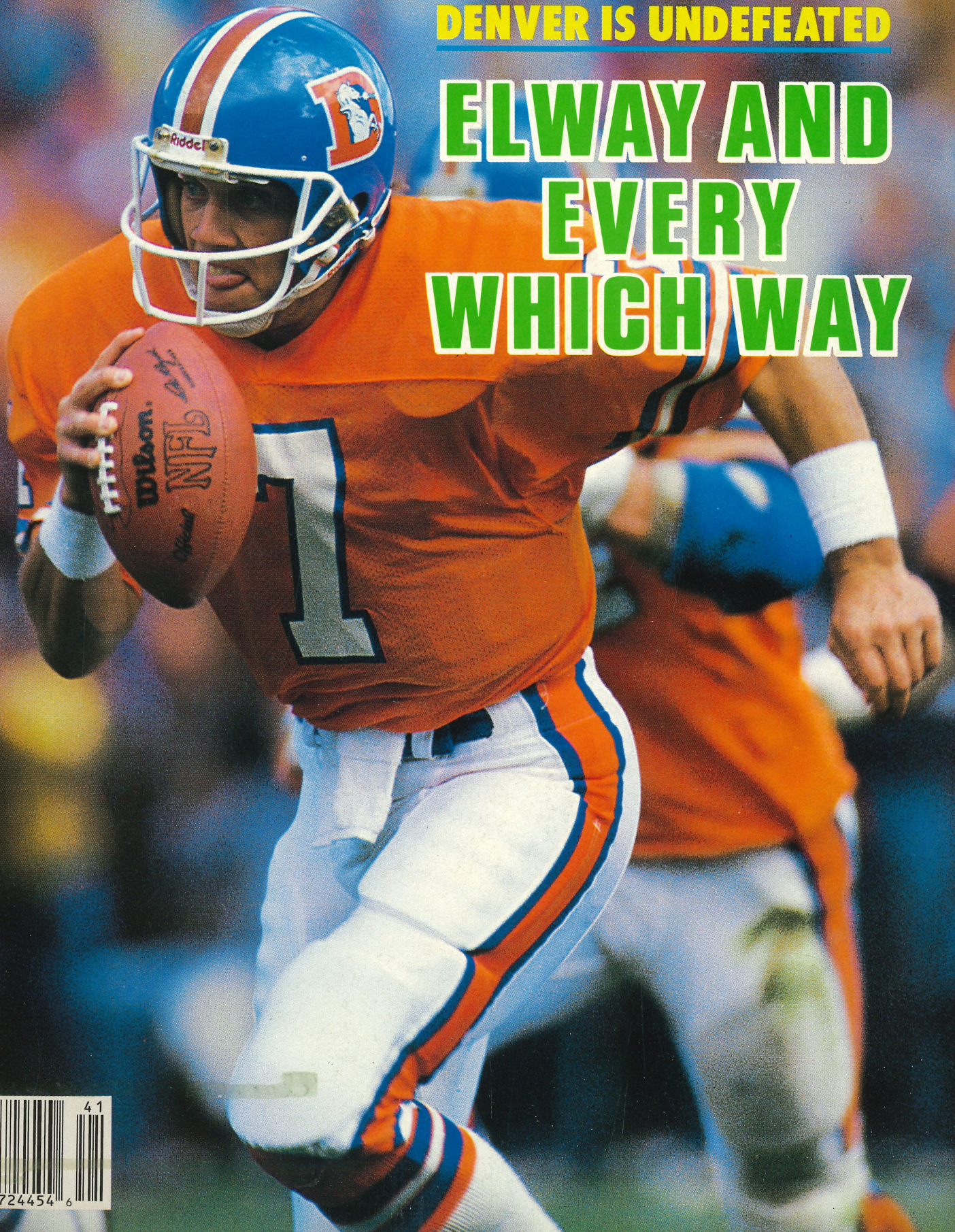


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DENVER IS UNDEFEATED

**ELWAY AND
EVERY
WHICH WAY**



Denver's Having A Ball

Awakening memories of their '78 Super Bowl team and its demon defense, the Broncos roughed up Dallas and substitute quarterback Steve Pelluer to boost their impressive record to 5-0, best in the AFC

by **PAUL ZIMMERMAN**



PETER READ MILLER

CONTINUED

The Denver Broncos had just scored, and with a little more than 10 minutes to go they sat on top of the Dallas Cowboys 29-7, in what eventually would be a 29-14 victory. When Dallas took over on its own 21, waves of sound rolled through Denver's Mile High Stadium.

"Dee-fense," the insatiable fans yelled. "Dee-fense."

Up in the press box the Cowboys' president and general manager, Tex Schramm, slumped in his seat and muttered, "What the hell do they need defense for?"

Enough already. Enough of those orange-shirted monsters who kept pouring

through, sending the young Cowboy quarterback Steve Pelluer—who was subbing for the injured Danny White—scrambling for survival and nailing Herschel Walker before he could get his 224 pounds in motion. Enough defense. Stop the fight. Get us back on our bus so we can regroup.

"Dee-fense!" yelled the crowd. And why not? It has been a way of life in Denver for nearly 10 years. It's what got the Broncos into their only Super Bowl in January 1978. Five Broncos made the Pro Bowl that year, all of them on defense. Four of them made it last season, and not an offensive player among them. Quick now, who's the last Bronco quarterback to be selected for the Pro Bowl? The answer is nobody. Denver quarterbacks have been the guys to hold 'em un-

til the defense can get back on the field and force a turnover.

And out of this lopsided setup a tradition was built. Bronco defense. The Orange Crush. The crowd got into it. The town was flooded with waves of orange. Red Miller, the coach of the '77-'78 Super Bowl team, was even sent an orange toilet seat. Veteran players remember the orange car that used to cruise the practice field, the orange truck that picked up the garbage, the cement truck with the orange mixer. Defensive teams stir the emotions. The spectacular offensive shows are pretty to watch, but there's something elemental about the struggle to stop the other guys, about great defensive players flying around the field like maniacs while your offense is running a carefully controlled, we-won't-screw-it-up-fellows operation.

"Our offense in the Super Bowl year," says free safety Steve Foley, one of the four current Denver defensive players who started on that '77-'78 team, "was first down, run; second down, run; third down, play-action pass—the waiting game. Wait for us to get 'em good field position on a turnover and then go for the quick strike. And that's the way we went to the Super Bowl."

"Craig Morton would take a sack, but he wouldn't throw an interception," says Joe Collier, who has coached the Denver defense for 18 seasons. "There were very few games that we were in bad field position."

Well, things have changed. The difference is John Elway, a quarterback more in the mold of Terry Bradshaw than of Morton. Nobody, repeat nobody, in the NFL has a stronger arm than Elway, and he has got the nimble legs to go with it. Morton was sunk in concrete. Elway will scramble sideline to sideline and then let one fly 50 yards downfield. He'll sprint one way and then throw a pass to the other side that will either bring the fans right out of their seats, screaming, or have them shielding their eyes and groaning, "Oh, no."

He has blown hot and cold for the last two games, but here's the thing about this Bronco team, and probably the main reason it's 5-0, the only unbeaten club in the AFC: When Elway runs into a bad streak, as he did very noticeably against the New England Patriots the week before the Dallas game, the defense will take over. It's as if the players are saying,

O.K., kid, get yourself together, we'll take over for a while.

And Elway will return the favor.

"That's one of the main differences between this team and our Super Bowl team—the ability of the offense to take charge when the defense runs into trouble," says Tom Jackson, the outside linebacker on the weak side, as he was in '77-'78. "It's the first time in my career that we've had a team like that. We beat the Raiders in a 38-36 shootout after we were down 36-28 in the fourth quarter. John and the offense just took over."

"They had a lot of our old alumni back for the New England game," Foley says. "Those guys from the Super Bowl team must have been eating their hearts out. Put this offense on that team, and we'd have been another Pittsburgh. We'd have had two or three Super Bowl rings."

The comparisons haven't started in earnest yet, Broncos '86 vs. Super Bowl Broncos. It's too early in the season; there's the fear of jinxing the team. And no one really wants to mess with hallowed memories. The fans were caught up in a frenzy that hasn't been seen in the NFL before or since. They still love their Broncos—the team has 123 consecutive sellouts, and Sunday's crowd of 76,082 set an attendance record for the third time this season—but all the crazy orange stuff hasn't returned. Maybe it never will. Maybe that was a one-shot deal.

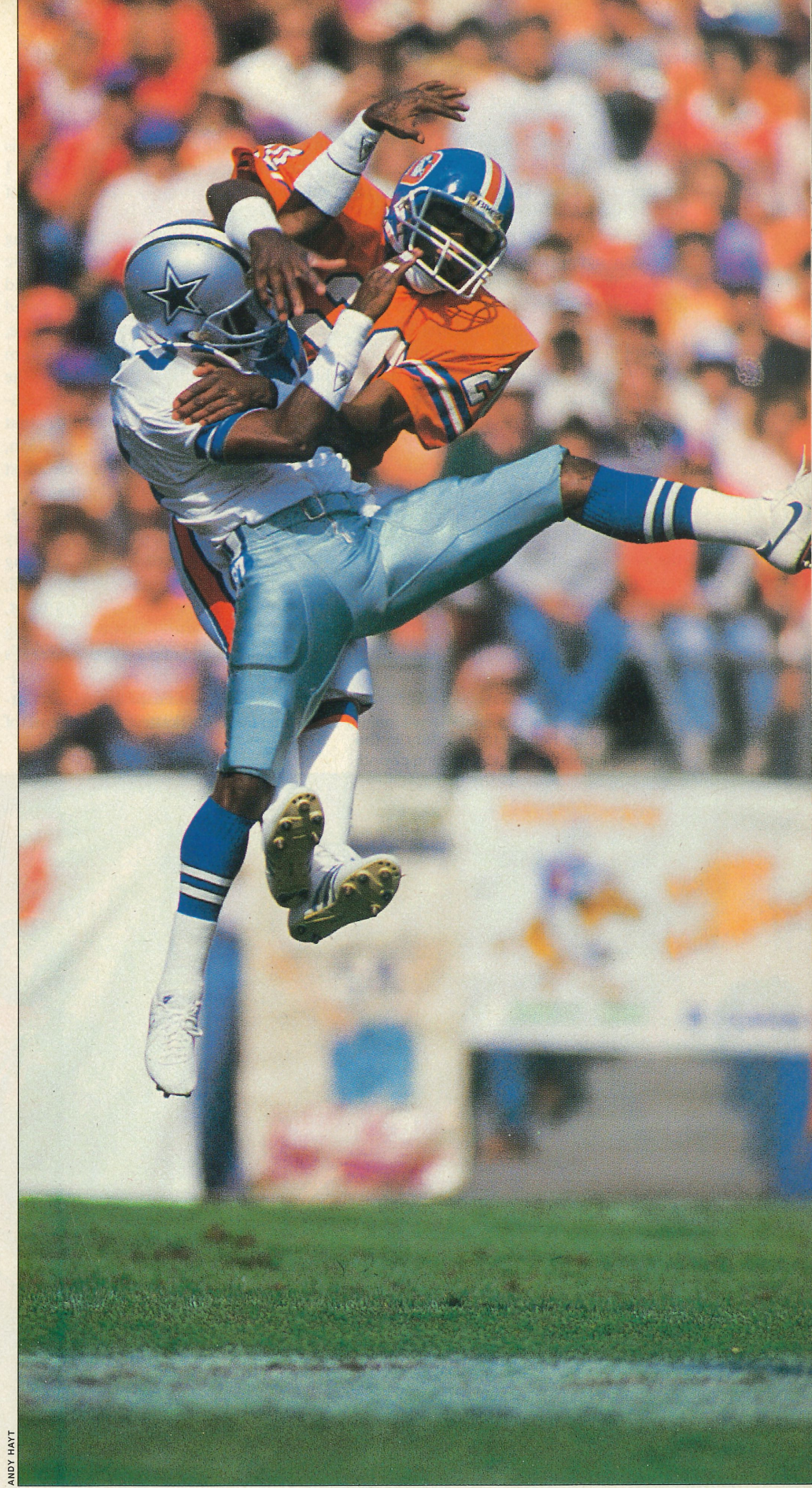
In 1977-'78, the fans cheered for a defense that had recognizable heroes, practically all of whom stayed on the field and played every down in an era in which the mass situation substitutions of today were unknown. They worked out of a 3-4, the same as now, but the roles were more clearly defined. Barney Chavous, the left end, was the prototype strong-side run-stopper. Rubin Carter was a rock at noseguard; Lyle Alzado, wild and flamboyant at right end, the sacking end, was a little of everything. Their outside linebackers were magnificent—on the strong side Bob Swenson, who could slice through anything and find the ball carrier; on the open side Jackson, the first of the greyhound linebackers. Running plays were funneled to Randy Gradishar in the middle. Billy Thompson ran the secondary from his strong safety spot, and Louie Wright was a brilliant young cornerback. It was a legendary group.

On Super Bowl Sunday they stood on

continued



Andre Townsend (61) and his stingy teammates held Walker to a mere 33 yards.



The ageless Wright, a vet of '78, went a mile high to break up a pass to Gordon Banks.

the sidelines and prayed that Dallas would win the toss, so they could go out and play defense. They couldn't wait to get at them. And they certainly had their moments. They had the Cowboys shook up in the early going. There was a fumble. . . you can close your eyes and see the ball bouncing free on the Dallas one-yard line and the Dallas guy and the Denver guy going for it . . . and maybe, just maybe, if the Broncos had recovered down there, and punched it in, and forced the Cowboys to play catch-up right away . . . just maybe. . .

"It was a defense with heart and with spirit," says Carter, who at 33 is still lining up on the nose, but not as a starter. "That's been the carryover; that's what the veteran players have brought down through the years."

"More talent now, more depth now, more speed," says Wright, who's still at the left corner and who had enough zip left in his 33-year-old legs to intercept

two passes against Dallas Sunday ("This is the first time in my NFL career that I got two in one game"). He ran one of them back 56 yards.

The Broncos' defensive scheme during the Super Bowl season seems simplistic by today's standards, and Pelluer would have been very happy to have faced something as old-fashioned as that. Fate, however, had seen fit to award him his first NFL start against one of the league's most complicated—and speediest—modern defenses, an outfit that would use up to 19 different players, lean, slightly undersized types for the most part, but very mobile, and relentless.

Pelluer had become the No. 1 man after the Thursday practice, when Danny White went down in a heap, cutting across the field in a punt-coverage drill, the very last drill of the day. And what, you might ask, is the varsity QB doing running downfield on a punt drill? "It's one of the things the Cowboys have always done," says their pass offense coordinator, Paul Hackett. "At the end of

practice, nobody's exempt from special teams."

The story hit the wires late Thursday that White was as good as out. In Denver, Bronco coach Dan Reeves, who had spent 15 years in the Cowboys' organization as a player and coach, was frankly skeptical. "If Danny can walk," he said, "he'll play." In the meantime Collier designed his game plan assuming the Broncos would face White, awarding additional attention to the rapid thrusts of Walker, who was taking over at tailback while Tony Dorsett rested a sprained left knee.

There were no doubts in the Cowboy camp about White's status. Maybe in a playoff situation they somehow could have patched him up, and Dorsett, too, but after the Bronco game they're scheduled to take on the whole NFC East, beginning with Washington, and the risk was prohibitive.

"We have a choice of doing three things," Hackett said the night before the game. "Changing the game plan to put

more emphasis on Herschel's running, which might make some sense if Denver wasn't leading the NFL in rushing defense. No. 2 is leaving everything the same as if Danny were going to play; and No. 3 is keeping the same concept but cutting back on some of the stuff, reducing it. We've chosen No. 3."

Pelluer's entire NFL experience consisted of five completions in eight passes, all but two in one drive against the Giants last year in a game that determined the division champion. Both White and Gary Hogeboom had been knocked out of action, and Pelluer took the team down the field for a late touchdown that stretched a 7-point lead to 14.

"You've got to look at his record," Hackett said. "He was called on [against New York], and he was magnificent."

Pelluer is a tall, quietly serious young man with an understated sense of humor. On Friday, the writers searched him out after practice. He showed up late. "Where were you?" someone asked him.

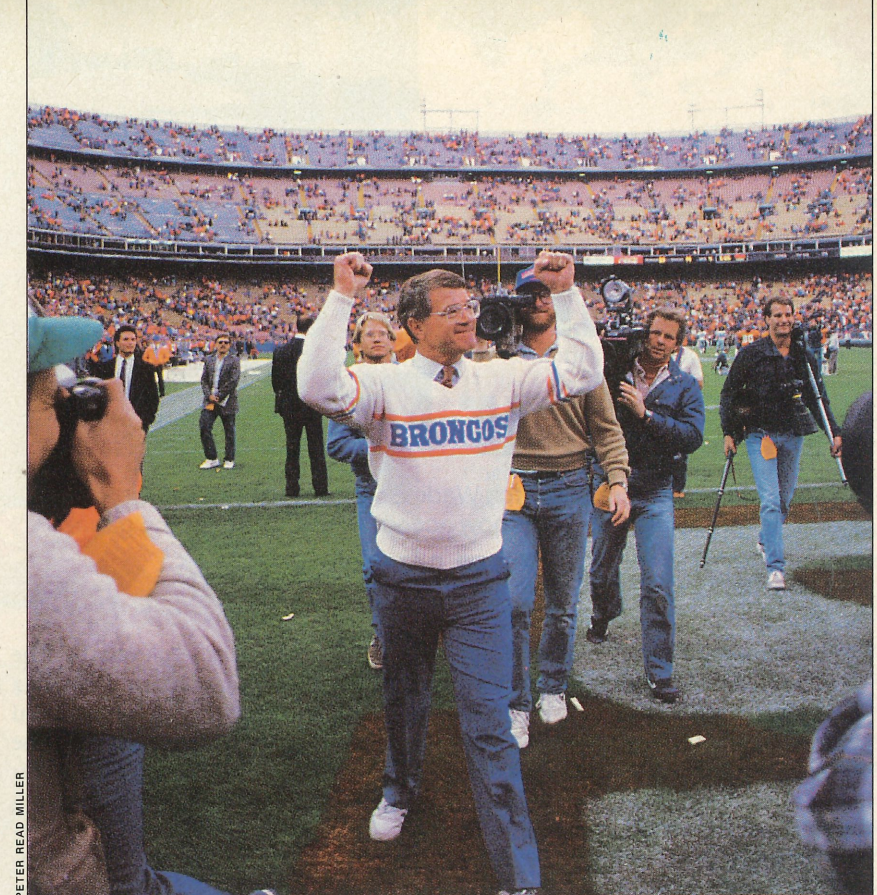
"Inside," he said, "making out my will."

The next day Pelluer said, "I see this as a great opportunity. You always want to prove yourself against the best. The only thing that makes you nervous is their quickness. You have to get your reads in a big hurry."

By the end of the first quarter he could see there would be major problems. Collier, who has gone to a more aggressive, blitzing style this year than he ever has before, was sending one or two linebackers in on practically every play, run or pass, and the Cowboys' pickup scheme couldn't handle it. Pelluer took some major hits after two of his first three passes. Each of the first three Cowboy runs resulted in minus yardage. The only positive thing for them was that the Broncos weren't doing much of anything either.

Elway missed his first three passes, hit a couple of shorties, then missed another. Against New England the week before he had run into what he calls "the worst cold streak of my life. I couldn't complete a pass. First I'd overthrow everybody, then I'd choke my motion off and throw the ball in the dirt."

On Sunday, it was Pelluer, not Elway, who was the first to get something going. At the end of the first quarter he hit Mike Sherrard with a 42-yarder to the Broncos' 12-yard line. Close range had been golden for the Cowboys this year. They



Reeves, who was on the Cowboys' side during Super Bowl XII, had reason to exult.

had reached the opposing 20 or better 17 times and had scored on each occasion: 14 TDs, 3 field goals. Louie Wright broke the streak, picking off a Pelluer pass on the one and fighting his way through tacklers out to the Dallas 43. The game had turned.

Randy White, the All-Pro defensive tackle, had pulled a hamstring running down halfback Sammy Winder, and he was through. The Cowboys tried free agent Bob Otto in his place, then Mark Tuinei, then nobody, giving up on the pass rush entirely and going with three down linemen and eight defensive backs on long yardage. Elway scrambled and bought time and made big plays, one of them a 50-yarder as he was running to his right. The Broncos scored three TDs in the second quarter; they got a safety when Rulon Jones, their All-Pro defensive end, split a double-team and sacked Pelluer in the end zone. Karl Mecklenburg, their All-Pro inside linebacker, did a number on Walker, reading and darting in through the gaps and jumping Herschel as he got the handoff.

Walker's final numbers read 15 carries, 33 yards. Pelluer, overmatched by the swarming defense and working behind a line that couldn't figure out how to get everybody blocked, looked confident

and poised in a terrible situation. He has a real NFL future.

But so do the Broncos, who shut down a team that had tied an NFL record by scoring 30 or more points in each of its first four games. Denver's defense is a mixture of proud old vets, the four Super Bowl holdovers—an inordinately high number for a nine-year span—and wild-eyed youngsters.

"We're all light and quick," Jones says. "You have to be to play with this defense because there's so much running involved. I weigh 254. Greg Kragen, our noseguard is 255. The Fridge would have a hard time on this team."

"It's the fastest defense since I've been here," Reeves says. "That's what we drafted for."

"The swarm," Jackson says. "A lot of times you can't tell who made the tackle. A guy's got to make a reservation to get a helmet on someone. And people who see us in our last eight games will see a better team. Vance Johnson [the speedy wide receiver] will be coming back off injured reserve, Mark Haynes [the All-Pro cornerback] will be healthy. Our defense will be fresh because we play so many people. This is a better team than our Super Bowl team, but it's going to be better yet. Stick around."

END



RICHARD JACKSON