

THE ELWAY EMERGENCE

Ten years with John Elway, Dan Reeves & The Denver Broncos: 1983-92



It took the Denver Broncos seventeen years from their founding in 1960 to earn their first playoff berth. The franchise won the AFC title in 1977, then made the postseason again each of the next two years. After a down year in 1980, Dan Reeves took over the coaching reins.

Even though the Broncos missed the playoffs in 1981, they still went 10-6 in Reeves' first campaign. But they needed something more. Two big breaks got Denver what it needed.

The 1982 NFL season was a strike-shortened mess and the Broncos struggled to finish 2-7. A team that had a pretty good foundation had the opportunity to pick fourth overall in the draft. That pick officially landed them offensive tackle Chris Hinton. It was a good choice—Hinton went on to a career that included seven Pro Bowl seasons and a pair of 1st-team All-NFL selections. But they wouldn't be in Denver.

The biggest break the Broncos got was that the best player in the draft, Stanford quarterback John Elway, made no secret of his disdain for the idea of playing for the Baltimore Colts. The Colts had the first pick in the draft. And Elway had options—he was a well-regarded minor league baseball player in the New York Yankees system. Elway used his leverage to force a trade. Baltimore traded him to Denver for a package highlighted by Hinton.

Elway would usher in the greatest era of the Denver Broncos, one that is best understood by dividing it into two movements.

The first movement was from 1983-92. It was the time when Elway made his legend. He led the Broncos to three Super Bowl appearances. His drive in the 1986 AFC Championship Game continues to be the defining moment in his career as a clutch quarterback. He won the MVP award in 1987 and his rifle arm made him a regular in highlight reels.

The second movement was the latter part of the 1990s. That's when Elway secured his legacy. The Broncos became a more physical team and Big John didn't have to carry the load. But he got the monkey of that 0-3 Super Bowl record off his back. The Broncos won two championships and Elway rode off into the sunset, ironically after a Super Bowl win over the Reeves-coached Atlanta Falcons.

This compilation covers the first of those movements. Nine of the ten seasons from 1983-92 have their own individual article published individually on TheSportsNotebook.com (the 5-11 disaster of 1990 being the one exception). Those articles are pulled together and edited to create this compilation.

You'll see the growing pains Elway went through from 1983-85, between his struggles on the field in his rookie year to some disappointing ends for the team in the next two. Then watch the breakout era of 1986-89 when Denver won three AFC crowns in four years. Finally, see the Broncos make a run to another AFC Championship Game in 1991 behind another vintage Elway postseason comeback. The era ends in 1992 when a late fade cost the team a playoff berth and marked the end of Reeves' tenure.

These ten years might not have been the ones where John Elway got his rings, but they were the ones where he and Reeves shaped the first part of the Legend of John Elway. Read about all the big games in each of these seasons and see the other notable players that came through old Mile High Stadium. From Dennis Smith to Karl Mecklenburg to Tom Jackson to Steve Atwater. From the Three Amigos to Sammy Winder to a young Shannon Sharpe and an aging Tony Dorsett. They're all here in *The Elway Emergence: Ten Years With The Denver Broncos Of John Elway & Dan Reeves*.

1983

Elway's rookie year had a lot of rocky moments, especially at the beginning. But by the end, they had made the playoffs and Elway was starting to flash the potential that would eventually take him to the Hall of Fame.

The offensive supporting cast for a young quarterback wasn't very good. There was no Pro Bowl talent on the offensive line and 24-year-old Sammy Winder only rushed for 757 yards. The receivers were the key strength. Steve Watson had an excellent year, catching 59 passes for over 1,100 yards. Rick Upchurch was a big-play threat himself, 40 catches for 639 yards. But overall, the offense ranked just 21st in the league as Elway went through serious growing pains.

It was the defense that led Denver in 1983. Linebacker Randy Gradishar and corner Louis Wright were both Pro Bowlers. Tom Jackson, the future ESPN analyst, was a 32-year-old

linebacker and got 5 ½ sacks. Strong safety Dennis Smith was only 24 and beginning a career that would see him become a Pro Bowl perennial. The defense ranked ninth in the NFL in points allowed.

Elway's highly anticipated debut came in Pittsburgh against a team that would ultimately win its division. It was inauspicious to say the least—he went 1/8 for 14 yards and had to be yanked for 29-year-old backup Steve DeBerg. The defense forced seven turnovers and bailed the team out in a 14-10 win.

A road trip to Baltimore saw Elway play marginally better, but not much—9/21 for 106 yards. Denver still trailed 10-3 in the fourth quarter and DeBerg again came on in relief. He went 9/11 for 158 yards and pulled out a 17-10 win.

Elway got another start at home against a subpar Philadelphia team and finally threw his first touchdown pass—a 33-yarder to fullback Rick Parros. Elway went 18/33 for 193 yards, but there was no running game to speak of and the Broncos lost 13-10. Another home loss followed, this one to an outstanding team in the eventual Super Bowl champion Los Angeles Raiders. Elway and DeBerg both struggled in a 22-7 loss.

The situation got worse in Chicago against a Bears team that was mediocre, but growing into the team that Mike Ditka would make a playoff perennial starting the following year. Elway started 4/10 for 36 yards and then was knocked out of the game. DeBerg came on and played well, 17/30 for 235 yards, but the running game was a problem, while the Bears' Walter Payton had a big day. A 31-14 defeat was the result.

DeBerg now had the job with Elway on the shelf and given the difference in performance, it's hard to imagine that Reeves was all that disappointed. A road trip to play the woeful Houston Oilers (today's Tennessee Titans) resulted in a 26-14 win. Winder had his best game of the year with 165 rushing yards, outperforming the great (albeit declining) Earl Campbell, who ran for 101. Another win came against so-so Cincinnati, as DeBerg threw a seven-yard touchdown pass to Parros in the fourth quarter to beat the Bengals 24-17.

The DeBerg-led winning streak produced two more wins, these against AFC West opponents. They didn't play well in a home game against the weak San Diego Chargers, trailing 6-0 in the fourth quarter. But backup running back Dave Preston ran for 99 yards, DeBerg threw a 30-yard touchdown pass to Upchurch and the Broncos escaped 14-6.

In a home date with Kansas City, DeBerg went 21/41 for 350 yards, making good use of the receivers. Upchurch and Watson each caught six balls and combined for 264 receiving yards. Denver roared to a 27-10 lead and hung on to win 27-24.

After four straight wins, DeBerg struggled in Seattle, an AFC West rival prior to 2002 and a contender with Denver for playoff spots in 1983. The Broncos fell behind 20-3, and the now-healthy Elway came in. He played pretty well, 8/15 for 134 yards. Even though they lost 27-19, he got his job back for a road trip to play the Raiders.

Elway lost the job as quickly as he got it. He was erratic, the Broncos were out rushed 140-63 and only a defensive touchdown kept the game close in a 22-20 loss. With Seattle making their return trip to Mile High Stadium, it was time for Door #3 in the quarterback carousel. Reeves went to 22-year-old Gary Kubiak. The Broncos won 38-27, though it was mostly about the defense getting eight turnovers and Winder out rushing talented Seattle rookie Curt Warner 92-70.



Reeves still went back to Elway in San Diego, who threw three interceptions in a 31-7 loss. Denver was now 7-6 and in the middle of a jam-packed race for two wild-card spots, their home game with the 7-6 Cleveland Browns loomed large.

Given how Elway would torment Cleveland in the latter part of the decade, maybe it was appropriate that this proved to be a breakout game. He went 16/24 for 284 yards, throwing TD passes of 39 & 49 yards to Clint Sampson in a 27-6 rout. It was the best performance of his still-young career.

At 8-6, the Broncos were tied with the Bills while the Seahawks, Patriots, Browns and Jets were all in chase at 7-7. Denver hosted Baltimore for the penultimate regular season game (scheduling rules at the time had last-place teams in the same conference from the previous year, play each other twice). With all the money on the table, the Broncos were playing horribly and trailing 19-0.

It was then that Elway showed the comeback mojo that would eventually make him a legend. He threw three touchdown passes to three different receivers, all from 20-plus yards out. Denver won 21-19 and the right confluence of events elsewhere in the league clinched a playoff spot.

The Broncos were in position to host the wild-card game, with a 9-6 record (the Raiders had run away with the AFC West title). But in a road game at Kansas City, Elway went 13/34 for 143 yards and threw four interceptions. The 48-17 loss, combined with Seattle winning meant that the Broncos would visit the Seahawks for the wild-card game.

It was late afternoon on Christmas Eve when Denver went to the Seattle Kingdome. The Seahawks played a flawless and efficient game. Both Elway and DeBerg played and were both so-so. Even though the game was tied 7-7 after the first quarter, Seattle's clean football and steady running game helped them pull away to 31-7.

The season wasn't always easy and Elway's final numbers were weak—a 47.5% completion rate, only 6.4 yards-per-attempt and a 7-14 TD-INT ratio. But he delivered the big wins over the Browns and Colts to get Denver to the playoffs. The new era had begun.

1984

1984 was the first season that John Elway was unquestionably The Man in Mile High Country. In his rookie year, he split time with veteran Steve DeBerg. This '84 season was a breakout campaign for Elway, even if there were the growing pains of disappointment at season's end.

Elway would rely on his ground game in 1984. Winder rushed for over 1,100 yards and was a versatile back, whose 44 receptions were the second-most on the team. Watson was Elway's top target, with 69 catches for nearly 1,200 yards. Butch Johnson, who had a fabulous Super Bowl catch against Denver seven years earlier when he played in Dallas, was now a competent veteran target, catching 42 passes.

There was not a single Pro Bowl talent on the offensive line or the defense. That's what makes the defensive performance so much more impressive. Under the leadership of coordinator Joe Collier, Denver produced the #2 scoring defense in the NFL. They trailed only the eventual Super Bowl champion San Francisco 49ers and were superior to the Buddy Ryan defense in Chicago that was gathering steam and would take the league by storm a year later.

Elway's numbers weren't spectacular—the 56% completion rate was decent by the standards of the time, and the 2,598 passing yards acceptable. The 18/15 TD-INT ratio could be lived with, along with the 6.8 yards-per-pass. It's fair to say that most of Elway's career was a case of him carrying mediocre talent to great heights. The defense carried more of the load in 1984 than the 11th-ranked offense, but the career pattern was starting to emerge.

Denver opened the season at home against mediocre Cincinnati. There was little evidence that this would be a special season for Elway—after a nice start, of 8/13 for 127 yards, he was knocked out. The best passer of the day was Bengal quarterback Ken Anderson, who threw for 323 yards. And this Bronco comeback was orchestrated by backup Gary Kubiak, who hit tight end Clarence Kay on an 8-yard touchdown pass for a 20-17 win.

Elway returned in Chicago for Week 2, although he might have regretted it. He went 2/3 for 11 yards against Ryan's swarming defense. Kubiak came in and went 3/6 for 40 yards. Head coach Dan Reeves also tried third-stringer Scott Stankavage, who managed a 4/18 for 58 yards. Denver was out rushed 302-53 and lost 27-0. To call it embarrassing would be an understatement.

Sunday Night games were a rarity in 1984, and Denver played one in Cleveland. These two franchises would eventually be interlocked in history after a couple epic AFC Championship Game battles in 1986-87.

For now, future Browns quarterback Bernie Kosar was still in college and Cleveland wasn't any good. After digging a 14-0 hole, Denver got a 62-yard touchdown pass from Elway to shift momentum, another TD pass to tie it and a defensive touchdown sealed the deal in a 24-14 win.

The Broncos played their best game of the young season at home against Kansas City, with Winder going for 139 yards and the defense spinning a shutout, 21-0. The Los Angeles Raiders, the defending Super Bowl champions came into old Mile High Stadium next and Denver was a (+4) home underdog.

It was Elway's chance to shine, although it was again the running game that stole the show. The Broncos out rushed Raiders and Marcus Allen 231-70, with Winder and Gerald Wilhite sharing the load. Denver pulled out a 16-13 win when Wilhite scored the go-ahead touchdown.

The Broncos were 4-1 and had beaten the champs, but there were still skeptics. Denver was a (+3) underdog going into Detroit, a team that would finish 4-11-1. While the Lions had won a division title at 9-7 the year before, they were off to a 1-4 start this time around, so what they were in 1984 was becoming apparent. Elway posted his best numbers of the season, going 15/22 for 210 yards in a 28-7 rout.

The Monday Night stage was next and the possibility of a quarterback battle between Elway and Green Bay Packer gunslinger Lynn Dickey loomed. Mother Nature intervened and dumped a blizzard on the Rocky Mountain area. Denver scored two defensive touchdowns immediately, with Steve Foley and Louis Wright each returning fumbles for scores. The Broncos took care of the ball, only fumbled twice and recovered both. The Packers fumbled seven times in all and lost four. Denver won 17-14.

A road trip to woeful Buffalo resulted in another defensive display. The Broncos got 5 ½ sacks, two by linebacker Karl Mecklenburg, and they intercepted four passes in a 37-7 rout. Denver was now 7-1, but Elway had again been knocked out. He would only miss one game, but as it turned out, that game was the return trip to Los Angeles to play the Raiders.

Falling behind 12-0 with a backup quarterback on the road generally isn't a formula for winning. But Kubiak stood tall, went 21/34 for 206 yards and trailing 19-6, threw two fourth-quarter touchdowns to tie the game. The TD should have been able to win it, but for a botched PAT, but Denver won in overtime 22-19. They were 8-1 and riding high.

A home date with a competitive New England Patriots team was next, and Elway returned to go 26/40 for 315 yards. The Broncos didn't run the ball well in this game, nor did they stop the run. They trailed 19-12, but Elway threw a short TD pass to tie it. The Patriots were driving for the winning points when safety Dennis Smith recovered a fumble on the Denver 36-yard line and took it to the house. They won 26-19.

The magic year continued in San Diego. Again running the ball poorly, Denver trailed 13-6 in the fourth quarter. Winder ran in from a yard out to tie it and Elway led a drive for a field goal to get the win. The Broncos finally made their lives a little easier at home against the awful Minnesota Vikings. Elway was 16/19 for 218 yards and rifled five touchdown passes. Denver led 42-7 after three quarters before giving up a couple inconsequential touchdowns in the fourth period.

With a record of 11-1, the Broncos should have been running away with the division, but the AFC West was the best division in the NFL. The Seattle Seahawks were 10-2. The Raiders were in the rearview mirror at 8-4. The final four weeks of the season would see both Denver-Seattle games and it started in Mile High Stadium on the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

Elway played well, going 15/25 for 275 yards, but the defense, uncharacteristically, did not. They surrendered 406 passing yards to Dave Krieg, allowed an 80-yard touchdown pass in the fourth quarter and the Broncos lost 27-24.

Things got worse a week later. The Chiefs were on their way to an 8-8 season, but ready to play spoiler. Denver led 13-7 after three quarters, but Elway was erratic, going 16/36 for 183 yards. Kansas City chipped away for a trio of fourth quarter field goals to win 16-13. The bitter road loss dropped the Broncos a game back and while the playoffs were clinched, even hosting a wild-card game was in doubt, as the Raiders were now 10-4.

Denver hosted San Diego in the regular season's penultimate game, and good news came early. Kansas City, continuing its spoiler policy, had crushed Seattle in the day's 1 PM ET games. The Broncos could tie for first and set up a winner-take-all battle with the Seahawks next week.

Elway played pretty well, going 18/31 for 193 yards. The rest of his team seemed ready to kick away the opportunity though. They turned it over four times, losing three fumbles and did not force any turnovers of their own. Eventually though, the Broncos rallied for a 16-13 win on a Rick Karl field goal.

Now there were six days to get ready and go up to the old Seattle Kingdome to play a late Saturday afternoon game on national television for the division crown. As if the AFC West title weren't enough, there was a double revenge factor—the game a few weeks earlier, plus the wild-card game in this same building in 1983 that Denver lost on Christmas Eve.

What's more, Denver had a shot at the #1 seed in the AFC playoffs. If they won, and the Miami Dolphins lost on Monday Night, the Broncos got home field advantage. Seattle didn't hold the tiebreaker on Miami, so they could only get to #2, but for Denver, this was a whole lot at stake.

John Elway has played some incredibly clutch football games in his Hall of Fame career. This game was not one of them. He went 9/21 for 148 yards and threw four interceptions. But the Bronco defense forced three turnovers of their own and mitigated the damage.

Meanwhile, Winder keyed a 143-79 edge in rushing yardage. Denver led 17-7 in the third quarter when Foley made the decisive play, picking off Krieg and going 40 yards for a touchdown. It was the dagger blow and the 31-14 road win gave Denver the AFC West crown. Miami won on Monday, so the Broncos settled for the #2 seed. But they had a week off and a chance to get ready for a Super Bowl run.

Whether Denver won the Super Bowl or not, it seemed like some sort of storybook finish was in the works. So long as the Broncos took care of the mediocre Pittsburgh Steelers, who had won a division at 9-7, then Denver could play Miami in an AFC title battle that would be Elway against Dan Marino. If Denver won that one? The Super Bowl was to be held at Stanford, Elway's alma mater. If the chalk held (and it did), the 49ers and Joe Montana would be the foil.

So long as they took care of Pittsburgh...but about that Pittsburgh thing. Elway was a pedestrian 19/37 for 184 yards and was outplayed by Mark Malone. The running game and defense couldn't step up in this one, as the Steelers got 25 first downs and out rushed the Broncos 169-51. A touchdown with three minutes left gave Pittsburgh a 24-17 win.

There's no shirking the disappointment of this loss. But nor was there any denying that after a tumultuous rookie year, John Elway had clearly established himself as The Man In Mile High.

1985

Denver missed the playoffs due to a couple heartbreaking losses, but they also finished 11-5 and only the weird balance of power in the AFC cost them a postseason spot.

Elway threw for over 3,800 yards in '85. The young gunslinger was still erratic though, not quite the polished pro that would become arguably the greatest quarterback of all time.

He completed 54% of his passes, which was decent in the football world of 1985. But his 6.4 yards-per-attempt was fairly low, especially given his arm strength. He threw 22 touchdown passes, but the 23 interceptions were high, even allowing for the era.

Denver was also dealing with a fall-off in production from Winder, who went from a Pro Bowl year in 1984 to barely over 700 yards rushing. Winder wasn't helped by an offensive line that lacked Pro Bowl talent. The receivers were solid, with Watson being a more possession-oriented target and Vance Johnson the deep threat. Collectively, even with the shortcomings, Elway's offense still ranked eighth in the NFL in points scored.



The defense had more pure Pro Bowl talent, starting with 1st-team All-NFL inside linebacker Karl Mecklenburg, who recorded 13 sacks. Corner Louis Wright was another Pro Bowler, as was Dennis Smith, who could cause havoc with his blitzing. Mike Harden, on the opposite corner of Wright intercepted five passes.

Rulon Jones keyed the pass rush and the defensive end got 10 sacks in a Pro Bowl season of his own. But in spite of this, the defense was still proportionally worse than the offense, ranking 13th in points allowed.

Denver opened the season with a marquee game against the Los Angeles Rams, another team that had made the playoffs the previous two years and would also finish 11-5 this season. It was a battle between the arm of Elway and the legs of the great Ram running back Eric Dickerson.

Elway threw two touchdown passes and the Broncos took a 16-10 lead after three quarters. But they lost the rushing battle 147-63 and the Rams eventually wore them down, taking home a 20-16 win.

The first home game came against a weak New Orleans Saints team, and Elway opened it up with a 65-yard touchdown pass to Butch Johnson, then threw two more TD passes before the first half was out. The quarterback finished with four touchdown passes on the game and 353 yards in a 34-23 win. And he kept it rolling in a road game against another bad NFC team, the Atlanta Falcons. Elway threw for 291 yards, spreading the ball around in a 44-28 win.

Another marquee opponent awaited in Dan Marino's Miami Dolphins. Marino had won the MVP award in 1984 and his team reached the Super Bowl. Though Elway would surpass Marino as the top quarterback in the famed draft class of 1983, the Miami QB was off to a better career start. And he outplayed Elway in this game at Mile High Stadium.

Even though Denver won the rushing battle thanks to 103 yards from Winder, but Elway was erratic, going 18/37 for 250 yards. Marino went 25/43 for 350 yards and three touchdowns. The Broncos led 23-20 after three quarters, but once again, a big win escaped them in the fourth quarter, falling 30-26 at home

A shaky game from Elway against the subpar Houston Oilers, saw him throw three interceptions, but Houston wasn't good enough to take advantage and the Broncos grabbed a 31-20 win at home. They got another less-than-impressive win over a bad team in edging the Indianapolis Colts 15-10 on the road. In this case it was red-zone execution, as four trips inside the 20-yard line ended in field goals.

Seattle had been the foil for Denver in both 1983 and 1984. In '83, it was the Seahawks who knocked the Broncos out of the playoffs. Denver returned the favor by winning a close division race in '84. In their first game of this season, the Broncos played opportunistic football, winning the turnover battle 4-0, getting five sacks and pulling out a 13-10 overtime win.

Two more divisional games followed, this time on the road. Denver dominated Kansas City on the ground, took a 24-0 lead by the second quarter and won 30-10. The Broncos gave it right back in San Diego, not running the ball, falling behind 27-3 and losing 30-10.

It was time for another marquee game, and this time it was the defending Super Bowl champion San Francisco 49ers and the stage was Monday Night Football. The snow was coming down in Mile High Stadium and Elway met the challenge. He threw the ball 50 times, completed 28 and got 261 yards, admirable numbers in the conditions.

And the snow ended up playing a decisive role—the Broncos led 17-16, but Joe Montana got the 49ers in position to try a short field goal for the win. As the ball was snapped, a snowball came out of the stands and landed in front of the holder, creating enough of a distraction for the kick to be missed. Denver had a controversial win, and at 7-3, they were in the lead in the AFC West.

Elway was again erratic at home against the Chargers, going 20/42 for 215 yards, but the Broncos were good enough to escape with a 30-24 overtime win. It set up a huge three-week period where they would play the Los Angeles Raiders twice. The Raiders were 7-4 and a game back of the Broncos. The Seahawks were also lingering at 6-5.

The first game took place at the L.A. Coliseum. Elway played efficiently, completing 19/32 passes for 164 yards. But he couldn't get the ball down the field, and Raider running back Marcus Allen ran for 173 yards. It went to overtime and the Raiders won 31-28.

Denver came back and won 31-23 at mediocre Pittsburgh, thanks to four sacks from Mecklenburg, and four interceptions overall, including a 42-yard Pick-6 by Harden that sealed the game. The Broncos and Raiders were now tied at 9-4 with the Seahawks fading from the race. Los Angeles visited Denver for the big showdown on December 8.

The Bronco secondary was again in a ballhawking mood, picking off four passes, three of them from Smith. They took a 14-0 lead. But they were struggling to run the football and Elway couldn't pick up the slack, going 18/36 for 158 yards and three interceptions of his own. Allen was having a MVP year and he went a long way toward solidifying it in this game—again it went to overtime and again the Broncos lost, 17-14.

Denver was now really up against it for the playoffs in spite of their 9-5 record. They trailed the Raiders by a game and would lose the tiebreaker. There were only two wild-card berths available and the AFC East had three teams at 10-4. The problem was that the AFC Central was so mediocre that Cleveland would win it at 8-8, meaning a worthy team elsewhere would get squeezed out. Denver was "poised" to become that team.

A late Saturday afternoon game with Kansas City almost ended the playoff bid. Denver played a terrible football game, specifically Elway, who threw five interceptions. But here's where the quarterback showed the magic that would define his career—even on a bad day, he found a way to make a play, and his 22/37 for 301 yards enabled Denver to steal a 14-13 win.

Los Angeles clinched the AFC West, but Denver still had hope for a wild-card. Coming into the final week, they were chasing the New York Jets and New England. Both teams would play at home against mediocre teams in Cleveland and Cincinnati. It wasn't a great shot, but Denver only needed one of them to lose.

First things first though. The Broncos had to beat the Seahawks in the old Kingdome on a Friday night telecast. Denver dug themselves a 17-0 hole, including allowing a blocked punt for a touchdown. Elway then invited the entire Bronco team onto his back. He threw for 432 yards and personally carried his teammates to a 27-24 win that kept the playoff dream alive.

Alas, it was not to be. The Jets won in a blowout and the Patriots pulled away in the fourth quarter against the Bengals. The Broncos would miss the playoffs at 11-5. It wasn't particularly fair, but there were plenty of postseason thrills for this franchise and this quarterback in the immediate years ahead.

1986

The time had arrived for the 1986 Denver Broncos. It was John Elway's fourth year and his first three had been an appropriate mix of success and disappointment for a growing young quarterback. In 1986, the Broncos took the next step and reached Elway's first Super Bowl.

Elway made the Pro Bowl, but his overall numbers weren't spectacular. His 56% completion rate was barely above the league average and even with one of the game's all-time great rifle arms, the 6.9 yards-per-attempt was below the league norm. He avoided making mistakes. On the surface that shouts "game manager." But underneath the numbers, Elway led a mostly pedestrian offense to the sixth-most points in the NFL.

There were no 1,000-yard receivers to bail Elway out. Steve Watson was still a good possession receiver and Mark Jackson had some speed, but combined they didn't reach 1,500 yards. Sammy Winder was still the top running back, but he only averaged 3.3 yards-per-attempt. How he made the Pro Bowl is a bit of a mystery. The offensive line was built around Pro Bowl left guard Keith Bishop.

What Denver ultimately had was Elway and the pass-catching ability of the backs. Winder caught 26 balls out of the backfield and the big target was Gerald Wilhite, who led the team with 64 catches.



The defense had more individual talent. Rulon Jones was a 1st-team All-Pro at defensive end and recorded 13 ½ sacks. Karl Mecklenburg was another 1st-team All-Pro at inside linebacker, getting 9 ½ sacks in an aggressive 3-4 scheme.

Strong safety Dennis Smith made the Pro Bowl, while corner Mike Harden picked off six passes. For leadership, Tom Jackson was at outside linebacker and the future ESPN analyst was 35-years-old.

But the defense didn't have its equivalent of Elway and consequently was a mediocre 15th in the league in points

allowed.

Denver had lost two crushing games down the stretch to the Los Angeles Raiders in 1985, the games that swung the AFC West title. The Broncos hosted the Raiders in the opening game of 1986 and it was another thriller. It wasn't necessarily well-played, with double-digit penalties on both sides, but it came down to the wire.

The Broncos trailed 36-28 in the fourth quarter in the era prior to the two-point conversion. Elway, who finished with 239 yards passing, led one of his patented comebacks. After a 51-yard field goal, a touchdown pass to Gene Lang won it 38-36. Denver won again the following Monday Night in Pittsburgh, with Elway going 21/38 for 243 yards and three touchdowns in a 21-10 win over a weak Steeler team.

The running game made an appearance in Philadelphia a week later. The Eagles were coached by Buddy Ryan, the architect of the devastating 1985 Chicago Bears defense that won the Super Bowl. Buddy's rebuilding project in Philly was just getting started and Winder and Wilhite ran over the Eagles for a combined 195 yards in a 33-7 win.

Denver hosted defending AFC champion New England on the last weekend of September and fell behind 13-3 at the half. Elway was erratic, going 18/34 for 188 yards. But by outrushing the Patriots 156-40, the Broncos turned the game around and scored 24 unanswered points. They won 27-20.

The Dallas Cowboys ended the season a mediocre 7-9, but they got off to a strong start and were 3-1 and the visit to Mile High Stadium was a marquee showdown game. After a scoreless first quarter, Elway started making big plays. He finished 12/24 and made those passes go for 300 yards. Wilhite caught two touchdowns out of the backfield and ran for a third in a 29-14 win.

Elway played well again in a road game at San Diego. The Chargers were a poor team, but Hall of Fame quarterback Dan Fouts could still gin it up every once in a while. He and Elway each moved the ball, but the Broncos had a running game and their defense recorded five sacks. It was the difference in an easy 31-14 win.

Another Monday Night visit awaited and this one was in the Meadowlands against the New York Jets who were flying high and had lost just once. Denver still came in a 3 ½ point favorite with their 6-0 record, but on the national stage they laid an egg. Elway threw a couple interceptions, they were out rushed 137-47, fell behind 22-0 in the third quarter and lost 22-10.

The undefeated run might have been over but Denver bounced back with a tough home win over Seattle. The Seahawks were a good team that would compete for a playoff spot to the bitter end. Elway was 18/32 for 301 yards while spreading the ball around. It trumped Seattle running back Curt Warner's 139-yard day in a 20-13 Bronco win.

Denver's defense stood stall in the rematch with the Los Angeles Raiders at the L.A. Coliseum. They picked off Raider quarterback Marc Wilson four times and also recovered two fumbles. The coup de grace was Mike Harden's 40-yard interception return for a touchdown that sealed a 21-10 win.

The Broncos must have suffered an emotional letdown, because nothing else can explain a horrid home performance against San Diego with Fouts out and backup Tom Flick in. Elway was awful, 13/31 for 196 yards and three interceptions. In spite of being nearly a two-touchdown favorite, Denver lost 9-3.

Special teams keyed the bounceback home game against the playoff-bound Kansas City Chiefs. The Broncos scored off a fake punt and Wilhite brought a punt 70 yards to the house. The defense also produced a touchdown. This was all in the first half as the lead grew to 31-0 and Denver coasted home to a 38-17 win.

Another visit to the Meadowlands, this one to play the New York Giants, was an anticipated game on the schedule. The Giants were 9-2 and this game was hyped as a possible Super Bowl preview. It would be exactly that and this game lived up to the stakes.

Elway was brilliant against one of the great defenses in the league, going 29/47 for 336 yards and spreading the ball around among all his receivers. The difference was that he did throw a couple picks. The killer came in the second quarter. Denver led 6-3 and was in the New York red zone looking for more. Giant defensive tackle George Martin got his hands on an Elway pass, and managed to rumble 78 yards for a touchdown.

Denver stayed in the game, but giving away a touchdown like that was too much to overcome against a good team on the road. They lost 19-16.

The Broncos were still in control of the AFC West at 9-3, but by no means home free. They had the Raiders in their rearview mirror at 8-4 and in the conference overall were chasing the 10-2 Jets for the #1 playoff seed. Denver would stay fairly stable down the stretch, though the teams around them would do some considerable shuffling.

Cincinnati was chasing a playoff spot when they came to Denver on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, but the Broncos recovered well from the tough loss a week earlier. After falling behind 14-10 to a high-powered offense led by Boomer Esiason and a potent running game, Elway threw a 19-yard touchdown pass to Jackson and then flipped an eight-yard scoring toss to Winder. The Broncos got some good running of their own, with 182 yards on the ground. They led as much as 34-14 before the Bengals scored a couple TDs to make the final a respectable 34-28.

The Raiders lost, as did the Jets. The opportunity to clinch the AFC West and keep in position for the top playoff seed was at hand when Denver went to Kansas City. The teams traded field goals in the first quarter and touchdown passes in the second. But the Broncos couldn't protect Elway, who was sacked five times. And the great quarterback wasn't careful with the football, throwing four picks. They bogged down in the third quarter, falling behind 17-10 and then came undone in the fourth quarter. The Chiefs pulled away 37-10.

Another loss by Los Angeles kept Denver in control of the AFC West. At 10-4, they led the Raiders, Chiefs and Seahawks by two games. The Jets lost again, but now the Browns were moving up in the AFC. They were also 10-4, as were the Patriots. In a logjam, Cleveland had the tiebreaker advantage.

First things first. Denver had to clinch the division and they had a Saturday game with the Washington Redskins, who would finish 12-4, on deck. The Redskins scored first, but missed the extra point. Without a two-point conversion to try and make it up, it kept the Broncos with an edge throughout the game and proved decisive. Elway went 20/35 for 282 yards and led the way to a 31-30 win that clinched a second division title in three years.

Denver closed the season with another Saturday date, this one in Seattle. There was still a lot in the line, as they could be seeded anywhere from 1-3. But the Broncos playing for seeding didn't

match the Seahawks playing with desperation. Denver was overwhelmed on the ground, giving up 298 yards rushing in a 41-16 loss.

It took the Broncos out of position for the 1-seed and put their hold on the 2-spot at risk. But the Jets completed a late-season collapse with a loss the following day and it locked Denver into the 2-spot. When the Patriots won on Monday Night they took the AFC East title and were set for a divisional playoff date in Mile High Stadium.



Nearly thirty years later, Broncos-Patriots would be a marquee date on the schedule, featuring Peyton Manning and Tom Brady. It wasn't quite that big of a deal in 1986 when they met on late Sunday afternoon in the final game of the NFL weekend. But this edition of Denver-New England was as good as any of the more heralded games that would take place in future years.

The teams started quietly, with the Broncos getting a good first-quarter drive that ended in a 27-yard field goal. In the second quarter, both offenses put together sustained marches. The Patriots drove 87 yards for a 7-3 lead, capping it off with Tony Eason's 19-yard touchdown pass to Stanley Morgan. Denver responded by going 82 yards, with Elway making it happen on the ground, scrambling 22 yards for a score. New England got a field goal before halftime and the game went to intermission tied 10-10.

Another Bronco drive bogged down in the red zone and they settled for a 22-yard field goal. Denver led 13-10, but they had twice settled for field goals down in close. Elway was also erratic and for the day he would complete just 13 of 32 passes.

Meanwhile, Morgan continued to cause problems for the Bronco secondary, getting loose on a 45-yard touchdown pass off a flea-flicker. New England led 17-13 as the quarter wound down.

The one thing Elway was doing was making big throws. His thirteen completions went for 257 yards and the biggest throw came on the final play of the third quarter. Denver was on the 48-yard line. New England jumped offsides and Elway had a free play. He used it to go deep to Vance Johnson and the result was a 48-yard touchdown pass.

Denver had the lead back at 20-17 and they were running the ball well. Winder rushed for 102 yards and the defense took over the fourth quarter. New England never scored again and Rulon Jones sealed the game when he sacked Eason for a safety. The 22-17 win was Denver's first playoff victory since their AFC championship season of 1977.

The Broncos were a three-point underdog in Cleveland the next week. An early kickoff of 12:30 PM ET meant that Denver had to deal with the body clock issues that come when western teams travel east. And they were slow out of the gate, with the Browns driving 86 yards for a first-quarter touchdown. Bernie Kosar's six-yard toss to running back Herman Fontenot put Cleveland up 7-0.

It was the defense that began to flip the script in the second quarter, getting three turnovers. Two of them were turned into points, although red-zone problems continued to hurt Denver. They settled for a 19-yard field goal to get on the board and were later stuck with 4th-and-goal on the 1-yard line. Head coach Dan Reeves couldn't keep settling for three and he went for it. Wilhite delivered with the touchdown. The Browns got a field goal just before the half and for the second week in a row the Broncos were tied 10-10 at the half.

The teams traded field goals, Denver in the late third quarter and Cleveland in the fourth. With 5:43 to go, the Browns appeared to finally strike the decisive blow. Kosar threw a 48-yard touchdown pass for a 20-13 lead. The Broncos messed up the ensuing kickoff and were pinned on their own two-yard line. The Dawg Pound was going crazy, their excellent defense was playing well and Elway was up against it. Now would be the time he made his legend.

A long 15-play drive began. The defining play was a 3rd-and-18, still deep in Cleveland territory. Elway, eschewing advice from Reeves to get half of it back, rifled a first-down strike to Jackson. He smoothly led Denver down the field and they tied the game with inside a minute left.

"The Drive" is what the game is remembered for and it remains the signature moment of Elway's extraordinary career. But there was still overtime to play. Prior to 2010, NFL overtime was sudden death. Cleveland got the ball first.

The Denver defense held. After getting the ball on his own 40-yard line, Elway faced another tough third down situation, this one requiring twelve yards to get the first down. He drilled a 28-yard strike to Watson. That was, in essence, the ball game. A 33-yard field goal gave Denver a 23-20 win.

The Broncos weren't given much of a chance in the Super Bowl, installed as a nine-point underdog to the Giants in Pasadena. The game is most remembered for the way New York took over the line of scrimmage in the second half and won decisively, 39-20. Less remembered is that Denver spent the first half keeping the favorites on the ropes.

After an early field goal, Elway then ran for one touchdown and then hit Johnson on a 54-yard pass to put Denver on the one-yard line, already holding a 10-7 lead. But those red zone problems that they'd flirted with against New England and Cleveland, finally came back to bite in a big way. The inability to run inside against the great Giant defense resulted in a goal-line stand, a botched field goal and ultimately set up a New York safety on a later possession when Denver couldn't flip the field.

Even though the Broncos led 10-9 at the half, the game quickly got away from them in the third quarter. They didn't score again until they trailed 33-10 in the fourth quarter.

It was still a breakthrough year for the 1986 Denver Broncos, the first of three Super Bowl trips in a four-year span. The season still produced the great moment of Elway's career and one of the most famous drives in NFL history. The only thing it missed was the Super Bowl trophy.

1987

The 1987 Denver Broncos gave their fans a season much like the one they saw in 1986. For the most part, that was extremely good. There was a run to the playoffs, a great year from Elway and a thrilling victory in the AFC Championship Game. Unfortunately the ending was also familiar with a blowout loss in the Super Bowl.

Statistically, Elway wasn't spectacular—he made big plays, ranking fifth among quarterbacks in yards-per-attempt. He stayed away from mistakes, ranking eighth in interceptions as a percentage of passes thrown. But he was also a bit erratic, with his 55% completion rate being 18th in the league. What Elway did do was lift a team better than any quarterback of his generation and that won him the MVP award in 1987.

Elway needed to be great because the talent around him wasn't. Bishop was the only other Pro Bowler on offense. Winder averaged 3.8 yards-per-attempt, the worst in the NFL among qualifying backs.

The good news was that the receivers meshed well with Elway. "The Three Amigos", as they were known were young and could stretch the field. Ricky Nattiel was the team's first-round draft pick out of Florida in 1987 and he immediately stepped in to average more than twenty yards a catch, second-best in the NFL. Vance Johnson and Mark Jackson were both 24-years-old and helped Denver head coach Dan Reeves spread the field. Elway and The Three Amigos were enough to produce the fourth-best offense in the NFL.



Inside linebacker Karl Mecklenburg was the only Pro Bowl player on defense in 1987, but that's a little misleading. Strong safety Dennis Smith had reached the Pro Bowl in 1986 and would do so again in the future. Mark Haynes had been one of the best corners in the league with the New York Giants and was still only 29-years-old.

Another misleading stat was that the defense ranked 27th in allowing pass yardage. It's misleading because they also produced 28 interceptions. The ability to force turnovers combined with excellent work against the run made the

Broncos the seventh-best D in the NFL.

Denver opened the season against a good team in Seattle. Elway threw an early 72-yard touchdown pass to running back Steve Sewell. The Broncos still trailed 17-7 in the second quarter before rallying to take a three-point lead by halftime. They broke it open in the second half. Elway threw a couple short touchdown passes and then hit Johnson on a 59-yard strike. The game ended 40-17.

A road trip to terrible Green Bay was extremely sloppy. Elway threw three interceptions and Denver trailed 14-0 in the second quarter. They rallied and the game ended in a 17-17 tie, but as a (-9 ½) point favorite, it was still a big disappointment.

By rights, Week 3 should have been the focal point of the regular season. Monday Night Football was going to show Denver-Cleveland in an anticipated rematch of the AFC Championship Game. Instead, a players' strike temporarily threw the season into a tizzy.

The owners responded by bringing in replacement players. Week 3 was canceled, but the next three weeks, while the strike lingered, were played by the replacements and counted in the standings.

Ken Karcher, a product of Tulane, was the new Elway and a home game with the Houston Oilers didn't exactly go well with a 40-10 loss. The Bronco replacements played on Monday Night against the Los Angeles Raiders and Denver turned it around with the running game.

Joe Dudek had gone to Plymouth State and set a new record for career touchdowns, previously held by Chicago Bears' legend Walter Payton. In 1985, *Sports Illustrated* made Dudek their choice for the Heisman Trophy. For the Monday Night audience, Dudek rushed for 128 yards and helped the Broncos beat the Raiders—who were quarterbacked by NFL veteran Vince Evans—30-14.

Karcher played well at Kansas City, throwing three touchdowns in a 26-17 win. The regulars came back, but the Denver replacements had done their job, winning a pair of key divisional games.

Another Monday Night game was on the docket as the regulars went to Minnesota. The Bronco defense intercepted five passes, two of them by Haynes, but they gave away the game in every other way possible. Elway was sacked five times. They allowed nearly 200 rush yards. And penalties killed Denver, ten of them for 128 yards. The result was a 34-27 loss.

The Broncos refocused and came home to beat up the lowly Lions, grabbing a quick 17-0 lead and rushing for 212 yards, en route to 34-0 whitewash. But at mediocre Buffalo a week later, Elway played poorly, they were out rushed 258-76, had two punts blocked for safeties and lost 21-14.

Denver's popularity nationwide was underscored by the fact that they played their third Monday Night game of the season (and it should have been the fourth if not for the Week 3 cancellation) on November 16 against Chicago. Elway made amends for his bad showing in Buffalo.

The Broncos trailed 29-21 in 25-degree weather against one of the great defenses of the era and at a time when the lack of a two-point conversion meant this was a two-score deficit. Elway pulled a rabbit out of his hat in the fourth quarter. He threw for 341 yards, three touchdowns and outgunned counterpart Jim McMahon in a 31-29 win.

Elway and Johnson hooked up to lead the way to a 23-17 road win over the Raiders. Johnson caught five passes for 115 yards, including an early touchdown. The following week in San Diego, the Broncos were marching for another early score when Elway threw an interception in the end zone that was taken 103 yards to the house. But the quarterback took over from there,

going 21/32 for 347 yards, three touchdowns and stretching the field with Nattiel. Denver won 31-17.

San Diego still led the AFC West with an 8-3 record as the final four games awaited. Denver was only a half-game back at 7-3-1 and Seattle was 7-4. Four other wild-card contenders were at 6-5 in a jam-packed race.

Denver hosted New England, a team they had ousted from the playoffs in 1986, but who was struggling to a mediocre season. The Broncos again fell behind early, this time 17-3. Again, Elway rallied them. He threw a pair of second-half touchdowns and they eventually led 24-20. The defense came through with its signature—turnovers. Mecklenburg had two picks and Haynes sealed the win with a Pick-6.

The Broncos got help in their division, as the Chargers and Seahawks both lost and Denver moved into first place. It set up a Sunday Night visit to the old Kingdome to play Seattle. Elway had a vintage big-play night—even though he was only 21/43, he produced 335 yards and led his team back from an early 14-0 deficit to a tie game. But the Broncos were being whipped in the line of scrimmage. Elway was sacked five times and the Seahawks won the rushing battle 141-72. Eventually, Denver wore down and lost 28-21.

San Diego had lost earlier in the day, so Denver's 8-4-1 record still had them a half-game up on both divisional rivals. The following Saturday they hosted Kansas City in a 4 PM EST start. The Chiefs did a good job removing The Three Amigos from the game, but Elway still went 18/31 for 237 yards and no mistakes, targeting tight end Clarence Kay for six catches and 91 yards. Winder ran for 98 yards and Denver clinched a playoff berth.

There was still the matter of the division title and the #1 seed in the AFC playoffs, both of which Denver controlled and both of which they could still lose. The Seahawks were a half-game back in the West and the Browns were the same in the conference overall. On the final Saturday of the season, Cleveland won and kept the pressure on. In the early part of Sunday, Seattle lost in Kansas City.

The Broncos took the field at home against San Diego assured of the AFC West crown and #2 seed. In a sloppy game with nine combined turnovers they locked up homefield advantage with a 24-0 win. The road to the Super Bowl was coming through Mile High Stadium.

After a week off, Denver met Houston in the final game of the divisional round weekend. The Broncos were a ten-point favorite and they backed that up. An early turnover set up a quick touchdown. Another turnover set up Elway's 27-yard touchdown pass to Kay. Before the first half was over, Elway had flipped a 1-yard TD pass to Kay. The score was 24-3 by halftime.

Elway finished the game 14/25 for 252 yards and a pair of touchdowns. Johnson caught four balls for 105 yards and the game never got closer, ending 34-10.

It wasn't all good news though—Johnson was injured and ruled out for the AFC Championship Game. Cleveland had won on Saturday and the rematch was set. You wouldn't have expected

that the game could match the thrills of 1986. But this was a case where the sequel stood up to the original.

Denver jumped out to the early lead. Linebacker Freddie Gilbert intercepted a tipped ball and a quick 17-yard drive was capped by an Elway TD pass to Nattiel. One possession later the Broncos recovered a fumble at midfield and drove it down to the three-yard line. A third-and-goal, Elway's pass fell incomplete but there was defensive holding. Sewell ran in for the touchdown that made it 14-0.

The Browns got a field goal, but Denver drove down for a one-yard touchdown run by Gene Lang that made it 21-3 at half and it looked like the night would just be one long party in the Rocky Mountains.

Elway threw an interception early in the second half that turned into a quick Cleveland touchdown. But he came right back and hit Jackson on a short slant that turned into an 80-yard touchdown pass that made it 28-10.

Cleveland quarterback Bernie Kosar was getting in rhythm though and when the Denver defense didn't force turnovers, they had problems. Kosar, who would throw for 356 yards, led successive touchdown drives and at 28-24, still in the third quarter, we had a ballgame.

Elway led a drive for a field goal, but another Browns' touchdown drive tied it 31-31 in the fourth quarter. It was time for another big drive from Elway. He finished the game 14/26 for 281 yards and three touchdowns. The final TD was a 20-yard pass to Winder with four minutes left to make it 38-31.

The Denver defense looked completely helpless though, and Cleveland moved right down the field and got inside the 10-yard line. Finally, safety Jeremiah Castille made the game-saving play. He stripped Browns' running back Earnest Byner, recovered the fumble at the 2-yard line and the Broncos would survive. They took a voluntary safety deep in their own end zone and closed out the 38-33 win.

One year earlier, the Broncos went to the Super Bowl against the New York Giants as decided underdogs. This time it was different. The NFC's top seed, the San Francisco 49ers, had been knocked out early and the Washington Redskins were the opponent. While the Redskins were a highly respected team under the leadership of Joe Gibbs and in their third Super Bowl in six years, they weren't seen as a dominant team. Denver was installed as a 3 ½ point favorite.

Elway hit Nattiel on a 56-yard touchdown pass less than two minutes into the game. He threw a 32-yard pass to Jackson and later caught a 23-yard pass from Sewell on a trick play. It was a 10-0 and it looked like the Bronco fans that came to San Diego would have reason to celebrate.

The game turned into the most stunning one-quarter reversal in Super Bowl history. The Broncos gave up a long touchdown pass and their rush defense then completely fell apart. The Redskins scored 35 points in the second quarter, a record that still stands. They rewrote the

Super Bowl record book in general. By halftime the score was 35-10 and the second half was just time for a lot of TV viewers to socialize during their Super Bowl parties. The final was 42-10.

It's difficult to think of the 1987 Denver Broncos without that second-quarter Super Bowl meltdown coming to mind, but that really isn't a fair legacy. Elway was as good as there was and lifted relatively mediocre supporting casts to championship levels in the late 1980s.

1988

The Denver Broncos came into the 1988 season looking to take the final step and they made a bold move to get over the top, acquiring Hall of Fame running back Tony Dorsett. But at 34-years-old, Dorsett's tank would prove to be running on empty and this '88 Broncos edition would prove to be a disappointment.

Dorsett barely cleared the 700-yard mark in '88 and retired after the season. Sammy Winder, the top runner the previous two years added over 500 yards to the cause, but both Dorsett and Winder were held under four yards per carry behind an offensive line that lacked any standout talent.

That kept the burden on Elway and the Hall of Fame quarterback had a bad year. His final numbers of 55 percent completion rate, 6.7 yards-per-attempt and 17-19 TD/INT ratio were all below the league average.

There was still a good collection of wide receivers, with Vance Johnson, Ricky Nattiel and Mark Jackson all big-play threats on the outside. Steve Sewell could come out of the backfield and Clarence Kay was a reliable tight end. But the offense overall ranked 15th in points scored in what was then a 28-team league.

The defense was worse, ranking 20th. Simon Fletcher had nine sacks at the outside linebacker spot and free safety Mike Harden picked off four passes. There were notable veteran names in linebacker Karl Mecklenburg and cornerback Mark Haynes. But on this team that had been a contender for five straight years, there was not a single Pro Bowler to be found in 1988.

Denver opened the season at home against Seattle. This opening game at old Mile High Stadium saw the Broncos get pounded on the ground, losing rush yardage 178-76. This Dorsett experiment was not off to a good start, Elway threw a couple interceptions and Denver lost 21-14.

A home date with a weak San Diego Chargers team went better. Dorsett got rolling with 113 yards. Elway was a sharp 17/28 for 259 yards with no mistakes. Denver cruised to a 34-3 win. But another game with a weak divisional foe, this one in Kansas City, turned into disaster. The Broncos were out rushed 130-70 and Elway was picked twice. It was a virtual carbon-copy of the Seattle game and ended in a 20-13 loss.

The schedule was front loaded with AFC West opponents and Denver now hosted the Los Angeles Raiders on Monday Night Football. The Raiders were coached by a man who was

already familiar to Broncos fans—Mike Shanahan was Denver's former offensive coordinator and future head coach.

For one half of football, the Monday Night stage looked like Denver's breakout moment. Dorsett ran for a couple touchdowns and ended with 119 yards on the night. The Broncos were rolling, up 24-0 at the half.

But Elway's night was a disaster. He threw four interceptions and almost single handedly got the Raiders back in the game. Denver suffered an embarrassing 30-27 loss in overtime. A 1-3 record was problematic in any circumstance and certainly when all those games are against your divisional rivals.

A fifth straight AFC West game was waiting in San Diego. The Bronco defense was locked in, holding the Chargers to 20 yards rushing. The offense consistently drove and held the ball, with nearly 38 minutes of possession time. Even though they didn't finish drives, the four field goals were enough to get a 12-0 win and keep the season alive.

Denver went on to San Francisco, a consistently great team in the 1980s and who would win the Super Bowl this season. On a day when three Hall of Fame quarterbacks played—Joe Montana and Steve Young for the 49ers joining Elway—it was the defenses who dominated. The Denver defense intercepted three passes. The San Francisco defense sacked Elway five times. The game went OT, but the Broncos got a huge 16-13 win.

A home date with a weak Atlanta team saw Denver take a 17-14 lead into the fourth quarter. Dorsett ran for 86 yards. Elway went 16/25 for 235 yards and the Broncos pulled away to win 30-14. But Elway was also knocked out and Gary Kubiak had to come in and finish up. Kubiak was still under center in Pittsburgh the following Sunday. Even though this Steelers team was bad, Kubiak threw three interceptions, the Broncos were crushed in rush yardage 256-40 and lost 39-21.

There was more humiliation in the trenches on Monday Night in Indianapolis. The Colts had won the AFC East in 1987 (there was no AFC South prior to 2002 and each conference had only three divisions) and would be on the playoff fringe this season. Elway was back, but the Broncos were pounded for 244 rushing yards, trailed 45-10 at the half and lost 55-23.

Denver desperately needed to get back on track when Kansas City came to Mile High. It wasn't pretty but with the rush yardage numbers swinging back the Broncos direction, 131-90, they ground out a 17-11 win.

The Cleveland Browns had been Denver's great rival in the previous two AFC Championship Games. This year's Browns team wasn't quite as good, but they would still make the playoffs. Even so, Elway continued to torment the fan base of Cleveland. He was an efficient 21/30 for 207 yards, two TDs and no mistakes. Fletcher's two sacks keyed a defense that got home six times against Browns QB Bernie Kosar. The Broncos cruised to a 30-7 win.

New Orleans was another team on the playoff fringe and when Denver went to the Bayou, they made the Saints look like a Super Bowl team. Elway was erratic. The running game was non-existent. The rush defense got hammered again, allowing 196 yards on the ground. The final was a humiliating 42-0.

Denver was 6-6 and had three losses—to the Steelers, Colts and Saints that were to eventual non-playoff teams by a combined score of 136-44. But the AFC West was the NFL's weakest division this year. The Broncos were actually in a three-way tie for first with the Seahawks and Raiders. Denver only trailed Cleveland and New England by one game in the race for the final wild-card spot. There was still time to make something of this season.

A big home date with the playoff-bound Los Angeles Rams was next. Elway and Jackson got cooking, hooking up on touchdown passes from 39, 58 and 14 yards. The Broncos were up 35-10 in the third quarter and won 35-24. Meanwhile, the Seahawks knocked off the Raiders. The Patriots lost.

Denver and Seattle were tied at 7-6 in the AFC West. Cleveland's 8-5 led the race for the last wild card, but the Broncos had the head-to-head tiebreaker. They were still in good position for the season's decisive moment, consecutive road games with the Raiders and Seahawks.

The trip to the Los Angeles Coliseum went poorly. Trailing 14-0 in the third quarter, Elway had the Broncos on the move when he threw an interception that went 86 yards the other way. Even though Denver tried to rally behind Jackson's 145 receiving yards, the three-touchdown hole was too deep, and they lost 21-20.

At least Seattle had lost to New England, so the division race was back to a three-way tie at 7-7. With the Browns at 9-5, the wild card was a major longshot, but the AFC West title was still begging for someone to take it.

That someone would not be Denver. Before the national TV audience on Sunday Night in the old Seattle Kingdome, the rush defense again got hammered, allowing 230 yards on the ground. The Broncos trailed 28-7 by the half. Elway hit the deck four times. The final was 42-14. Denver was now 0-4 against their two key divisional rivals and were formally eliminated.

They still had the chance to play spoiler in a Saturday afternoon kickoff with New England. The Patriots were playing to grab the final playoff spot away from the Browns. Elway did the people of Cleveland a service after all the torment he'd inflicted. An efficient game from the quarterback, 150 combined rushing yards from Dorsett and Winder produced a 21-10 win and sent the Patriots home.

The final game of the season showed that Denver still had heart, but the results of the entire season showed they had problems. The following spring, the Broncos made some big fixes. They drafted running back Bobby Humphrey, who provided the jolt that Dorsett no longer could. And they drafted strong safety Steve Atwater, who embarked on a Hall of Fame career. The 1988 season was just a disappointing interlude rather than the start of a trend.

1989

The 1989 Denver Broncos quickly returned to form—they went to the Super Bowl for the third time in four years, even if the Lombardi Trophy itself managed to elude them.

Elway did not have a vintage year in 1989, with a TD/INT ratio of 18-18. Denver's offense got a big boost from Humphrey, who produced over 1,110 yards. Vance Johnson was a 1,000-yard receiver. The offense was still good enough to finish eighth in the NFL in points scored, but it was the defense that carried the day in Denver in 1989.



Wade Phillips was the coordinator and the league's top scoring defense had a Pro Bowl nose tackle in Greg Kragen to anchor the three-man line. Karl Mecklenburg was 1st-team All-Pro at inside linebacker, getting 7 ½ sacks.

Dennis Smith had another Pro Bowl year at strong safety. Elsewhere, outside linebacker Simon Fletcher got after the quarterback, with 12 sacks, corner Tyrone Braxton picked off six passes. At the strong safety spot, the rookie Atwater emerged as a tough hitter and eventual Hall of Fame player.

This aggressive Denver defense put its imprint on the season immediately. They opened in Kansas City and Braxton returned an interception 34 yards for a touchdown in the first quarter, as the Broncos went ahead 17-0 RANDY Robbins then sealed it with an 18-yard interception return in the fourth quarter of a 34-20 win.

A Monday Night date at the Buffalo Bills, who had reached the AFC Championship Game the year before was next. The defense got an early safety, picked off Jim Kelly three times and cruised to a 28-14 win that was more commanding than the score makes it look.

One week later, at home against the Los Angeles Raiders, Elway threw for two early touchdowns and ran for another, setting the tone for a 31-21 victory. Denver was 3-0, and their turnover margin in the first three weeks was +13.

The Broncos had beaten the Cleveland Browns in the AFC Championship Games of both 1986 and 1987, and they went to Cleveland in Week 4. This time, Denver lost the turnover battle 3-1. Neither team had much luck running the ball, and Elway did not play well—6/19 for 198 yards, and Denver took their first loss 16-13.

More offensive struggles followed at home against a bad San Diego Chargers team and the Broncos trailed 10-6 after three quarters. Humphrey ran for 102 yards and Denver rallied for a 16-10 win. The defense then carried the team to a 14-3 home win over the Indianapolis Colts. The Broncos won the rushing yardage battle 169-44, shutting down Hall of Famer Eric Dickerson and getting 92 yards on 21 carries from Sammy Winder.

The Seattle Seahawks had won the AFC West in 1988 and were a perennial playoff contender in the 1980s under Chuck Knox. Denver went to the Pacific Northwest and fell behind 14-0 early. Elway brought the team back, throwing for 344 yards, including a 54-yard strike to Johnson that tied the game 21-21 and the Broncos won in overtime.

Denver came home to face a playoff-bound Philadelphia Eagles team and again fell behind 14-0. Again, Elway brought them back to a 24-21 lead with 278 passing yards. But Elway also threw three interceptions and this time the opponent scored last, with Philly stealing a 28-24 win in the Rocky Mountains.

The Broncos hosted another playoff team from Pennsylvania in the Pittsburgh Steelers and came roaring back. Humphrey rushed for 105 yards in a 34-7 win. Denver then went to Kansas City and in a tough, defense-minded game, Kragen returned a fumble for a touchdown that was the biggest difference in a 16-13 win.

Denver was 8-2 and in complete command of the AFC West race. The Raiders were 5-5, with the Seahawks and Chiefs trailing at 4-6. It made the cracked ribs Elway suffered against Pittsburgh seem a little less urgent. Along with the stomach virus that sidelined him from a Monday Night game at the Washington Redskins, Gary Kubiak filled in on a windy night in D.C. and game-managed a 14-10 night as Denver controlled the running game on both sides of the ball.

Elway returned for a home date with Seattle on the Sunday after Thanksgiving and announced his return by throwing four touchdowns in the first half, two of them to Johnson, who caught six passes for 154 yards. The result was a 41-14 win and it clinched the division title.

Denver then hit a bump in the road. The Raiders kept Elway underneath in the passing game, intercepted him twice and got late, long touchdown pass from Steve Beurlein to tie the game and eventually won in overtime. The Broncos then hosted the impending NFC East champion New York Giants and failed to score for three quarters, losing 14-7.

In spite of the losses, the struggles of other division leaders meant Denver clinched the #2 seed. On a Saturday afternoon in Phoenix, the Broncos locked up the top spot in the AFC playoffs. Mecklenburg returned a fumble 23 yards for a touchdown and Humphrey led a rushing attack that outgained the Cardinals on the ground 204-22. Denver won 37-0. They dropped a meaningless home game with the Chargers to end the season, with Elway only playing part-time.

After taking the week off, the Steelers came to Mile High Stadium for a late Sunday afternoon kickoff that was the final game of the divisional round. Pittsburgh was fresh off a thrilling overtime win in the wild-card game and they seemed to carry the momentum right into this game. Merrill Hoge, now an ESPN analyst, but then a Steeler running back rushed for 120 yards and Pittsburgh grabbed an early 10-0 lead.

Denver chipped back to within 17-10 by the half and Elway tied it up with a 37-yard touchdown pass to Johnson in the third quarter. The Pittsburgh ground game again took over and they

mounted two solid drives into the red zone...but both times, the Broncos held them to field goals.

Elway had a chance and with his track record of postseason heroics already established, everyone knew what they meant. He led a 71-yard drive that ended with a short touchdown run with 2:27 left and this time the defense held on for the 24-23 win.

For the third time in four years, Denver was playing for an AFC Championship. And once again, the Cleveland Browns were the last road block before the Super Bowl. This game was a relatively early kick, 11:30 AM local time, due to the fact that the NFC Championship Game was in San Francisco and it wasn't until 2003 that the NFL shifted to start times of late afternoon/early evening for Championship Sunday.

Denver awakened first, as Smith intercepted a pass from Cleveland's Bernie Kosar and set up a quick field goal. Elway then threw a 70-yard touchdown pass for a 10-0 lead. Elway and Kosar swapped touchdown passes, but when Denver took a 24-7 lead late in the third quarter, the game seemed over.

But Kosar led a drive for one touchdown and then a Bronco fumble set up another quick TD for the Browns. Now it was 24-21 as the fourth quarter began. Elway immediately answered, connecting twice with Johnson to move his team into striking distance and then hitting Winder with a 39-yard touchdown pass. Denver drove for two more field goals and in the era prior to the two-point conversion, a 16-point lead at this stage of a game was insurmountable. The final was 37-21.

The result of the Super Bowl in New Orleans was one painfully familiar to Bronco fans. They were blown out by the San Francisco 49ers, 55-10 in a game that got away almost immediately. In fairness to Denver, this particular 49er team was peaking—they had won their two NFC playoff games by a combined score of 64-12 and remains one of the best champions of all time.

A more appropriate way to remember the 1989 Denver Broncos team is as one that brought new defensive aggressiveness and improvement, added it to the foundation that was the John Elway-led offense and reclaimed the throne of the AFC.

1991

After the run of three Super Bowl trips in four years, the Broncos crashed hard to a 5-11 season in 1990, the worst of the Elway era. But 1991 saw Denver bounce back strong with a return to the postseason and success once they got there.

Elway, now 31-years-old, enjoyed another Pro Bowl year. He spread the ball among a balanced receivers corps where Mike Young's 44 catches led the team. Mark Jackson, averaging better than 18 yards-per-catch, was the big-play threat. Sewell was effective coming out of the backfield and a 23-year-old tight end by the name of Shannon Sharpe was getting started on a Hall of Fame career.

Elway got help from his running game in 1991, with Gaston Green being one of seven players in the league who broke the 1,000-yard barrier. The offense finished 12th in the NFL in points scored.

Defensively, the Broncos were even better. They ranked third in the league, with linebackers Fletcher, Mecklenburg and rookie Mike Croel combining for 32 ½ sacks. The safeties were outstanding. Dennis Smith made another Pro Bowl at the strong safety spot, intercepting five passes. Atwater was 1st-team All-NFL at free safety with five picks of his own.

Denver's comeback season started at home against Cincinnati, a team that would be on the opposite path in 1991. Elway got the scoring started with a 52-yard touchdown pass to Young. Green ran for 116 yards. The defense shut down the Bengal running game and intercepted Boomer Esiason three times. A 45-14 win got the year started.

A road trip to the archrival Los Angeles Raiders, who had reached the AFC Championship Game in 1990, didn't go as well. The Broncos were out rushed 133-33 and lost a tight 16-13 game. A similar defensive battle went down the next week at home against Seattle, but in this one Elway was able to make enough big plays. He hit Ricky Nattiel on a 61-yard touchdown strike in the second quarter, went 19/32 for 252 yards and led a 16-10 win.



Green got back on track the following week when San Diego came to Mile High Stadium. He ripped off touchdown runs from 63 and 20 yards to lead a 27-19 win.

A road trip to Minnesota the following Sunday Night saw Elway play poorly, but the defense answered by intercepting Wade Wilson three times, keeping the Vikings out of the end zone and leading a 13-6 win.

Denver went to Houston to face a perennial playoff team in the Oilers, led by their own Hall of Fame quarterback, Warren Moon. The Broncos were awful, giving up first-half touchdowns to the Houston defense and special teams. The result was a 42-14 loss. But Denver was still 4-2 going into the bye week...and they would get another chance at these Oilers before it was all over.

Kansas City was another playoff contender within the division and they came to the Rocky Mountains two weeks later. Elway made big plays, going 14/27 for 270 yards and leading a big 19-16 win.

The Broncos went to New England the following week. For a future generation, Denver-New England in the late Sunday afternoon window (or prime-time) would be a staple, but in this era, when the Patriots stunk, the 4 PM kickoff was less compelling nationally. And the game lived down to expectations. No one could find the end zone, but the Broncos were able to twice hold the Patriots inside the 5-yard line and preserve a 9-6 win.

A Sunday Night home date with Pittsburgh was next. The Steelers had been a contender in 1989-90, but were on a down year this time around. Greg Lewis got the bulk of the Denver carries in this game and ran for 111 yards. The Bronco defense made it stand up in a 20-13 win.

The AFC West was a three-team race between the Broncos, Raiders and Chiefs and both rivals were on deck the next two weeks. Green came back at home against the Raiders and ran for 103 yards. Denver still trailed 17-10, when Elway threw a 10-yard touchdown pass to Vance Johnson. But the extra point was blocked...and so was a subsequent field goal attempt, producing an aggravating 17-16 loss.

The winds were blowing heavy in Kansas City the following week and the Bronco defense produced four interceptions. One was a Pick-6 from Charles Dimry in the third quarter of a 24-20 win. Riding high, Denver suffered a letdown on the Sunday after Thanksgiving in Seattle. The Broncos turned it over four times, allowed five sacks, allowed Seattle to score on a turnover and lost 13-10.

Denver was 8-4 and tied for first with Los Angeles, though the Raiders held the head-to-head tiebreaker. Both teams were a game up on the Chiefs. The Broncos opened December by hosting the Patriots (the schedule format of the time had teams that finished fifth the previous year play twice). Elway hit Johnson with a 21-yard strike to get the day rolling and went on to complete 18/25 passes for 215 yards and no mistakes. An easy 20-13 win was the result.

There was no team John Elway caused more angst for in the late 1980s than the Cleveland Browns. He did it again on a visit to the old Dawg Pound. The game was tied 7-7 in the fourth quarter, but Elway just had too much firepower. He went 16/29 for 221 yards on the day and led a push for ten late points in the 17-7 win. Later in the afternoon, the Raiders lost in overtime at AFC frontrunner Buffalo. Denver was in first place with two weeks to go.

Three consecutive days on the penultimate weekend of the season clinched another division title. It started on Saturday when the Chiefs lost in San Francisco. On Sunday, the Broncos nearly blew it against a subpar Cardinals team. Elway went 19/33 for 245 yards and put his team ahead 17-6. He also threw three interceptions and the lead was coughed up. Then he ran for the winning touchdown in the 24-19 escape. On Monday Night, the Raiders lost in New Orleans. Denver was the champion of the AFC West.

Buffalo had the #1 seed clinched, but Denver was still in play for the 2-seed and first-round bye. They needed help. The Broncos and Oilers were each 11-4, but Houston had that head-to-head blowout win in October.

On the final Saturday of the season, Denver fans watched with delight as Houston basically no-showed against a mediocre New York Giants team and lost. The door was open for Denver. They didn't exactly play inspired football at San Diego, but with two sacks from Fletcher and intercepting three passes, they beat the Chargers 17-14. The Broncos would get a week off to start the playoffs.

Houston took care of their business in the first round. Broncos-Oilers was set for the late Saturday afternoon TV window in the divisional round. For most of the first half, Houston picked up where they had left off in October. Moon threw three touchdown passes to three different receivers, starting a day he would go 27/36 for 325 yards. The Broncos missed an extra point after an Elway touchdown pass and trailed 21-6. In nearly six quarters of play against Houston, Denver had been outscored 63-20. Fans could be forgiven if they called this one prematurely.

Then again, maybe not, because who counts out John Elway in the playoffs? He went 19/33 for 257 yards and the lead was chipped down to 24-16 in the fourth quarter. Elway converted a 4th-and-4, where he picked up a fumbled snap and rifled a 26-yard completion. Lewis finished the drive with a one-yard touchdown run. But prior to 1996 there was no two-point conversion, so the score was still 24-23 when Denver got it back on their own two-yard line with 2:07 to play.

Even watching this in the moment, there was the feeling that this game was now Denver's to lose. Even when they faced two fourth downs on the final drive. Such was the late-game force of John Elway, especially in the playoffs. On 4th-and-10, he hit Vance Johnson for 44 yards. The drive reached the Houston 11-yard line where a field goal delivered the Broncos a 26-24 win.

Denver was a decisive (+12) underdog in Buffalo for the AFC Championship Game. The Bronco defense played a superb football game, but this time Elway struggled. Five times in the first half, he drove his team past midfield and five times he came up empty. In the third quarter of a scoreless game, Elway's middle screen pass got tipped into the hands of Bills linebacker Carlton Bailey who returned it for a touchdown. Elway was later forced from the game with a deep thigh bruise and Denver ultimately lost 10-7.

1991 was a comeback year, but with tensions rising between Elway and Reeves over the direction of the offense, it was also the last really good team produced by Reeves in the Rocky Mountains.

1992

The Dan Reeves era of Denver Broncos history had been an unquestionable success. Reeves, backed by the powerful right arm of John Elway, had taken the team to the playoffs six times from 1983-91, including three trips to the Super Bowl. But tensions between the coach and quarterback were mounting and when a promising season fell apart, the 1992 Denver Broncos proved to be Reeves' last run in Denver.

Change was already afoot in the coaching staff. Mike Shanahan had left as offensive coordinator to take the same job with the powerful San Francisco 49ers. Elway did not have a good year post-Shanahan. He struggled to a 55% completion rate, which ranked 20th among starting quarterbacks. His 7.1 yards-per-attempt was above the league average, but nothing spectacular. And the mistakes piled up. Elway's 10-17 TD/INT ratio was awful and the 5.4% of passes he had picked off were among the league's worst.

It wasn't for a lack of targets. Shannon Sharpe caught 53 balls, made the Pro Bowl and ultimately the Hall of Fame before assuming his place across the debate table from Skip Bayless every morning on FS1. Mark Jackson caught 48 passes and averaged 15.5 yards-per-catch. Reggie Rivers, a young running back, made a nice addition to the passing game out of the backfield.

But between Elway's struggles, his missing of four games with a shoulder injury and the utter lack of a running game, Denver's offense only ranked 22nd in the NFL in points scored.

Wade Phillips was back in the fold as defensive coordinator and his career, both then and subsequently, have given him a well-deserved good reputation. But 1992 wasn't one of his big moments.

The Bronco defense had talent—Atwater was the best in the league at his position and Dennis Smith was still reliable. Tyrone Braxton at the corner was emerging. Inside linebacker Michael Brooks made the Pro Bowl and Fletcher had a big year rushing the quarterback, getting 16 sacks. In spite of all this, the Broncos only ranked 19th in a 28-team league in points allowed.

The warning signs were there early, at least for the offense, even as Denver won their first two games. They hosted the mediocre Los Angeles Raiders and were out rushed 152-47. The Broncos survived 17-13 because of a 54-yard fumble return for a TD by Brooks. The San Diego Chargers were next in old Mile High Stadium and a five-sack performance by the defense—including 2 ½ from Mike Croel—keyed a 21-13 win.

A visit to the contending Philadelphia Eagles was next and the flaws were exposed. Elway was held to an atrocious 8/18 for 59 yards. There was no running game, no pass defense and no points in a 30-0 loss. A 12-0 victory at Cleveland got the defense back on track and a balanced running game produced 188 yards. But it was still a win achieved without finding the end zone.

All of that made it less than surprising that Denver dug themselves a 19-6 hole in the fourth quarter at home against a good Kansas City Chiefs team. But it wouldn't be Elway against KC coach Marty Schotteneheimer if Big John didn't have something up his sleeve. He threw touchdown passes to Jackson and Vance Johnson late and stole a 20-19 win in front of a late Sunday afternoon national TV audience.

The Broncos again went on the road to face an NFC East power, this time the defending Super Bowl champion Washington Redskins. Again it was a disaster. They turned it over four times, Elway was sacked five times, lost rush yardage 117-26 and the football game by an embarrassing 34-3.

Denver might have been 4-2, but they weren't seen as anything special. Oddsmakers made them a three-point home underdog to the Houston Oilers—a playoff team to be sure, but one that Denver had beaten on this very field the previous January in the AFC divisional round.

And they did it again. Reeves was able to find the running game. The Broncos rushed for 170 yards and Rivers' 20-yard jaunt to the end zone was the difference in the 27-21 win.

Denver went on the road to San Diego where the Chargers were finding their footing after an 0-4 start. Elway made plays, going 21/39 for 260 yards, including nine balls to Rivers. Mark Jackson caught five passes for 113 yards. But Elway also made the plays going the other way, throwing three interceptions. The Bronco pass defense was shredded by San Diego's Stan Humphries and the result was a 24-21 loss going into the bye week.

Back-to-back visits from the New York teams, both heading for sub-.500 campaigns were waiting on the far side of the bye and a rested Denver team took advantage. In the second quarter against the Jets, Elway hit Arthur Marshall with an 80-yard touchdown strike. Wyman Henderson added a Pick-6 and the Broncos cruised home 27-16. A 51-yard TD pass from Elway to Jackson got Denver off and rolling against the Giants, a game they won 27-13.

But Elway was only around long enough to give the Broncos a 14-zip lead in the game against the Giants. He injured his right shoulder. Denver was still 7-3 and in good shape for the playoffs, but now their quarterback would miss the next four games.

Tommy Maddox, a 23-year-old out of UCLA got the call. If we fast-forward almost a decade, Maddox would save the 2002 Pittsburgh Steelers season with an improbable great year. And he wasn't awful as a young gun in Denver. But he wasn't Elway, even Elway on a bad year.

Maddox's 18/26 for 207 yards performance at the Raiders was negated by a couple interceptions, the usual lack of a running game and it led to a 24-0 loss. The young backup was worse on Monday Night at woeful Seattle. Even though the Broncos scored the first ten points, Maddox finished 11/26 for 127 yards and two more picks. The running game was its usual non-existent self and the result was a humiliating 16-13 overtime loss.

At 7-5, the schedule was about to get tougher. The two teams that would ultimately make the Super Bowl, Dallas and Buffalo were on deck. Reeves opted to split the snaps between Maddox and Shawn Moore for these games.

It nearly worked against the Cowboys. Maddox went 10/17 for 104 yards and three touchdowns against Dallas. Denver also got an 81-yard scoring pass off a trick play when Arthur Marshall hit Cedric Tillman. They led 27-24 in the fourth quarter. But Troy Aikman led a game-winning drive that stole a game the Broncos desperately needed.

The split-QB system didn't work out the following Saturday afternoon in Buffalo. Moore was picked off three times, Denver dug themselves a 21-0 hole and lost 27-17. Elway was coming back for the final two games, but the record was 7-7 and the division title was all but gone, with both the Chargers and Chiefs at 9-5. The most promising route to the playoffs looked to be catching the Oilers, who were 8-6, but the Broncos had the head-to-head win over Houston.

But Denver got unlikely help on the Saturday afternoon of the season's penultimate week. Kansas City showed up flat in the Meadowlands and lost to the Giants. Denver would travel to KC for the final week of the season, meaning if they could win out, they would pass the Chiefs and make the postseason.

There was still the matter of winning football games and that again didn't come easily, even with Elway and even with playing the Seahawks at home. Elway threw three interceptions and—stop if you've heard this before—there was no running game. But the defense bailed them out with eight sacks, two apiece from Fletcher and Mecklenburg. Denver avoided embarrassment and elimination with a 10-6 win.

It set up a winner-take-all showdown for a playoff berth in Kansas City. If this happened today, this game would surely have gotten flexed to Sunday Night, with the stakes and the Elway-Marty storyline too good to pass up. In 1992, the schedule was set in advance so it kicked off in the 1 PM ET window.

That was just as well for the Broncos. They started out well enough, with Elway throwing an early touchdown pass and taking a 7-0 lead into the second quarter. But with the score tied 7-7, Elway threw two interceptions in his own end and both were taken to the house. Denver was suddenly in a 21-7 hole. They gave up another defensive TD and fell behind 35-13 in the fourth quarter, ultimately losing 42-20.

The tensions between the coach and QB were no secret and the Reeves era was quickly ended when the season was over. The first movement of John Elway's historic career was in the books.