

## PATRIOTS VS. BRONCOS

## Being a better manager

Broncos don't ask Plummer to carry team with his arm

By EDDIE PELLIS  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

## DENVER

In many ways this season, Jake Plummer has been good simply by not being bad.

A backhanded compliment, for sure, but true nonetheless. It's a big reason the Denver Broncos went 13-3 and find themselves two wins away from the Super Bowl.

And instead of trying to shed the image of the quintessential team player and game manager, Plummer has accepted it and stayed the course.

Not surprisingly, his game plan for Saturday's playoff meeting against New England and quarterback Tom Brady is simple.

"You are going to make mistakes, and you hope that they are not big ones," Plummer said. "I'm going to come out fighting as I always have.

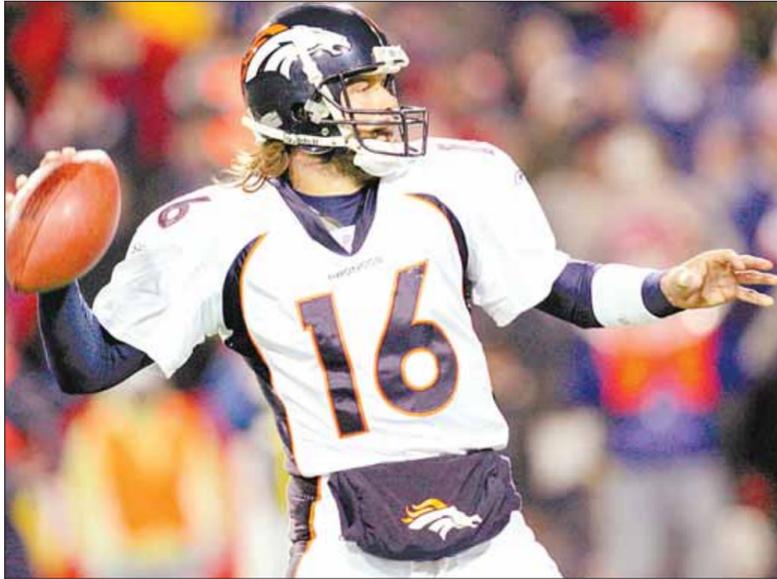
"Whatever someone is saying doesn't matter to me. The only thing for me is playing the best I can and doing what is best for the team."

During the offseason, coach Mike Shanahan knew Plummer had to improve. He sat down with his quarterback, turned on the tape machine and reviewed every pass Plummer threw during his first two tumultuous seasons in Denver.

The conclusion was that Plummer didn't have to do as much as he thought.

Surrounded by a strong supporting cast for the first time in his career, he simply had to get used to making the obvious throws that came out of Shanahan's well-designed offense. He had to hand off, avoid interceptions, left-handed throws and other silly mistakes that seemed to define his first eight years in the league.

Simply, he only had to man-



Denver Broncos quarterback Jake Plummer, shown throwing a pass during a Dec. 17 game against the Buffalo Bills, has thrown just seven interceptions this season, 13 fewer than he threw last season.

age the offense, the term that has been used consistently and not always in a complimentary way to describe Plummer's effective stewardship of the quarterback position this year.

"It's not an insult," receiver Ashley Lelie said. "Because any NFL quarterback has to go out and manage the game and not lose it.

"It's just that Jake made a couple mistakes here and there in his career, and the NFL kind of got on him for that. They still want to get on him for that now."

At least publicly, Plummer has been blandly boring most of the season, willing to accept and even play up the fact that he is one of 11 cogs in an offense that has worked very well.

At one point midway through

the year, he was being touted as a Most Valuable Player candidate. He laughed at that and tried to deflect it, insisting that center Tom Nalen was more deserving than he was.

Of course, he didn't end up as an MVP, or anything close.

In fact, despite what was arguably the best of his nine NFL seasons — maybe not stats-wise, but in the overall result — he was only voted as a second alternate for the Pro Bowl. He backed in this week when Carson Palmer went down after first alternate Drew Brees' injury in the regular-season finale.

It was, as most achievements have been for Plummer this season, nothing to get excited about.

"When I saw Carson Palmer go down, I knew he

was done," Plummer said. "I didn't think of anything other than his injury. Nothing about the Pro Bowl."

Of all Plummer's statistics — 3,366 yards, 18 touchdowns, passer rating over 90 for only the second time in his career — it is the one that most associate with the mistake-prone quarterback that is most impressive. He threw only seven interceptions. That's 13 fewer than last season and 10 fewer than his career average.

In the middle of the season, he set a franchise record with 229 straight passes without a pick, part of a stretch during which the Broncos offense went 28 consecutive quarters without a turnover. It was historic stuff, not just by Plummer's standards, but by those of any NFL quarterback.

## Evacuees filling hotel rooms in Super Bowl city

The Associated Press

## SOUTHFIELD, Mich.

Hotel owners hoping to cash in on the demand for rooms during the Super Bowl say Hurricane Katrina evacuees are reducing the number available.

Many hotels are raising rates and setting four-day minimum stays for the days around the Feb. 5 NFL championship game at Detroit's Ford Field.

At a Howard Johnson's in suburban Southfield, room rates will be increased from \$69 a day to \$199.

Officials say they depend on 30,000 hotel rooms being available for the Super Bowl.

At 11 Michigan hotels, however, about 150 evacuees are still occupying 61 rooms, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Hotel owners receive an average of \$60 a day per room from the government to house them.

"No one thought it would drag on this long," said Frank Coutts, director of emergency management for Southfield, where most of the evacuees are staying in three hotels, including the Howard Johnson's.

At the 91-room Hawthorne Suites, owner Dennis Davenport told the Detroit News: "I don't want to think about it."

"Right now, it's a concern," Davenport said. Fifteen of the Hawthorne Suites' rooms are occupied by evacuees, according to the state.

FEMA's deadline for hurricane evacuees to move out had been Jan. 7.

But it is continuing to subsidize rooms while the government works out issues arising from a class-action lawsuit.

The hotels' participation in housing hurricane victims is voluntary, according to FEMA spokesman James McIntyre.

And despite the disparity in room rates, owners say they will not evict the evacuees to make room for Super Bowl fans.

Last week, when a New Orleans hotel tried to evict about 100 evacuees to make room for scheduled guests, a judge blocked the move, issuing a restraining order against the Maison St. Charles, said Bill Quigley, head of the Loyola Law Clinic who sought the order.

Maison St. Charles manager Emily Wright told The Times-Picayune the hotel had planned on the Katrina victims leaving by Jan. 7 and needed to make room for guests who had reserved rooms months earlier.

"I feel like we have to honor those contracts," she said.

## • Manning

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

Colts coach Tony Dungy considers the assertion nonsense. But he understands the singular standard by which NFL quarterbacks are judged: Have they won a Super Bowl?

"I think that is probably how he'll be judged in the short run," Dungy said. "But we look back, and we realize that Dan Marino was a pretty good quarterback, and Dan Fouts was a pretty good quarterback, and there are a lot of pretty good quarterbacks who didn't win Super Bowls.

"But to be thought of as a great player, in the short term, I think you have to win them."

Manning has won or earned just about everything else.

He's a two-time league MVP. He's a seven-time Pro Bowler. He's started every game of his professional career. He threw an NFL single-season record 49 touchdown passes last season. He has a league-record six straight seasons of 4,000-plus passing yards.

And he's led the Colts to the playoffs five times, including a trip to the AFC Championship game in 2003.

A sure-fire Hall of Famer, Manning is missing only a Super Bowl on his résumé.

"Hopefully, he'll win two or three of them before he's done," Dungy said. "I remember a time when we didn't think John Elway or Brett Favre were very good because they didn't have one.

"But I don't think Peyton Manning needs a Super Bowl to judge him as a good quarterback."

But that's exactly what Manning wants. He's confident this year can be the year, but he's not guaranteeing anything other than a determined effort.

"It's an exciting opportunity, but you still have to go out there and execute during the game," Manning said. "I think we've had good teams here in the past, as well. We've had good chances in the past. I'm just excited about the chance we have here in 2006.

"Certainly, it's our best regular-season record, and I think we have more playmakers overall. But at the same time, you've still got to make it happen."

And if it doesn't, Manning won't stop trying.

"We have been disappointed in years past in the playoffs when we haven't won or advanced," Manning said. "And you deal with that, and you try to learn from it and try to improve yourself as a player and as a team, and we feel we have done that.

"I feel we are a better team this year than we were last year, and you hope that results in being able to win and advance."

## Roethlisberger: Steelers must play perfectly

By ALAN ROBINSON  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

## PITTSBURGH

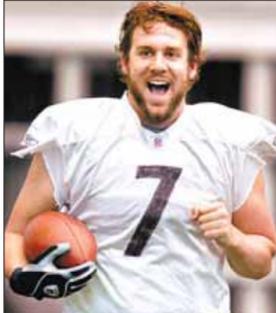
Ben Roethlisberger made a candid admission for the quarterback of a team that has won 28 of its past 35 games and considers itself to be among the NFL's elite.

Even if his Pittsburgh Steelers play as well as possible in Sunday's AFC divisional playoff game, Roethlisberger suggested Wednesday, they won't win if the Indianapolis Colts play equally as well.

"This team is an unbelievable football team," Roethlisberger said of the Colts, who won their first 13 games before dropping two of their final three. "They're as good as it gets in the NFL.

"It's going to take our A-plus game to go out and beat their B-minus game."

Roethlisberger wasn't winking when he made the comment but no doubt was accentuating the theme of the day inside the Steelers' locker room. Namely, that the whole country is picking against them, and they might as



Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger runs off the field after a workout Wednesday in Pittsburgh.

well start packing for their six-month vacation before training camp starts.

"I don't think anybody is picking us to win," Roethlisberger said. "Obviously, they're the best football team in the NFL, and we're just the Pittsburgh Steelers.

"We're going to go in and obviously try to find a way to just put a few points on the board and compete."

The Steelers, accustomed to being a favorite and owning home-field advantage only to falter in the AFC title game, clearly seem to be reveling in this new they-can't-win mode.

"I think it's a really good assessment," All-Pro guard Alan Faneca said of Roethlisberger's remarks. "They've shown all season what they can do offensively and defensively and how well they can do it on both sides of the ball, that it takes a great effort just to play on their level."

## Hampton to play more

The Pittsburgh Steelers' defense figures to be a lot bigger Sunday in Indianapolis than it was seven weeks ago.

Look for a lot more of 325-pound nose tackle Casey Hampton on the field and a lot less of him on the sideline.

To try to slow the Colts' fast-paced offense, the Steelers relied on their nickel defense, which uses five defensive backs rather than the usual four, almost exclusively in their 26-7 loss in the RCA Dome on Nov. 28.

The Steelers have lost only one of six games since.

That means that Hampton, the Steelers' primary run-stopper, often was off the field when Edgerrin James was running for 124 yards on 29 carries. It was the only 100-yard game against the Steelers all season and the most rushing yards against them in two seasons.

Hampton had only one tackle and two assists in that game, but is certain that he will be on the field a lot more Sunday.

No doubt his teammates would like that. After all, they voted him and wide receiver Hines Ward as their co-most valuable players, an infrequent honor for a player who doesn't play on every down.

"We played a lot of nickel in that game, and they ran the ball very well against our nickel defense," Hampton said. "That's what they do; they get you out of what you're used to doing."

Hampton often played in the nickel defense two seasons ago, but was pulled from it after missing all but six games last season with a knee injury.

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