

1 PEYTON MANNING HAS ONE MORE GHOST TO K.O.

HE STOOD just inside the Patriots' 20-yard line flapping his arms like a duck in water, his ritual plea for silence. But the 77,110 orange-clad fans crammed into Sports Authority Field on Sunday were simply too delirious to listen. For once, Peyton Manning didn't get his way—but how could he let that bother him when the Patriots' defense had been so obliging all afternoon? True, New England had just forced Denver into a fourth-and-two with 1:19 left in the AFC championship game. But the Pats were 17 yards from their own end zone, down 26–16, out of timeouts and on the brink of certain elimination. And Montee Ball was about to explode.

In the huddle seconds earlier, Manning had called a simple outside zone run play to the right side from an offset I formation. Mitch Unrein, a 6' 4", 306-pound defensive tackle now cast in a cameo as a fullback, would block one of the two defenders crouching just to the outside of tight end Julius Thomas, the outermost blocker. Thomas would block the other, and Ball would take care of the rest. As the

rookie back considered the significance of this carry—one in which three yards would yield a cloud of confetti—he vibrated with excitement. He thought he could hold it in. He nearly didn't. Not after Manning added three more words to his initial directive: "Let's end this."

Thank God Manning went with a quick snap count, or Ball might have jumped out of his stance early and scotched the whole moment. Instead he took the handoff, followed Unrein off the right edge and rumbled through Pats end Rob Ninkovich for a five-yard gain. On the next play Manning performed another ritual—one he had been denied in two of his three postseason clashes against the Patriots: He took a knee.

We've heard plenty about Manning buckling in big moments, but this was Manning at the peak of his powers. He was dictatorial in his approach (43 attempts), democratic in his rule (32 completions to eight receivers for 400 yards) and efficient in his execution (two touchdowns, no picks). He also called 27 run plays that netted 108 yards, including 43 from Ball and another 59 from Knowshon Moreno. And there wasn't a damn thing the Pats could do about any of it, especially once cornerback Aqib Talib left the game during the second quarter after suffering a knee injury on a pick-play collision. "We were able to hold them to a few field goals," Patriots defensive end Andre Carter said. "But at the crucial points, when we had to make a stop, we didn't. In the

RING IN THE NEW YEAR?

Pundits will point this week to Peyton's perfectly average stats in two Super Bowls: two TDs, two INTs and an 85.4 passer rating.

second half they controlled the clock. We just couldn't get off the field."

Manning scored on every drive except his first—which ended on a punt—and his last, which ended with fans screaming; his father, Archie, and brothers, Cooper and Eli, pogoing with joy inside a suite; and the Mile High City seemingly a mile higher after punching its first Super Bowl ticket in 15 years. And yet there amid the on-field celebrations lingered a familiar playoff sight:

the Manning Face—the frowning, furrow-browed expression that is as much a part of his persona as his nimble wit. It is the face of frustration. It is the face he wore at his locker even when Broncos coach John Fox bounded over in his AFC title cap and matching shirt asking which local restaurant should prepare itself for a mob of giddy footballers. It is the face that keeps Manning from getting too far ahead of himself. "There is still one more game to play," he reminded

reporters minutes later in his postgame news conference.

Forget that he had just pulled into a two-all tie in his postseason rivalry with Brady—who played well on Sunday (24 for 38, 277 yards, one TD), just not as well as Manning. The look on his face merely provided another stark reminder of how deep Manning's frustration runs. For all of his comparisons between the two, Brady has never known the Broncos' burden. As much as Brady laments being

picked near the bottom of the 2000 draft, really, the football gods did him a favor. He was free to define success for himself and work toward it on his own terms. Everything he has achieved has been a bonus.

But the same could hardly be said of Manning, the closest thing there is to an undisputed heavyweight champion in shadow boxing. Consider the many ghosts he's had to drop to the canvas in his 16 NFL seasons: Archie's legend, the Ghost of No. 1 Picks

Past, that apparition they call Marino, Brady's specter, even Eli's occasionally creeping shadow. He's also done battle with two other Peytons—The One Who Would Never Be the Same after four neck surgeries and The One Who Can't Win the Big One. If Manning had never amounted to anything, people would hardly remember the name Ryan Leaf.

Still, Manning is certain to hear the choker talk from the minute he steps off the plane in New York. Which is perhaps what Broncos vice president John Elway—the two-time Super Bowl champion and Hall of Famer whose outsized reputation crushed every Denver quarterback who followed him, until now—was driving at last week when he said that Manning doesn't get enough credit. That's a laughable statement to make about a four-time MVP, until you measure it against Manning's intake of grief.

"I'll be honest with you: As a parent, I get tired of it," said a typically awe-shucks Archie, from the eye of a delirious Broncos locker room. "You play 16 years . . . so what's he played in? Twenty-two postseason games? And he's kind of being ridiculed. I mean, I played in zero postseason games. I can tell you a bunch of guys in my era, quarterbacks, buddies of mine—they'd love to say they played in 22 postseason games. . . . My text count just hit 108 since the game's ended. The last one I got is [from] Fran Tarkenton. So there are a lot of guys out there who played the game, friends of mine, friends of Peyton, who are proud of him."

What's more, they're actually giving him a better-than-fair

chance of winning his second Super Bowl in three tries. True, the Seahawks boast the league's top defense, but who has challenged them, really? Throw out the Saints, whose fourth-rated attack is as one-dimensional as it is explosive, and the average rank of the offenses that Seattle has faced is 23rd. The people who still hew to the thinking that defense wins championships clearly haven't watched the last four Super Bowls. In three of them, all the best defense won was an up-close view of the winner's confetti shower.

The exception was Super Bowl XLVI, in 2012, when Eli's Giants beat the Patriots in Indianapolis. Now here Peyton is, two years removed from watching Eli cradle a second Lombardi Trophy—on his home turf—a win away from winning his second on Eli's. Now it's Eli's turn to be a resource to the big brother who had him and the rest of the Manning clan over to his house in Indy for dinner during the run-up to the game, and talked strategy with him over the phone the night before the kickoff. But seeing Eli in the Denver locker room after Sunday's game, leaning against Peyton's stall, one got the sense that, even after two Super Bowl MVP performances, he still can't wait to start acting like his big brother.

If Peyton wins at MetLife Stadium, he'd become the only quarterback walking around with rings from two different teams. He would be able to smile, and maybe even lose the Manning face, safe in the knowledge that his greatness is no longer in doubt. —Andrew Lawrence



SUPER BOWL PREVIEW •

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