester Williams, and the signing of Shaun Phillips away from the division-rival Chargers. Of those three, Phillips is likely to have the most dramatic immediate impact. He quietly had 9.5 sacks last season in San Diego. Phillips, with his long arms and willowy athleticism, is best suited to be a No. 2 edge rusher, operating on the weak side. That's exactly what he'll do in Denver's base defense.

The greater concern with this defense is at middle linebacker, where either Joe Mays or Nate Irving will replace reliable veteran Keith Brooking in the base 4-3. Brooking had one of his most valuable seasons in years, partly because the scheme and linebackers/safeties around him kept him from getting caught in a lot of coverage situations. Mays and Irving both move well enough, but neither has the pre-snap recognition and awareness that Brooking offered. That's critical given what this scheme demands from its middle linebacker.

Nevertheless, let's not get carried away with pessimism about the 2013 Denver Broncos and their defense. Even if the issues above lead to decline, it's still unlikely that this defense will suddenly become worse than average. The offense should be one of the four or five best in the league, and our mediocre projection for the rest of the AFC West suggests that Denver will once again have one of the league's easiest schedules. The forecast for defensive regression means the path to the Super Bowl will not be easy. But really, what Super Bowl path ever is?

2012 Broncos Stats by Week

Andy Benoit

Wk	vs.	W-L	PF	PA	YDF	YDA	TO	Total	Off	Def	ST
1	PIT	W	31	19	334	284	0	57%	45%	-17%	-5%
2	at ATL	L	21	27	336	275	-4	-2%	-13%	-4%	7%
3	HOU	L	25	31	375	436	1	26%	28%	6%	3%
4	OAK	W	37	6	503	237	-1	37%	20%	-20%	-3%
5	at NE	L	21	31	394	444	-2	16%	18%	1%	-1%
6	at SD	W	35	24	365	307	3	61%	39%	-30%	-8%
7	BYE										
8	NO	W	34	14	530	252	0	69%	38%	-35%	-4%
9	at CIN	W	31	23	359	366	-1	31%	28%	15%	17%
10	at CAR	W	36	14	360	250	0	90%	15%	-51%	23%
11	SD	W	30	23	386	277	1	23%	1%	-35%	-13%
12	at KC	W	17	9	368	264	0	7%	12%	-3%	-7%
13	TB	W	31	23	333	306	0	45%	27%	-9%	9%
14	at OAK	W	26	13	428	324	1	9%	15%	13%	7%
15	at BAL	W	34	17	350	278	2	57%	31%	-36%	-10%
16	CLE	W	34	12	457	233	0	5%	22%	11%	-6%
17	KC	W	38	3	488	119	-1	73%	39%	-32%	2%
18	BYE										
19	BAL	L	35	38	398	479	-2	23%	-7%	13%	42%

Trends and Splits

	Offense	Rank	Defense	Rank
Total DVOA	22.1%	2	-13.8%	5
Unadjusted VOA	22.5%	2	-14.0%	3
Weighted Trend	23.3%	3	-17.4%	2
Variance	2.3%	2	4.2%	10
Average Opponent	3.4%	31	-3.2%	26
Passing	49.7%	2	-10.5%	5
Rushing	-2.8%	15	-18.1%	4
First Down	19.4%	5	-9.8%	6
Second Down	22.1%	4	2.2%	18
Third Down	28.1%	3	-47.8%	1
First Half	18.1%	6	-6.2%	10
Second Half	26.2%	3	-21.6%	2
Red Zone	24.1%	6	5.6%	19
Late and Close	46.8%	1	-28.5%	2

Five-Year Performance

Year	W-L	Pyth		Est			TO	Total	Rk	Off			ST	Def			Off Age	Def			ST			
		W	W	PF	PA	Rk				Rk	Rk	Rk		Rk	Rk	Rk		Rk	Rk	Rk	Rk	Rk	Age	Rk
2008	8-8	6.1	6.3	370	448	-17	-8.5%	24	19.2%	1	20.7%	31	-7.0%	31	45.3	28	30.1	22	26.8	27	27.9	6	26.5	18
2009	8-8	8.1	9.2	326	324	+7	10.6%	13	1.3%	18	-9.8%	7	-0.4%	18	16.5	13	3.3	1	27.7	10	29.1	2	26.4	19
2010	4-12	4.9	5.3	344	471	-9	-17.1%	26	2.1%	15	16.6%	30	-2.6%	27	11.0	6	40.8	28	26.6	24	28.9	2	25.6	28
2011	8-8	5.8	7.0	309	390	+1	-11.8%	24	-9.9%	23	1.6%	18	-0.2%	18	15.0	5	40.4	24	25.6	32	27.5	10	25.9	28
2012	13-3	12.5	14.7	481	289	-1	36.5%	2	22.1%	2	-13.8%	5	0.6%	13	27.8	15	21.4	11	28.3	5	27.0	15	25.9	21

2012 Performance Based on Most Common Personnel Groups

DEN Offense					DEN Offense vs. Opponents				DEN Defense				DEN Defense vs. Opponents			
Pers	Freq	Yds	DVOA	Run%	Pers	Freq	Yds	DVOA	Pers	Freq	Yds	DVOA	Pers	Freq	Yds	DVOA
11	64%	6.4	30.2%	35%	Nickel Even	49%	6.3	24.2%	Nickel Odd	39%	5.0	-9.4%	11	54%	4.7	-11.7%
12	28%	6.3	32.6%	56%	Dime+	14%	6.2	46.1%	4-3-4	33%	4.4	-12.7%	12	24%	5.3	-11.9%
02	2%	4.3	-41.7%	0%	Nickel Odd	14%	6.8	38.0%	Nickel Even	13%	4.3	-15.4%	21	16%	3.8	-28.7%
13	2%	4.0	-47.2%	82%	3-4-4	13%	5.7	20.4%	Dime+	10%	4.0	-62.2%	22	2%	4.1	-0.7%
22	1%	2.1	-17.3%	82%	4-3-4	9%	5.1	1.3%	3-4-4	4%	7.2	12.5%	13	1%	4.6	-5.3%

Strategic Tendencies

Run/Pass	Rk	Formation	Rk	Pass Rush	Rk	Secondary	Rk	Strategy	Rk
Runs, first half	38%	16 Form: Single Back	91%	1 Rush 3	5.1%	20 4 DB	37%	28 Play action	29%
Runs, first down	53%	8 Form: Empty Back	4%	25 Rush 4	63.1%	16 5 DB	52%	6 Avg Box (Off)	6.18
Runs, second-long	31%	17 Pers: 3+ WR	67%	4 Rush 5	25.1%	10 6+ DB	10%	11 Avg Box (Def)	6.25
Runs, power sit.	52%	19 Pers: 4+ WR	0%	26 Rush 6+	6.7%	17 CB by Sides	54%	31 Offensive Pace	27.45
Runs, behind 2H	26%	24 Pers: 2+ TE/6+ OL	34%	12 Sacks by LB	51.0%	11 DB Blitz	16%	8 Defensive Pace	29.43
Pass, ahead 2H	45%	19 Shotgun/Pistol	57%	6 Sacks by DB	8.7%	11 Hole in Zone	6%	27 Go for it on 4th	0.66

“Don’t blitz Peyton Manning,” right? That’s not actually the strategy that Denver opponents used a year ago. Denver opponents blitzed on 32 percent of passes, which is above the NFL average of 30 percent, and big-blitzed on 9.6 percent of passes compared to an NFL average of 7.6 percent. And Manning actually struggled against the big blitzes, with just 5.3 yards per pass, although he was just fine against five-man blitzes. ☹️ Peyton Manning runs an excellent play-fake, and he really likes to use it. In fact, the Broncos actually play-faked more often during 2012 than they did during 2011, even though Tim Tebow was their starting quarterback for half of 2011. ☹️ Only 6.9 percent of carries by Broncos running backs came with two backs in the formation, which is good because they were horrible running the ball with two backs in the game: just -35.8% DVOA and 1.3 yards per carry. ☹️ Could it be that Manning has trouble getting yardage when he dumps the ball off? Denver had -11.9% DVOA on passes thrown behind the line of scrimmage (26th in the NFL) but 82.4% DVOA on passes thrown beyond the line of scrimmage (fourth). ☹️ Denver only recovered three of 15 fumbles on offense. ☹️ The Broncos’ defense more than doubled its Adjusted Sack Rate on third down, from 6.3 percent on first and second downs to 13.8 percent on third downs.

Passing

Player	DYAR	DVOA	Plays	NtYds	Avg YAC	C%	TD	Int
P.Manning	1805	32.8%	602	4526	7.5	4.7	69.0%	37

Rushing

Player	DYAR	DVOA	Plays	Yds	Avg TD	Fum	Suc
W.McGahee*	49	-2.1%	167	727	4.4	4	58%
K.Moreno	56	1.1%	138	525	3.8	4	56%
R.Hillman	-24	-15.7%	85	330	3.9	1	51%
L.Ball	-1	-9.2%	41	160	3.9	1	39%
J.Hester	21	27.4%	17	81	4.8	2	41%
P.Manning	2	-5.4%	6	27	4.5	0	-

Receiving

Player	DYAR	DVOA	Plays	Ctch	Yds	Y/C	YAC	TD	C%
D.Thomas	354	21.4%	141	94	1430	15.2	5.7	10	67%
E.Decker	392	27.2%	123	85	1071	12.6	3.1	13	69%
B.Stokley*	204	37.4%	59	45	544	12.1	3.3	5	76%
M.Willis*	-44	-42.6%	22	10	90	9.0	2.8	0	45%
W.Welker	251	6.1%	175	118	1354	11.5	5.8	6	67%
J.Tamme	18	-5.8%	84	52	555	10.7	3.8	2	62%
J.Dreessen	13	-1.2%	58	41	356	8.7	3.4	5	71%
V.Green	14	22.7%	6	5	63	12.6	12.4	0	83%
W.McGahee*	44	7.2%	33	26	221	8.5	9.0	0	79%
K.Moreno	58	25.3%	26	21	167	8.0	6.0	0	81%
L.Ball	5	-5.6%	12	8	58	7.3	5.1	1	67%
R.Hillman	-2	-17.0%	12	10	62	6.2	6.9	0	83%

Offensive Line

Player	Pos	Age	GS	Snaps	Pen	Sk	Pass	Run	Player	Pos	Age	GS	Snaps	Pen	Sk	Pass	Run
Zane Beadles	LG	27	16/16	1145	4	1	11.5	10	Manny Ramirez	RG	30	15/11	831	6	5.5	9.5	5
Orlando Franklin	RT	26	16/16	1135	9	1.5	13.5	5	Chris Kuper	RG	31	7/5	311	1	0	3	2.5
Ryan Clady	LT	27	16/16	1115	8	1	13	4	J.D. Walton	C	26	4/4	248	1	0	0	0
Dan Koppen*	C	34	15/12	890	1	1	2	5.5	Louis Vasquez	RG	26	16/16	1017	0	0.5	6	3

Year	Yards	ALY	Rk	Power	Rk	Stuff	Rk	2nd Lev	Rk	Open Field	Rk	Sacks	ASR	Rk	Short	Long	F-Start	Cont.
2010	3.62	3.60	30	52%	27	23%	25	1.12	16	0.45	28	40	6.4%	16	10	20	17	32
2011	4.67	4.19	11	56%	26	17%	9	1.31	7	0.94	10	42	9.5%	29	9	25	7	48
2012	4.07	4.13	12	67%	9	20%	20	1.19	16	0.53	25	21	4.2%	2	10	5	12	29
2012 ALY by direction:		Left End 3.37 (23)			Left Tackle 3.96 (18)			Mid/Guard 4.24 (10)			Right Tackle 3.75 (22)			Right End 5.07 (6)				

Not to take anything away from what's become a very good offensive line in Denver, but playing with Peyton Manning makes life a lot easier for a linemen. Manning's brilliant pre-snap diagnostic abilities make defenses inherently hesitant. Consequently, there are fewer eight-man boxes for this line to run-block against and fewer blitzes to react to in pass protection. Manning also has a sixth sense when it comes to compensating for weaknesses in protection. This is why someone like right tackle Orlando Franklin, who has great size but not the quickest feet you'll ever see, can survive in one-on-one pass protection so much of the time. Manning excels at setting protection slides, moving within the pocket, and regulating his sixth blocker (which is generally his running back). He also knows how to get the ball out quickly. Last season the Broncos only had 13 blown blocks that directly resulted in a sack, the third-lowest figure in the NFL, and 5.5 of those blocks came from perpetually overmatched backup guard Manny Ramirez.

While Manning occasionally goes out of his way to help Franklin, he rarely has to think twice about his protection on the left side. Sixth-year pro Ryan Clady was the best all-around left tackle in football last season. With almost no chip-block help all season, Clady had just one blown block resulting in a sack, proving that the supposed struggles he had in 2011 were more a product of blocking for the scattershot Tim Tebow. Impressive as Clady was in protection, he may have been even better in the ground game, where his athleticism both in the box and extended short-area space was a major plus in Denver's frequent runs from shotgun.

Inside, the Broncos were solid and will likely be better in 2013, signing free-agent Luis Vasquez away from San Diego to replace underrated but injury-prone veteran Chris Kuper at right guard. On the left side, Zane Beadles is a stellar run-blocker who, like Kuper, has a good feel for executing double teams. Between them was supposed to be J.D. Walton, but he's once again sidelined with ankle problems, so the Broncos brought back serviceable veteran Dan Koppen. The alternative option at center would be last year's fourth-round pick Philip Blake or the porous Ramirez.

Defensive Front Seven

Defensive Line	Age	Pos	Overall							vs. Run					Pass Rush			
			Snaps	Plays	TmPct	Rk	Stop	Dfts	BTKl	Runs	St%	Rk	RuYd	Rk	Sack	Hit	Hur	Tips
Elvis Dumervil*	29	DE	921	54	6.8%	12	41	19	3	35	66%	63	2.9	59	11	12	23	0
Derek Wolfe	23	DE	901	40	5.0%	43	29	11	0	29	66%	65	2.2	25	6	3	8.5	2
Justin Bannan*	34	DT	523	46	5.8%	14	35	3	1	39	72%	47	2.7	54	0	0	3.5	4
Kevin Vickerson	30	DT	482	41	5.2%	23	31	10	0	34	74%	37	1.9	24	2	3	4.5	1
Mitch Unrein	26	DT	387	20	2.5%	68	17	0	1	20	85%	7	2.3	38	0	3	4	0
Terrance Knighton	27	DT	657	33	3.7%	45	29	11	2	28	86%	5	1.5	16	2	6	4.5	1

Linebackers	Age	Pos	Overall							Pass Rush				vs. Run				vs. Pass						
			Snaps	Plays	TmPct	Rk	Stop	Dfts	BTKl	Sack	Hit	Hur	Tips	Runs	St%	Rk	Yds	Rk	Tgts	Suc%	Rk	AdjYd	Rk	PD
Von Miller	24	OLB	960	69	8.7%	68	58	39	3	18.5	12	41	0	38	87%	4	0.4	1	13	43%	--	8.0	--	2
Wesley Woodyard	27	OLB	875	119	16.0%	19	72	25	3	5.5	3	6	0	64	69%	35	3.5	62	44	67%	3	4.5	9	5
Keith Brooking*	38	MLB	452	53	6.7%	86	25	1	1	1	0	1	0	39	56%	97	4.3	98	13	72%	--	2.9	--	0
Joe Mays	28	MLB	291	19	6.4%	--	11	2	5	0.5	1	0	0	10	80%	--	2.9	--	10	37%	--	6.8	--	0
Danny Trevathan	23	OLB	239	32	4.0%	--	16	5	0	1	0	0	0	14	57%	--	3.3	--	16	71%	2	4.7	11	2
D.J. Williams*	31	OLB	129	15	4.3%	--	9	3	0	0	0	0	0	7	71%	--	1.9	--	6	98%	--	1.6	--	1
Shaun Phillips	32	OLB	839	50	6.3%	93	33	22	5	10	5	14	3	26	58%	90	3.7	74	7	72%	--	6.2	--	1

Year	Yards	ALY	Rk	Power	Rk	Stuff	Rk	2nd Level	Rk	Open Field	Rk	Sacks	ASR	Rk	Short	Long
2010	4.52	4.40	29	57%	9	15%	27	1.11	16	0.99	26	23	4.6%	32	6	15
2011	4.26	3.88	9	60%	12	22%	8	1.28	24	0.78	18	41	7.8%	5	18	14
2012	3.69	3.91	14	52%	6	18%	18	1.02	3	0.35	1	52	8.7%	1	19	18
2012 ALY by direction:		Left End 4.7 (27)			Left Tackle 4.35 (25)			Mid/Guard 3.73 (6)			Right Tackle 3.62 (6)			Right End 3.53 (9)		

Because of the drastic schematic differences between Denver’s base defense and its sub packages, it’s almost like this team has two front sevens: the run-stopping one and the pass-stopping one.

Against the run, Broncos coaches emphasize the importance of being destructive with just seven box defenders. In fact, Broncos defensive linemen and linebackers are taught not to differentiate their technical approach even when there is an eighth man in the box. Having an active defensive line is critical, as evidenced by the fact that John Elway made it a priority to restock the defensive tackle position this past offseason. Last season’s rotation of Justin Bannan, Kevin Vickerson and Mitch Unrein did a tremendous job using strong lateral movement and gap-clogging techniques to prevent blockers from reaching the second level. Their destructiveness made for one of the most immovable front fours in football—at least in the middle and on the offense’s right side. Adjusted Line Yards on runs to the left were noticeably worse, which may suggest that Elvis Dumervil’s lack of size was indeed an issue at times in play-side run defense.

This offseason, Vickerson, a talented but mercurial veteran with great initial get-off, was re-signed (two years, \$5 million). So was Unrein, an exclusive rights free agent. The aging Bannan was allowed to walk, and the Broncos signed Terrance “Pot Roast” Knighton, a potentially more destructive force, away from the Jaguars. He was likely to battle the up-and-coming Unrein for a starting spot, but both became destined for backup duties after Elway drafted North Carolina’s Sylvester Williams in the first round. Williams intrigued scouts with his strong lower body and penetrating burst.

The upgrades inside mean that last season’s second-round pick, Derek Wolfe, will likely play a full-time defensive end role in the base defense. Wolfe plays with terrific tenacity and movement skills. He’s perfect for strongside duties, which means veteran free-agent pickup Shaun Phillips can operate as a space-oriented chase defender on the weak side. Also in the mix for playing time is the quietly effective and athletic Robert Ayers, an example of how a first-rounder who doesn’t live up to his draft status can still develop into a useful player. Further depth is provided by 2012 fifth-rounder Malik Jackson (at 284 pounds, he moves between tackle and end) and 2013 fifth-rounder Quanterus Smith (a smaller pass-rush specialist out of Western Kentucky).

The only linebacker spot that’s set is the Sam, where Von Miller has evolved into an outstanding playside run-stopper. His dominating performance was somewhat overshadowed by J.J. Watt having one of the four or five best defensive seasons of all-time, but Miller’s total of 39 Defeats tied Ray Lewis’ 2003 season for the sixth-highest total since 1996. (The full list of best seasons can be found in the Houston chapter.) Miller’s greatest value is in Denver’s nickel/dime package, where he headlines many of Denver’s complex amoeba sub-package pass rushes. Miller is much more than just a devastating edge rusher. Last season he was used extensively as an inside blitzing joker and quarterback spy.

Veteran Keith Brooking, who stabilized this defense after taking over for Joe Mays at Mike last season, was not re-signed. Presumably, the Broncos would love for athletic third-year pro Nate Irving to fill the void. A safer option, however, might be Wesley Woodyard, a smooth space-oriented veteran who may lack ideal strength to play the run in traffic but has the awareness that Fox and Del Rio demand in the middle. If Woodyard started in the middle, then last year’s intriguing sixth-round pick, Danny Trevathan, would get a chance to replace departed veteran D.J. Williams on the weak side. Then again, playing Woodyard slightly out of position may not be worthwhile; he’s much better when he can play to his strengths, and his strength is operating in space. In fact, in nickel, one key reason the Broncos can afford to be creative and diverse with Miller in their pass rush designs because Woodyard is such a heady, fluid pass defender. That stabilizes the intermediate areas that are usually the most vulnerable when the defense blitzes.

Defensive Secondary

Secondary	Age	Pos	Overall							vs. Run					vs. Pass									
			Snaps	Plays	TmPct	Rk	Stop	Dfts	BTKl	Runs	St%	Rk	Yds	Rk	Tgts	Tgt%	Rk	Dist	Suc%	Rk	APaYd	Rk	PD	Int
Rahim Moore	23	FS	1042	77	9.7%	41	24	8	7	32	31%	52	7.6	44	28	6.3%	42	12.2	41%	69	8.3	49	3	1
Champ Bailey	35	CB	1011	74	9.3%	30	31	11	2	17	59%	15	3.3	6	71	16.2%	54	13.7	59%	13	6.6	20	5	2
Mike Adams	32	FS	980	90	11.3%	28	34	11	2	38	45%	16	6.4	27	45	10.3%	10	11.3	49%	55	6.9	29	8	0
Chris Harris	24	CB	902	70	9.4%	27	38	20	4	23	52%	24	5.6	27	62	15.2%	61	9.9	54%	31	6.4	15	7	3
Tony Carter	27	CB	496	35	4.7%	83	16	9	4	2	0%	84	7.5	57	58	14.1%	68	15.4	63%	4	6.7	24	9	2
Tracy Porter*	27	CB	301	27	9.1%	--	14	7	4	9	56%	--	4.6	--	34	20.5%	--	14.5	44%	--	10.8	--	6	1
Jim Leonhard*	31	SS	260	17	2.1%	--	8	5	1	8	50%	--	7.6	--	8	1.8%	--	14.9	42%	--	8.3	--	2	2
Quentin Jammer	34	CB	992	73	9.2%	31	27	15	4	12	58%	16	6.7	46	95	21.9%	9	15.5	49%	61	8.1	61	8	3
D. Rodgers-Cromartie	27	CB	992	67	8.5%	46	27	11	12	11	27%	71	8.4	66	79	20.7%	19	14.5	48%	62	8.0	60	16	3

Year	Pass D Rank	vs. #1 WR	Rk	vs. #2 WR	Rk	vs. Other WR	Rk	vs. TE	Rk	vs. RB	Rk
2010	31	7.1%	21	16.1%	27	28.9%	32	13.5%	24	8.8%	21
2011	24	21.7%	23	-1.2%	14	2.5%	22	6.1%	14	26.3%	30
2012	5	-12.5%	8	-20.3%	3	-18.1%	4	6.9%	24	-7.7%	11

Another reason the Broncos can get maximum value out of Miller’s brilliance is they have a strong collection of versatile defensive backs. In fact, although 12-time Pro-Bowler Champ Bailey is clearly still the secondary’s best player, veteran safety Mike Adams is arguably the secondary’s most *important* player. Adams can line up in the box and either blitz, disguise and execute a zone coverage or, most often, defend a tight end man-to-man. He lends a lot of deception to Denver’s scheme. Backup Quinton Carter can also do some of these things, though the third-year pro is better suited to play back in coverage. So is Rahim Moore, a hard

hitter with solid speed and one giant playoff mistake to atone for. The Broncos also signed former Chargers cornerback Quentin Jammer and moved him to safety, where they hope he can push all of these guys for playing time. Versatile as Denver's safeties can be, none of them are flawless natural starters. The diversification of their usage is not always a method of disguising coverage; it's sometimes a means for hiding these players' weaknesses. Nevertheless, it's a real luxury to have as much freedom in the use of safeties as Fox and Del Rio have.

This style of play requires cornerbacks who can hold up in solo coverage (which often means man-to-man), and the Broncos have them. Bailey reversed a recent slide in his charting stats, showing why he remains one of the preeminent corners in the NFL. Last season he regularly shadowed the opposing No. 1 receiver, playing without significant help a lot of the time. (Bailey was covering the No. 1 receiver 65 percent of the time our charters marked him in coverage, tied with Ike Taylor for fifth in the league.) Youngsters Chris Harris and Tony Carter also were excellent last season. Harris has emerged as one of the best pure slot man-defenders in the league, while John Fox has said that Carter is as good a pure cover corner as he's seen. (Of course, this begs the question of why Carter was once cut by Denver, then cut by New England, and only played three games for Fox and the Broncos when he returned to the team in 2011.) Given the quality they already had at the position, the free-agent signing of Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie was a bit curious. Perhaps adding the extremely gifted but up-and-down sixth-year corner is a hedge against the possibility of the 35-year-old Bailey suddenly succumbing to Father Time. Or, maybe signing a potential true No. 1 corner for just \$10 million over two years (\$5 million guaranteed) was simply too good of a deal for Elway to pass up. With Rodgers-Cromartie on board, plus 2012 fourth-rounder Omar Bolden (Arizona State) and 2013 third-rounder Kayvon Webster (South Florida), the Broncos have a lot of long-term options at cornerback.

Special Teams

Year	DVOA	Rank	FG/XP	Rank	Net Kick	Rank	Kick Ret	Rank	Net Punt	Rank	Punt Ret	Rank	Hidden	Rank
2010	-2.6%	27	2.4	11	-4.5	26	2.9	14	-13.0	29	-0.6	16	-17.6	32
2011	-0.2%	18	-6.4	27	1.8	13	0.6	16	-5.3	24	8.2	4	4.8	9
2012	0.6%	13	-4.7	26	-1.6	20	0.9	12	13.2	5	-4.6	24	-0.1	18

Trindon Holliday might be the new Devin Hester, or he might just be another return man to flash with a few spectacular plays in a limited timeframe, only to spend the rest of his career bouncing around the league average with hot and cold streaks. He had an electrifying kick return *and* punt return for a touchdown in the Divisional Round game against Baltimore. He also had two touchdown returns in the regular season, plus three touchdown returns for the Texans in the preseason. On the other hand, Holliday was so bad for Houston once the regular season began that they cut him after Week 5. Holliday's returns for Houston were worth a combined minus-7.4 estimated points worth of field position compared to average. His returns for Denver were worth 6.4 estimated points during the regular season and 12.8 estimated points in that single playoff game.

The good news for Denver is that a Peyton Manning team is the perfect place for an inconsistent but sometimes spectacular return specialist. Manning is so steady that the Broncos get away with focusing less on establishing field position in the return game and more on making game-breaking plays. As long as Holliday doesn't fumble—which was a big problem for him last season, as he had six fumbles including four muffed punts—the Broncos should have no hesitation about letting him cut loose.

We've written for years about how playing eight games at mile-high elevation does wonders for a kicker and punter's bottom line. As former FO writer Bill Barnwell has written at Grantland, the Broncos failed to consider this when they signed Matt Prater to a four-year, \$13 million deal last offseason. Just as in the year before signing his new deal, Prater missed six field goals last season, though that was on 32 attempts (versus 25). Things were better on punts, where Britton Colquitt and a good coverage team helped lead Denver to the fifth-best punt unit in the league.

Coaching Staff

John Fox's hands are mainly on the defense, which he runs alongside coordinator Jack Del Rio. The two worked together in Carolina and have a great feel for featuring their stars and diversifying game plans each week. Offensively, coordinator Mike McCoy is now the head man in San Diego; quarterbacks coach Adam Gase has taken his place. Gase has a good working relationship with Peyton Manning, which is all that matters. With Gase likely focusing almost solely on the game-planning side of things with Manning, the Broncos brought in Greg Knapp to oversee the quarterback position. He'll presumably work closest with Brock Osweiler. Also still on staff is well-respected running backs coach Eric Studesville, who served as interim head coach at the end of the Josh McDaniels debacle in 2010.