

Key Stats

From Divisional

Game:

- Broncos advance to AFC Championship Game
- Denver offense gains 413 yards from scrimmage
- Broncos overcome injuries to both starting guards, starting cornerback
- Josh Freeman accounts for four touchdowns

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BRONCOS UPSET JETS TO REACH CHAMPIONSHIP, 35-27

Freeman Tosses Three TD Passes, Runs for Another

January 8th, 2012: The king is dead. Long live the king.

The Broncos upset the two-time defending ISFL Champion New York Jets in New York to advance to the AFC Championship Game behind Josh Freeman's three touchdown passes and one touchdown rushing. Freeman was stellar in the contest, completing 17 of 23 for 260 yards, and rushed for another 64 yards.

The teams went back and fourth in the first half, with each team taking the lead three separate times in an exciting 21-17 half that found the Broncos with the narrow four-point lead.

The Broncos never trailed after scoring just before the end of the first half. In the second half, the Broncos broke the back-and-forth trend, scoring another touchdown to open the third quarter to go up by 11 at 28-17.

After a Jets field goal cut the Broncos lead to 28-20 early in the fourth quarter, the Broncos quickly came right back with a dagger through the heart of the Jets, with Freeman throwing long and connecting with Dwayne Bowe for a 65-yard touchdown to take a 35-20 lead with just 13 minutes remaining in the contest.

Although the Jets came back with a touchdown of their own to cut it to 35-27, they didn't get the ball back again until just over a minute remained in the contest, and the Broncos Malcolm Jenkins then picked off a desperation Brett Favre heave down the middle to take the ball back and end the competitive phase of the contest.

The Broncos, who came into the game relatively healthy (minus only sub-linebacker Kaluka Maiava), suffered a number of key injuries during the game but

were able to overcome them all. In the first quarter, they lost starting cornerback Tracy Porter and starting linebacker Ernie Sims. Porter's injury is the most severe, and he may miss the remainder of the post-season. They then lost starting guard (and long-snapper) Josh Sitton for most of the rest of the game. Finally, they lost their other starting guard, Eric Wood, for the remainder of the game plus probably next week as well. That meant, for most of the time after the Broncos fell behind 17-14, they were operating behind a makeshift offensive line that consisted of two backup guards in Nick Cole and T.J.Lang. At that point, the Broncos, who only carried seven offensive linemen into the game, had no margin for error, and nobody available off the bench.

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GAME AND SEASON NOTES

Will Witherspoon played exceptionally well again, and it would be a shame if he doesn't get some All-Pro recognition someday soon. He had five tackles, a sack, two hurries, and a forced fumble on his sack of Favre in the third quarter. The fumble was recovered by the Jets, but the sack came on third down, forcing a Jet punt. He also had a key hit of Favre on the pick by Jenkins that preserved the Bronco lead.

Terrell Thomas was the leading Bronco tackler with 12, while Charles Woodson led the Jets with eight. James Harrison blitzed frequently, but the Bronco offen-

sive line did a good job of keeping Freeman secure in the pocket. The only hurries of Freeman came from Julian Peterson, who has probably played his last game as a pro, Kevin Williams, and Dave Ball. Freeman used his size and nimble feet to escape pressure on several occasions and picked up positive yards when he scrambled (three for 35).

Michael Turner ran the ball effectively, picking up 101 yards on 21 carries (4.8) but did not score. while Ryan Torain was held to 55 yards on 12 carries (4.6), but reached paydirt once.

Hartline and Edwards both caught six for the Jets, with Ed-

wards gaining 83 yards and Hartline leading the team with 108 yards and one TD reception. The Broncos Dwayne Bowe had six catches for 151 yards and one score, accounting for more than half of the Broncos 260 yards in the air. Delanie Walker was the Broncos next leading receiver, with four for 38 and one score.

Freeman completed 17 of 23 for 260 and three scores, putting up a 150.4 rating, while Jon Kitna acquitted himself well in defeat, completing 22 of 31 for 254 and three touchdowns. Brett Favre completed two of three for 24 yards, but was sacked once and threw the game-ending pick.

"We didn't change a thing when we lost both [starting guards] Josh [Sitton] and Eric [Wood]."



Denver is one game from the Super Bowl a year after going 4-12



Bronco Report Card

Overall Grade: **B-**

UPSET JETS (continued from page one)

But after the game, Hank Sienzant had only good things to say about the offensive line. "They played great," he said from the excited Broncos locker room. "We didn't change a thing when we lost both Josh [Sitton] and Eric [Wood]. I want to commend T.J.Lang for the great job he did stepping into the fray. He made a great block on Ryan's [Torain] long gain that set up our touchdown coming out after halftime. How many times was Josh sacked?" Told it was none, Sienzant said again, "They played great all game. We rushed for over 150 yards and Josh was just superb back there."

But it wasn't all due to the line's blocking. On numerous occasions, Freeman pulled the ball down and ran after pressure forced him from the pocket. Freeman was able to capitalize with some great runs, including the first two plays of the second half, but it wasn't all the offensive line. Freeman confirmed that as well. "Everybody stepped up and played great today," he said after emerging from the post-game locker room pandemonium. My receivers made some great catches, and Dwayne [Bowe] just played out of his mind (Bowe was matched up against future Hall-of-Famer Charles Woodson for most of the contest, and Bowe caught six for 151 yards and one score).

The Jets scored first in this game, taking the opening kickoff and marching right down field in an unrelenting drive that looked like they wanted to bury the upstart Broncos from the outset. But the drive lost steam when Michael Turner was stuffed on a trap play on third and two from

the Bronco six yard line, failing to pick up the first down and the Jets had to settle for a Connor Barth field goal from 23 yards out for a 3-0 lead 6:29 into the contest.

The Broncos came right back, scoring in a hurry after a Deji Karim kickoff return to the Broncos 45. After that kick, the Broncos wasted no time getting on the board, moving 55 yards in just four plays to their first of five touchdowns in the contest. Freeman came out throwing long, something he had great success with all game, and hit Bowe on the Broncos first play from scrimmage on a long slant for 31 to the Jets 24, and then, after two plays gained ten yards and a first down at the 14, called his own number and deftly faked a handoff to Ryan Torain and bootlegged it in the endzone for the Broncos first lead of the contest at 7-3.

But this veteran Jets squad, which may not hold together much longer, came right back with a touchdown drive of their own on their second possession, scoring from 15 yards out on a Jon Kitna to Maurice Morris screen pass to take a 10-7 lead late in the first quarter. The drive took only seven plays and gained 69 yards, taking nearly five minutes off the clock. Kitna was four-for-four on the possession, for 47 yards, and Michael Turner chipped in with two runs for the other 22 yards.

After a Broncos next possession petered out at the Jets 37, Jon Ryan punted the ball dead at the Jets three yard line, and the Broncos defense forced their first three-and-out of the game. Taking over at their own 39, the

Broncos opened the march with six straight passes, moving to the Jets 23 on Freeman's five of six for 38 yards, before Freeman pulled the ball down on the seven play and picked up 19 yards on a scramble before sliding down at the Jets four-yard-line. A pitchout to Ryan Torain around right end for the final four yards on the next play finished off the drive in style, giving the Broncos a 14-10 lead 7:31 into the second quarter. It was already the fourth lead change of the game, and there was yet more to come.

The Jets took the lead back at 17-14 on their next possession, but as events proved, it would be the last time they led in the game. Jon Kitna converted a third-and-inches on a quarterback sneak to get the ball to the Jets 40, and then hit Braylon Edwards for 24 down to the Broncos 36 on a long slant. One play later, Maurice Morris broke the longest run of the contest for the Jets, lugging the leather to the Bronco 17 for a big 19 yard gain. A screen to fullback Daniel Fells gained 11, and then Kitna hit Brian Hartline from six yards out on the next play for the go-ahead score and the fifth lead change of the game.

With just 3:03 left in the first half, the Broncos knew they had to get serious if they wanted to win. Facing the Jets in the second half with the Jets crowd at full throat wasn't something they wanted to do. Already without starting guard Josh Sitton, they had to scratch and claw for every yard, with veteran Ricky Williams replacing an ineffective Ryan Torain (just three for nine yards rushing in the first half) and providing the necessary spark to ignite the final Bronco possession

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Bronco Report Card

Bronco Pass Offense: A+ The Broncos passing game burned the Jets with a number of big plays, but the key one was the fourth quarter 65-yard touchdown pass from Josh Freeman to Dwayne Bowe. Freeman was 17 of 20 until three incompletes late.

Bronco Run Offense: B Denver picked up over 150 yards, but their leading rusher was Josh Freeman. They need to get more production from the running backs if they are to advance. Averaged 5.3 per rushing attempt.

Bronco Run Defense: C- The Jets ran for 140 yards at 5.2 a carry, far too much yardage to allow on the ground game after game and win every week. Surrendered 101 yards to long-time nemesis Michael Turner.

Bronco Pass Defense: C The pass defense got shredded in the first half, (13-of 15, 139, 2 TDs) but regrouped and played better in the second half (11 of 19 for 139, 1 TD, 1 pick, 2 sacks). Willerspoon and Michael Johnson had sacks, and Malcolm Jenkins saved the game with his late pick.

Injuries And a Look Ahead

Injury Report

Josh Sitton's injury probably cost the Broncos three points late in the contest when the Broncos had a 35-27 lead and were trying to extend it to an 11-point lead on Mason Crosby's 43-yarder with the wind. But the snap from Maurkice Pouncey was a little low, and it threw off the timing of the kick just enough for Crosby to miss wide right. Denver's Eric Wood is listed as doubtful for next week's championship game, but will be a game-time decision. The Broncos lost Ernie Sims early, but Robert Ayers played well at linebacker in his stead, as the Broncos overcame every obstacle to beat the defending ISFL Champions on their home turf.

A Look Ahead

The Broncos will face the winner of the Buffalo Bills at Dallas Cowboys matchup. If the Bills can upset the Cowboys, the Broncos will be at home for the AFC Championship game, so the Broncos will be rooting for the Bills for purely selfish reasons. If the Cowboys win, the game will be played in Dallas. The Cowboys finished with the AFC best 14-2 record, while the Bills finished 9-7, a record that includes two losses to Denver.

The Broncos are now one win from reaching the Super Bowl. When the Broncos were 0-9 to start last season, did any Broncos fans among you dare to think this was remotely possible? We didn't either.

UPSET JETS (continued from page two)

of the first half. Williams opened the possession with an eight yard run, and after a holding penalty against Maurkice Pouncey, picked up another three before Freeman hooked up with Dwayne Bowe for 11 yards to convert the third and nine and move the ball to the Bronco 46. Three straight runs to Williams followed, with Ricky picking up zero, nine, and then on a third and one, breaking off-tackle for 13 to move the ball to the Jets 32 with exactly one minute left in the half. Thanks to the veteran backup, the Broncos had found their running game. Three passes from Freeman got the touchdown, with Freeman hitting Delanie Walker from seven yards out on a short out pass with just 12 seconds left in the half. Ricky Williams did not play again in the contest, but his six for 34 rushing on the possession was just the lift the Broncos running game needed.

This was the first of three touchdowns the Broncos would score while holding the Jets to just a field goal, part of a 21-3 run that broke the game open in Denver's favor. The Broncos scored again after taking the second half squib kickoff back to their own 44. Running on every

down now (some of them scrambles by Freeman) and overcoming two penalties, a third and 11, and converting a fourth and two from the Jets 32 yard line against the wind, the Broncos moved the ball 59 yards on the ground to the Jets seven yard line. Ryan Torain picked up 26 yards on a key draw play on second and fifteen after a penalty against Lang, and overall gained 34 yards rushing on five rushes on the march. Freeman's only pass of the series was good for a seven-yard touchdown to Brandon Pettigrew just inside the pylon and gave the Broncos a 28-17 lead. It was his second touchdown pass in as many throws, as his last pass of the first half ended in the seven-yard touchdown to Delanie Walker, and his first pass of the second half was good for the Pettigrew touchdown.

The rest of the third quarter devolved into the two teams going back and forth, but not with scoring, but rather with punts. After each team punted twice, the Jets took over with 3:30 left in the third quarter at their own 23, and put together their best drive since their lead-taking march in the second quarter. They overcame a Michael

Johnson sack of Kitna that left them in a third-and-12 hole with an 18-yard completion to Brian Hartline from Brett Favre, then Kitna hit Hartline again for 22 down to the Broncos 27. But two more plays could only gain five yards, and the Broncos then stuffed a screen for Fells for a one-yard loss. The drive took just over five minutes off the clock, gaining 54 yards on ten plays and enabled the Jets to cut the Broncos lead to 28-20 on the Shaun Suisham field goal of 41 yards into the wind early in the fourth quarter.

It took just one play from scrimmage for the Broncos to top that. Following the Karim kickoff return to the Bronco 35, Josh Freeman went deep for Dwayne Bowe, connecting with him over Charles Woodson down the middle and Bowe outraced everyone to the endzone for the 65-yard touchdown to give the Broncos a more secure 35-20 lead with just 13:01 left in the contest. The touchdown was the third in the Broncos 21-3 run and the third touchdown pass by Josh Freeman in his last four throws (as Casey Stengel would say, "You could look it up"). Hank Sienzant would say that "Josh was very judicious and deliberate in his throws. He

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The Broncos Eric Wood is doubtful for the AFC Championship

Denver Bronco

Fast Fact:

Denver has gone 19-6 (including playoff games) since starting 0-9 last year



Upset Jets (continued from page three)

pulled it down and ran when the Jets had good coverage, and threw bullets most of the rest of the time."

But these Jets didn't win the last two ISFL championships by giving up on a game when trailing in the fourth quarter. They came right back with a touchdown of their own, but with the Broncos in a dime defense for most of the rest of the way, they had to do it patiently. Running on five consecutive downs after a pass for nine to open the series, the Jets moved to the 39 of the Broncos, then Kitna went deep for Edwards, connecting for 25 to the Broncos 14 yard line with 8:36 to play. But with the Broncos conceding yardage grudgingly, and in small chunks, it took the Jets another six plays and another 3:25 off the clock, including a fourth and five completion to Braylon Edwards, to put the seven points on the board. Daniel Fells three-yard reception from Kitna ended the drive with a touchdown, cutting the Bronco lead to 35-27, but with just 5:09 to play. Overall, that drive took 13 plays to move 80 yards and took nearly eight minutes off the clock, which proved to help the Broncos a lot more than they realized at the time.

The Broncos came out throwing, expecting the Jets to be anticipating the run, and the calls worked to perfection, at least to start, as Freeman connected on three for three for 47 yards to move to the Jets twenty at the two minute warning. But with the Jets having all three timeouts left, the Broncos wanted more, and wanted to force the Jets to burn their timeouts on defense and then wanted to put up at least a field goal to go up by eleven. That plan failed miserably when Freeman audibled away from the called runs and threw three straight incompletes, preserving all three Jet timeouts and then Mason Crosby missed the 43 yard wind-aided field goal attempt, keeping the Jets within one score with 1:33 remaining in the contest.

The Jets got one completion from Kitna to Hartline for 17 to move the ball to midfield, but then inserted Brett Favre into the game for the final time in his Jets career (he had announced before the game that he would really - no, really - finally, absolutely retire when the Jets playoff run came to a close). Favre completed one pass to Donald Driver for six yards on an out pass, then threw deep under heavy pressure, getting hit as he threw by a blitzing Will Witherspoon, and threw up a wounded duck that was picked off by safety Malcolm Jenkins at the Bronco 22, and returned 59 yards to the Jets 19, from where the Broncos secured the win with a trio of kneel downs by Freeman.

Hank Sienzant perhaps summed it up best of all from the Broncos perspective after the game, reflecting back on the Broncos loss to the Jets in their fifteenth game of the regular season that denied them the division crown. "If we are going to win two of three every year from the Jets, I'll gladly take the regular season loss in exchange for the playoff win."