

Patriots-Broncos Round 2 Should Excite Football Fans

-Matt Lieberson

Before I begin my rational, logical preview for this Saturday night's Patriots–Broncos playoff game, let's all just take a minute to freak out about Tim Tebow.

Done? Okay, let's begin.

Anybody who watched last week's game in Denver knows that the Broncos aren't to be taken lightly. Yes, the Pats went into Denver and whipped the Broncos last month, but everybody thought the Steelers would go to Mile High Field and cream Denver. That proved not to be the case, as Demaryius Thomas ran through Pittsburgh's secondary to give Denver the victory and light up Facebook and Twitter with posts such as "Tebow>Jesus" and "MARRY ME TEBOW!"

New England has had a nutty season themselves. It's getting to the point where their defense is impossible to name. Wilfork, Mayo, and... Tarpinian? Koutovides? Who are these guys? As of press time, Ross Ventrone was probably cut, resigned, then put on the practice squad and recalled again. However, the "bend don't break" defense here in New England has started to mesh, and the Patriots are rolling, having won eight straight games.

But can they stop the unique set of skills that Tim Tebow brings to the table? They've done it once before, but this is different. Tebow thrives under pressure. The option attack he's been running with Willis McGahee has been brutally effective, and Denver's offensive line has been superb with Tebow under center. He has really come around as a thrower.

Tebow is not even the person on the Denver offense who most concerns me. That player is Demaryius Thomas, the rookie wide receiver out of Central Florida who caught the overtime TD pass. Thomas has really been blossoming lately, emerging as a true deep threat for Denver. With Tebow's deep ball skills being better than usual last week against Pittsburgh, and the Patriots having a suspect pass defense, I expect Thomas to cause Bill Belichick fits.

Denver's defense is the unsung hero of the Broncos. With all of the press that Tim Tebow has gotten, the Broncos defense has been unheralded yet successful all season. What scares me most is the Denver pass rush. The Broncos have three legitimate pass rushers, with Robert Ayers, Elvis Dumervil, and Von Miller all being able to rush the QB. The common thread in the Patriots last three playoff losses has been Tom Brady being hit. Last

year versus the Jets, Tom Brady was sacked five times and hit many more. The year before, versus Baltimore, Brady was sacked four times. In Super Bowl XLII, Brady was sacked five times and had constant pressure on him. If Denver puts pressure on Tom Brady, New England may be in for a long day.

On offense, New England is unstoppable. Tom Brady is just being Tom Brady, winning games and taking names. The emergence of The Gronk has been the main story offensively, with tight end Rob Gronkowski setting NFL records for a single season with 1327 yards receiving and 17 touchdowns, both the most for a tight end.

But there are two lesserknown X-factors that I think give New England advantages. First, I think Stevan Ridley is due for a big game. The little guy from LSU has been showing promise during his limited playing time recently, running downhill and showing patience in the backfield. He brings a new dimension to the Patriots offense that they haven't had since Corey Dillon.

Secondly, Josh McDaniels is returning to eventually fill the void of Bill O'Brien, leaving for Penn State. Personally, I never loved McDaniels as I thought his play calling became mundane in 2008 with Matt Cassel. However, he brings intimate knowledge of Denver and Tim Tebow. McDaniels was the head coach of Denver two years ago, and it's been said that he was the driving force behind drafting Tebow. He worked with him before getting fired by Denver, and he knows Tebow's skill set and potential better than most. This should provide an edge to New England on defense, something that hasn't been said often this year.

I don't want to make any official predictions. Last year, I said the Patriots would beat the Jets 31-17. That didn't go so well, so I will not predict anything. But this Saturday should be a thoroughly entertaining game, and the Gillette crowd will be rocking as Denver comes to town.

Under any circumstance, Tim Tebow will cause a stir. He always does.

The game will be taking place this Saturday night at 8:00 pm at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough. It will be on CBS.

FORECAST: 25-30 degrees, no precipitation, limited windchill