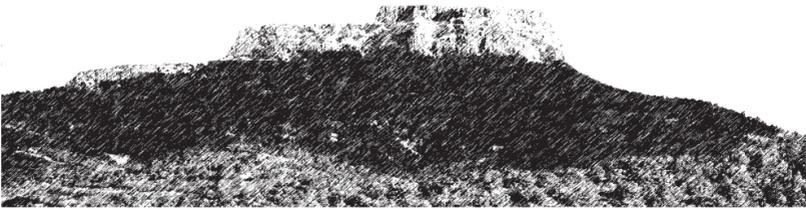


OVER THE PASS



"We're from Florida and lived the last two years in Hawaii. I've never celebrated Christmas. I have two children and this will be our first time. We already have a tree, and stockings. This is our first true winter and we're excited to see our first snow."

— Cassie Scott, barista/waitress/cook, The Café, Trinidad



"That I will see my son. He's missing. He went missing a year and a half ago in California. He was building a cabin in the mountains. Everything he owned was at his tent—his billfold, his dog—but he was gone. I hope to see him for Christmas this year."

— Diane Martin, retired nurse, Marlow, Oklahoma

TIM KELLER'S CONNECTIONS

"What pleasant surprise could Santa add to your stocking this year?"

Photos by Tim Keller / The Chronicle-News



"That's a long list! Let's see. A light bar for my truck. Parts for my next gun build. A Swarovski scope. And a new fishing pole."

— Michael Berndt, TSJC gunsmithing student, Salida, Colorado



"A pair of Space Jams. They're a pair of shoes that are coming out soon from Jordan."

— Paul Ambuul, TSJC business management student and basketball player, Colorado Springs

BRONCO FOOTBALL

Denver's defense can't hide all of Broncos' many flaws on offense, special teams

ARNIE STAPLETON
AP Pro Football Writer

DENVER (AP) — Unlike a year ago, Denver's dazzling defense can't hide all the warts on offense or special teams.

These Broncos are actually surrendering fewer points per game (18.4) than last year's version (18.5) that brought home the Lombardi Trophy.

They limited Tom Brady to 16 completions and the Patriots to 16 points on Sunday, but their sputtering offense and atrocious special teams again couldn't match the effort.

Denver's 16-3 loss to the Patriots (12-2) put the Broncos (8-6) in danger of missing the playoffs a year after winning Super Bowl 50.

"I can't sit here and tell you what all the scenarios are, but if we don't find a way to win 10 games, we're not going to have an opportunity," Broncos coach Gary Kubiak said Sunday.

That means the Broncos are going to have to win on Christmas Night at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, where they're 3-16 in December. Then, they'll have to beat Oakland at home, where the Raiders won last year.

Even beating the Chiefs (10-4) and Raiders (11-3) won't guarantee Denver a ticket to the postseason party.

They're in this precarious position because of a season-long ineptitude on offense, shaky special teams and debatable coaching decisions, all of which were on display as Brady won for just the third time in 10 trips to Denver.

After watching rookie speedster Kalif Raymond post good punt returns in the two weeks since his promotion following Jordan Norwood's two costly muffs on punt returns against Kansas City, Kubiak went back to Norwood on Sunday.

Norwood promptly let his first punt go through his arms and legs for a key turnover after Denver held Brady to three-and-out to start the game.

"Just a short punt, think it was a bad punt on the punter's part. Tried to get up there and fair catch it and save us a lot of field position," Norwood said. "Tough play that I've got to make."

Asked why he made the switch, Kubiak said the offensive game plan and its no-huddle and three-receiver sets, was better suited for Norwood.

But Norwood caught just one pass, in the game's closing



AP Photo/Jack Dempsey

New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady passes under pressure against the Denver Broncos during the second half of an NFL football game Sunday, Dec. 18, 2016, in Denver.

seconds, and he fumbled away the football after a 15-yard gain.

He wasn't the only goat by any means. The Broncos' porous O-line couldn't keep Trevor Siemian upright enough, and Siemian made two uncharacteristic bad decisions, one of which resulted in a red-zone interception and another which pushed Denver out of field goal range.

Demaryius Thomas, Virgil Green and A.J. Derby once again had huge drops that thwarted any building momentum.

"When you kill yourselves with two early turnovers, and you're not putting up points, it's hard to win games," Denver safety T.J. Ward said. "That's point-blank, period. That's what we've been doing the last two weeks and have two L's on that side of the column."

Last week, the Broncos limited Marcus Mariota to six completions for 88 yards and lost 13-10 at Tennessee.

Three weeks ago, Aqib Talib shoved Norwood after one of his muffs, prompting Kubiak to remind them they fight together, not each other.

What about now?

"That's not going to take us nowhere, being frustrated and beefing with the offense," Talib said. "That's going to get us nowhere. We're going to ride and stick together."

Still, there's clearly budding friction, but Von Miller said he'll be the peace-keeper if necessary.

"There's not going to be any friction," Miller promised. "I'm the partition."

Other takeaways from the Patriots' win in which they improved to 7-0 on the road:

DIVISION DOMINANCE: The Patriots passed out AFC East Champion caps after becoming the first NFL team to

win eight consecutive division titles. This is never old hat, noted Julian Edelman, who said, "It's an honor to play here and experience eight of them."

Coach Bill Belichick's 14th division title broke a tie with Don Shula and Tom Landry for most ever.

RUN STUFFED: The Broncos again struggled on the ground — after a promising start, too. Denver had 46 of its 58 yards in the first half, but finished 2 of 12 on third downs after going. They're now 6 for 36 on third downs in December.

"We have to block better, run better and catch better in those situations," running back Justin Forsett said. "Then we'll be able to run the ball more."

MISSING MARSHALL: With Brandon Marshall (hamstring) missing his second straight game, inside linebackers Corey Nelson and Todd Davis each collected 13 tackles. Still, the Patriots gained 136 yards on 39 carries, keeping Brady from having to test Denver's "No Fly Zone" secondary.

"They really didn't have to take a lot of chances," cornerback Chris Harris Jr. said. "They didn't have to throw the ball too much, and it's hard to make plays when you don't get that many targets."

GOOD BYE: With the win, New England earned a first-round bye in the playoffs for a seventh straight season. The Patriots lead the NFL with 12 first-round byes since the current playoff format began in 1990. The next best is Denver, Pittsburgh and San Francisco with eight.

"We still got a job to do, so we'll continue to work for our ultimate goal," defensive lineman Trey Flowers said.