

Denver players in mourning

Police look for suspects in shooting death of cornerback Williams

By PAT GRAHAM
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DENVER

Police asked for help finding Darrent Williams' killer Tuesday as coaches and teammates gathered at Broncos headquarters to honor the 24-year-old player gunned down after a New Year's Eve party.

"Darrent was a guy that was always upbeat, always had a smile, and he was a fierce competitor," said Broncos coach Mike Shanahan, fighting back tears.

Williams was killed in a drive-by shooting early Monday, hours after the Broncos were eliminated from playoff contention.

"We're working around the clock on this investigation," police spokesman Sonny Jackson said. "It's a situation where anyone who knows what happened or has any information, we'd love to hear."

Jackson said the police had not identified any suspects and were unsure of the nature of the taunts that they believe sparked an altercation at a night club before the shooting that also wounded two other people. Police were searching for a white Chevy Suburban or Tahoe with dark-tinted windows.

Williams sustained a single gunshot wound to the neck, according to Robert Whitmore, chief medical examiner in the county coroner's office.



Rudy Leyva, of Laredo, Texas, places flowers at a makeshift memorial for Denver Broncos cornerback Darrent Williams at the team's headquarters Tuesday. Williams was shot and killed while riding in a limousine early Monday morning.

The team will conduct a private memorial today at Broncos headquarters so that Williams' teammates can tell his family what he meant to them. The team also will fly together to Fort Worth, Texas, for Williams' funeral Saturday.

"He's in a better place right now," Shanahan said, choking up at a news conference.

Receiver Javon Walker was with Williams in the limousine when he was killed, and was one of several Broncos who met with professional counselors the team brought in.

"He just went through a tragic experience," Shanahan said. "A lot of times when somebody has that happen to them, they wonder why it (wasn't them). That's just human

nature, and obviously the counselors are talking with him about that. It's a process. It takes some time."

The Broncos weren't prepared for the usual exit interviews.

"Today wasn't about football or the offseason or the future," safety Nick Ferguson said. "Today was to grieve and remember the good things about him."

Miami gives Saban time for decision

By STEVEN WINE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MIAMI

Miami Dolphins coach Nick Saban needed another day to consider a job offer from Alabama.

Saban met with Dolphins owner Wayne Huizenga at the team complex for 10 minutes Tuesday and asked for more time to decide.

"The meeting went good," Huizenga said. "We had a quick meeting. We had a nice conversation. Coach asked if we could defer the decision until 10 (a.m. today). And then he went into several reasons as to why he wanted to do that. I agree 100 percent with his reasons. I understand more now what he's thinking about."

Saban smiled and waved at reporters as he left the complex but didn't stop to talk. For weeks he denied interest in the Alabama job, which became vacant when Mike Shula was fired in late November.

"I am not upset," Huizenga said. "I love Nick Saban. I hope he stays. I'm optimistic."

After two seasons in Miami, Saban was considering a deal that reportedly would make him the highest-paid coach in college football.

He has three years remaining on his Miami contract at \$4.5 million a season.

If money doesn't sway Saban, a preference for the college game may. He won a national championship at Louisiana State and is 15-17 with the Dolphins. They went 6-10 in 2006, his first losing season in 13 years as a head coach.

Saban weighed the relative merits of the NFL and college in a November interview.

"I really like coaching pro football," he said. "The relationship with the players is great, and being in the most competitive league in terms of competitive balance is fantastic."



SABAN

Experience in playoffs gives Colts edge on Chiefs

By DOUG TUCKER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KANSAS CITY, Mo.

If experience in the fast-paced, high-pressure world of the NFL playoffs counts for much, Kansas City could be in trouble.

This is a franchise that hasn't even sniffed the postseason for seven of the past eight years. Many key starters have never even appeared in a playoff game; even fewer ever won one.

That's a lot of wide-eyed, fuzzy-cheeked playoff newcomers to toss into the roar of the RCA Dome on Saturday against a confident Indianapolis Colts team that's unbeaten at home and a virtual postseason fixture.

"We have some players who have been in playoff games. But when you say seven starters never have, that's kind of new."

Herm Edwards

Kansas City Chiefs coach on his team's lack of experience in the playoffs

"We have seven starters who have never been in a playoff game. Seven starters," coach Herm Edwards said Tuesday.

"This team we are playing has been in the playoffs five years in a row. They understand the tempo, they understand the mode. They understand what's getting ready to take place. We have some players who have

been in playoff games. But when you say seven of your starters never have, that's kind of new."

The only starter among the Chiefs (9-7) with significant playoff success under his belt is cornerback Ty Law, who was on New England's three Super Bowl winners.

Quarterback Trent Green, although he's 36, has started only

one game in the playoffs, Kansas City's 38-31 loss to the Colts in 2003. The Chiefs' major weapon on offense, running back Larry Johnson, was a rookie that year and didn't even get in the game.

It's been so long since the Chiefs actually won a playoff game that the team they beat doesn't even exist any more, at least not in that incarnation.

The Houston Oilers, ousted in January 1994 by Marty Schottenheimer's Joe Montana-led Chiefs, have relocated to Tennessee as the Titans and have been supplanted in Houston by the expansion Texans.

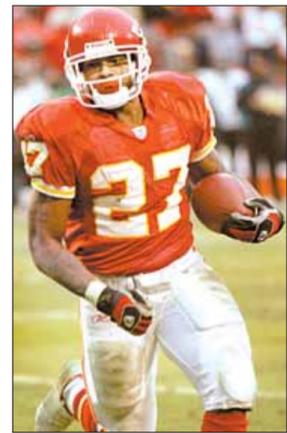
The only current Chief who played in that game is right guard Will Shields.

Law and the handful of others who have actually experienced all the pressure and stepped-up tempo of the postseason will be called upon for leadership.

"Ty's been in a bunch of them. And he's won three Super Bowls, so he's been in this environment," Edwards said. "We have some guys who have been in some big-time games, and it's good to have some veteran guys like that."

Even the coaching staff is inexperienced. Mike Solari will face his first playoff experience as an offensive coordinator.

For Edwards, it's different. He played in the Super Bowl as a cornerback for Philadelphia and coached the New York Jets to the playoffs three times.



Kansas City Chiefs running back Larry Johnson has never appeared in an NFL playoff game. The Chiefs visit the Colts on Saturday.

Safety Sanders says he's ready to practice, play

The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS

Indianapolis Colts safety Bob Sanders is expected to play Saturday when the team opens the playoffs against Kansas City.

Sanders said Tuesday that his injured knee was feeling better than it has in weeks and planned to practice this week.

"I feel good," he said. "This whole week has been making sure I'm able to strengthen it (the knee), and as long as I can do that, I should be OK."

If Sanders' optimism sounds familiar, it should.

Colts coach Tony Dungy has been optimistic the past several weeks that

Sanders would return before the end of the regular season. Instead, Sanders was placed on the inactive list each time.

Sanders has missed all but two games since having arthroscopic surgery on his right knee after a Sept. 17 victory against the Houston Texans in the season's second week.

But the return of Sanders could significantly help the Colts' run defense, which finished as the league's worst and set a franchise record by allowing 5.3 yards per carry.

Dungy said Sanders would be re-evaluated throughout the week. The team's Tuesday practice was closed, a rarity under Dungy.

"We expect Bob to practice this week;

we expect him to play, and we think he will give our defense a boost," Dungy said.

Sanders had 118 tackles, one fumble recovery and one interception in 2005 when he was selected to the Pro Bowl. This year, he played in just four games and finished with 30 tackles and one interception.

Five Colts starters — Sanders, tight end Dallas Clark (knee), cornerback Nick Harper (ankle), guard Ryan Lilja (knee) and Pro Bowl receiver Reggie Wayne (quad) — are all listed as questionable this week.

The Colts have listed many players this season as questionable, and often times they've played.



Colts safety Bob Sanders has missed all but two games since having knee surgery following a Sept. 17 win against the Houston Texans.

• Dungy

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

would be linked to the job.

"I think that might be the case because I went to school there, but I'm not a college coach, and I never have been a college coach," he said. "I'm not sure who's on their list. But I'm not a college coach. I'm flattered, but I'm not interested."

Dungy is 60-20 with Indianapolis and has led the Colts to the playoffs in each of his five seasons. He's also won four straight AFC South titles and has taken teams to the playoffs in

each of the past eight years, a string that began while he was with Tampa Bay.

In 11 seasons as an NFL head coach, Dungy is 114-62.

Dungy, 51, played with the Gophers from 1973-76 and was the school's career leader in passing yards (3,577) and touchdowns (25) when he graduated. He also ran for 1,345 yards and 16 TDs during his college career.

He has occasionally referenced his ties to the Gophers and singled out Colts players who attended the University of Minnesota.

Dungy spent one season as the Gophers' defensive back coach in 1980, then moved to the NFL, first as an assistant with the Pittsburgh Steelers.

• Legacy

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

with a 3-6 postseason record, and even if the Colts win that he's likely to get another round of questions about playing outdoors in bad weather.

Plus, Manning is likely to hear about the lost chances of past seasons.

While other players might tire of the constant interrogations, Manning tries to shrug it off like a defensive lineman in tow.

"We talk about just trying to do

our jobs," he said. "It's going to be a 60-minute game, and there could be overtime, so we've just got to try to score every time we've got the ball."

Manning's teammates understand the scrutiny he faces each week, especially the high-profile playoff games. Win, and Manning is the star attraction. Lose, and he takes the blame.

They don't believe it's right.

"It's totally unfair," tight end Dallas Clark said. "There's 11 guys on the field at any one time, and 10 other guys have responsibilities, too. That's just the way it is, unfortunately."

"It's too bad for him, and I feel

bad for a guy who's under that kind of microscope."

Manning, the \$98 million man, isn't the only member of the Colts in this predicament.

Coach Tony Dungy has been around the league more than a quarter-century and in 11 seasons as a head coach has won nearly twice as many games as he's lost.

He turned Tampa Bay from a laughingstock into a Super Bowl contender and has made eight straight playoff appearances, second only to Dallas' Tom Landry (nine).

Like Manning, though, Dungy has never reached a Super Bowl,

and each year the chorus of questions escalates.

Dungy calls it life in the brutally honest world of the NFL.

"To me, January is a new year, and it's a fun time," he said. "I'm happy every time we make it to the playoffs. It's really what our league is all about. Whether we go all the way or not, I'm going to try and enjoy it."

Some think Manning plays differently in the postseason, yet the numbers tell another tale.

In nine career playoff games, Manning has completed 60.1 percent of his passes, averaged nearly 274 yards per game and thrown almost twice as many

touchdowns (15) as he has interceptions (eight). Those do not deviate much from his regular-season totals of 64.0 percent, 261 yards per game and 275 TDs compared with 139 interceptions.

The reason is simple: Manning's philosophy doesn't change.

"The word we strive for is efficiency," he said. "It's a real mindset to stay on the field, move down the field and get in the end zone. Just because you do that for 14, 15 or 16 weeks doesn't mean you're going to do it again."

This week, Manning must content with a couple of old nemeses, cornerbacks Ty Law and Patrick Surtain.

Law picked off Manning three times in the 2004 AFC championship game, and Surtain was long a thorn in the Colts' side when the Miami Dolphins and Indianapolis were rivals in the old AFC East.

But rather than focus on old rivalries, future goals or past failures, Manning has spent this week working toward one goal: beating Kansas City and getting another game next week.

"We're going to prepare for what we've seen on film and, you know, the playoffs is a no-holding-back mentality," he said. "That's what we're dealing with this week."



Colts defensive tackle Anthony McFarland, center, reacts as he is congratulated by teammates Jason David, left, and Dwight Freaney after sacking Miami Dolphins quarterback Cleo Lemon during Sunday's game in Indianapolis.

• Momentum

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Larry Johnson is, after all, the NFL's most potent ground weapon after L.T. And he's officially its busiest.

Johnson finished the regular season with a league-record 416 carries. He was second in the NFL in rushing yards (1,789) and No. 2 in rushing touchdowns (17).

Perhaps most ominous, he capped the regular season with three TDs and 138 yards against Jacksonville's fourth-ranked rushing defense.

Up next is the league's worst run defense. Colts fans just might want to close their eyes.

Win or lose, the ground damage won't be pretty. It wasn't against Miami. The Colts

yielded 115 to Ronnie Brown and 150 overall.

Johnson could get that figure by halftime.

Maybe by the end of the first quarter. In previous seasons, i.e. last year or the year before, it might not matter. The Colts could survive vicious ground assaults because their own offense was unstoppable. But that's seldom been the case this season.

For the most part, the offense has been good but rarely great. It has even spluttered at times, most notably during its humbling losses against Dallas, Tennessee, Jacksonville and Houston.

A similar misfire against Kansas City could easily end the Colts' season.

Now back to this momentum thing. Kansas City definitely brings some coming off its do-or-die 35-30 win against the Jaguars. The Colts claim to have some after edging the Dolphins.

"We needed to solidify that playing here is going to be tough for anybody who comes

here in the playoffs," offensive tackle Tarik Glenn said. "It's important to create some momentum going into the playoffs."

"These last couple of months have been an up-and-down roller coaster, but we felt that if we came out here and executed, we can do some good things."

Time will soon tell if the optimism is based on reality or wishful thinking. But this much is certain: a first-round Colts victory is not a certainty.

Not with Larry Johnson coming to town. Not with a defense that can't stop him. And not with an offense that hasn't always risen to the occasion.

We'll see how much of an advantage home field really is. It wasn't much of one last year.

But, hey, this time, the Colts have "momentum."

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