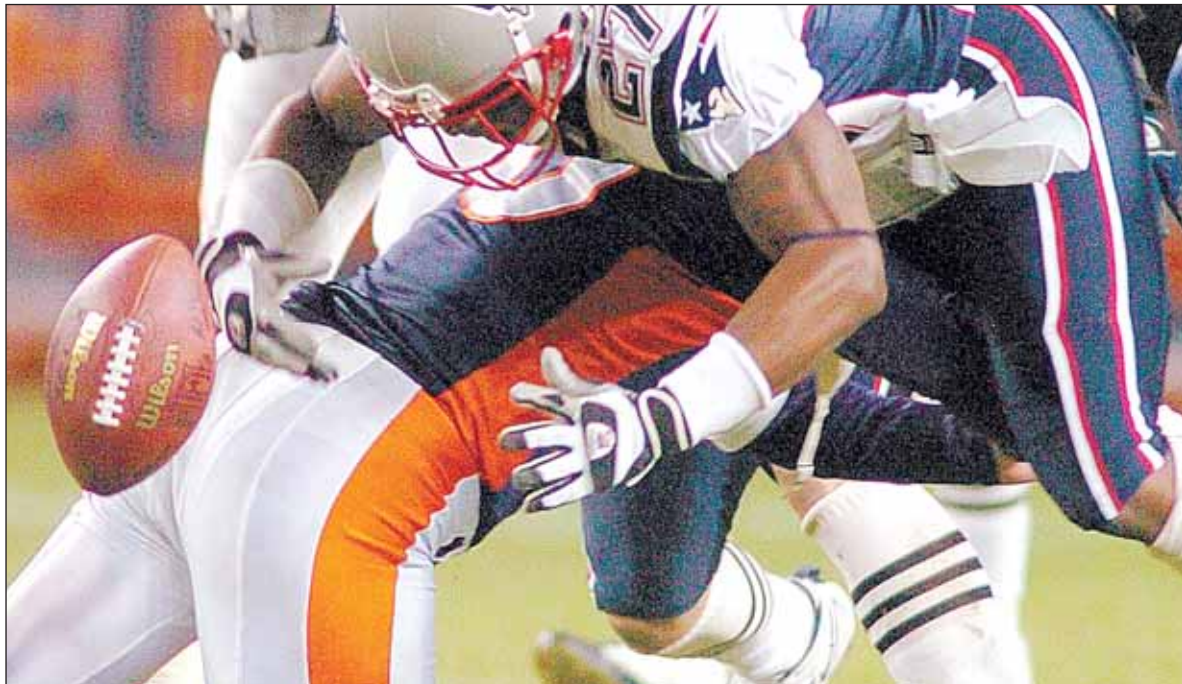


Not so funny anymore

Denver's laughable offseason no longer a hoot



Broncos kicker Todd Sauerbrun, left, knocks the ball away from the Patriots' Ellis Hobbs during their game Saturday at Denver. Sauerbrun signed in the offseason after spending troubled seasons in Carolina and being accused of using steroids.

Manning, A-Rod among athletes behaving badly

Sometimes, the punishment really does fit the crime. Just look at the price Nathan Mallett is paying for an ill-advised romp at Cleveland Stadium.



Tim Dahlberg

Mallett, by way of introduction, is the drunken idiot who was so upset at the way his Cleveland Browns were getting beaten by the Pittsburgh Steelers last month that he ran across the field in protest.

Thanks to a municipal judge and her Solomon-like wisdom, he's also living proof the American justice system really does work.

Judge Joan Synenberg didn't just give Mallett a few days in jail for the jaunt that ended badly enough for the 24-year-old when Steelers linebacker James Harrison body-slammed him onto the ground and held him until the cops arrived.

She made him serve his sentence during Super Bowl weekend and ordered him not to watch the game on television or listen to it on radio while in jail.

If that wasn't bad enough for a die-hard football fan, Synenberg banned Mallett from attending Browns games in Cleveland or any other city for the next five years.

Think of what might happen if Synenberg had jurisdiction over other things in sports.

Imagine the punishments she could hand out to:

- Peyton Manning, for trashing his offensive line after losing to the Pittsburgh Steelers.

- Make Manning appear with his linemen in a commercial as excruciatingly painful to watch as the Visa spot Tom Brady made with his protectors.

- Or have Manning spend an off-season actually working in a grocery store or at a salad bar; Then maybe he'll stop making ads that mock everyday workers who don't have \$98 million contracts.

- While we're on the subject of commercials, will someone please make Tiger Woods take a rainy day off? Actually, Woods does take time off and lots of it, if you judge by his frequent appearances at the MGM Grand blackjack tables in Las Vegas.

- Maurice Clarett and Marcus Vick, for playing badly with guns. Let them both go into a dark alley and scare each other, instead of innocent bystanders.

- Even better, put them in a cell-block of real tough guys and let them figure out how to run out of danger.

- The Vikings, for their X-rated journey on a G-rated Minnesota lake. If Daunte Culpepper, Moe Williams, Bryant McKinnie and Fred Smoot like the water so much, let them spend the winter doing what most Minnesotans do: stand around shivering over a hole in a frozen lake while trying to get equally frozen fish to bite.

- And, finally, Alex Rodriguez and the Treasury Department for taking way too long to make decisions that shouldn't be that hard. Rodriguez may have Dominican parents, but he was born and raised in the United States.

- He also plays for a team called the Yankees. If A-Rod has such conflicting emotions, maybe he should sentence himself to foregoing the smoky Manhattan poker rooms and gambling away some of that \$250 million he's making in the Dominican to make himself feel better.

- The dunces at the Treasury Department, meanwhile, seem to think it's 1962 all over again. Countries aren't kept out of the Olympics for political reasons, and there's no legitimate reason to keep Cuba from coming to the United States to play in the World Baseball Classic.

- Don't sentence them to anything. Just hope that they finally come to their senses.

Tim Dahlberg is a national sports columnist for The Associated Press. Send comments to tdahlberg@ap.org.

Coach: Taking chances breeds success

By EDDIE PELLIS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DENVER

Maybe it's true that the Denver Broncos have been a team playing under the radar this season. At the beginning, though, they sure were drawing some attention and lighting up the laugh-o-meter.

That's what happens when a coach who insists his team is close to the Super Bowl tries to take the next step by drafting a malcontent running back; trading for a punter with alleged steroid issues; signing an aging superstar receiver; and making a variety of moves to bring in the entire set of linemen, along with the position coach, from a team that ranked last in the league in rushing defense.

Denver's locker room resembled a three-ring circus to many five months ago. But now, the Broncos are a win away from the Super Bowl. Mike Shanahan is looking like a genius for the chances he took and, not surprisingly, the snickering has stopped.

"It's taking chances," Shanahan said in a recent interview. "What I do is, if someone's got a checkered past, I'm not afraid to talk about their checkered past. I let them know I don't care about their past; I just care about what they do when they come to this football team."

For every mistake Shanahan made this season, such as giving Jerry Rice and Maurice Clarett a shot at making the team, there was a success or two, or three. Start with punter Todd Sauerbrun.

He was considered poison after his final season in Carolina. Accused of using steroids, in trouble for drunken driving, ridiculed for his running feuds with the Gramatica brothers, he looked like the kind of guy to stay away from, no matter how strong his leg.

The Broncos actually went out of their way to get him. They traded their own punter, Jason Baker, and a seventh-round pick and spent more than a few weeks negotiating a contract.

This season, Sauerbrun has been solid and quiet. He came in second in team vot-

ing for special teams captain. The biggest news he made came last week, when he forced a fumble that led to a field goal against New England.

Then, the crown jewel: The decision to bring on, in four separate transactions, all four starting defensive linemen from last year's Cleveland Browns, along with the man who coached them, Andre Patterson.

While their stats have not been overly impressive — Denver's 28 sacks were third-fewest in the league — their overall production has. With the line creating pressure, if not sacks, the Broncos created 36 turnovers this year, fourth most in the league and 16 more than in 2004.

Now, thanks to all these changes, the Broncos find they're the envy of the league, one of only four teams left. That's hardly something to laugh at.

"In Cleveland, we were always talking about rebuilding, winning the next game," Warren said. "Here, they talk about winning a championship from Day 1. That's a big difference, and it's why I like being here."

NFL won't fine Steelers linebacker



The Associated Press

PITTSBURGH

Pittsburgh linebacker Joey Porter won't be fined by the NFL for criticizing officials after the Steelers beat Indianapolis.

NFL coaches are subject to fines for criticizing officials but players usually aren't fined.

Porter, a Pro Bowl selection and one of the Steelers' co-captains, criticized referee Pete Morelli's crew repeatedly during a series of postgame interviews following a 21-18 win in the AFC divisional round.

Among other comments, Porter said, "The whole world wanted Indy to win so

bad, they were going to do whatever they had to do."

NFL spokesman Steve Alic said there would be no fine for the remarks. Alic didn't elaborate.

Porter was most angered when an apparent interception by Troy Polamalu was reversed on replay, allowing the Colts to score their second touchdown during a frantic but failed rally in the fourth quarter. The NFL issued a statement Monday that the interception should have stood.

During his news conference Tuesday, Cowher called Porter's remarks ridiculous and said, "Our officials are doing the very best that they can do."

The Steelers' Joey Porter drew criticism after he said officials in Pittsburgh's game against the Colts wanted Indy to win.



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