

No Plan B: Peyton Manning's Comeback with the Denver Broncos

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Peyton Manning won the Super Bowl, hosted *Saturday Night Live*, and threw 399 touchdown passes during 14 amazing years as an NFL quarterback.

Then he got fired.

Indianapolis no longer valued Manning, a four-time winner of the league's Most Valuable Player award. Get this: The Colts cut the most-liked athlete in America.

"And I'm glad they did," Denver Broncos executive John Elway said.

The Broncos made the most buzz-worthy signing in the history of NFL free agency during March of 2012. Despite missing a season with a neck injury that threatened to end his brilliant career, Manning was acquired to lead the Broncos back to Super Bowl glory.

"We don't have a Plan B," Elway declared, as he presented Manning with an orange No. 18 jersey. "We're going [with] Plan A!"

Even for a quarterback as decorated as Manning, his task in Denver was daunting.

At age 36, Manning had to relearn to throw the football with a right arm that had suffered extensive nerve damage. The new quarterback in town had to convert devout fans of Tim Tebow, who won games in the name of Jesus. A brutal early season schedule left the Broncos with a 2-3 record, as whispers grew the old Pro Bowler had lost his touch.

What happened next is one of those great comeback stories that make us fall in love with sports. Manning went from washed up to nearly unbeatable. He led Denver to 11 consecutive victories to close the regular season. More important, Manning lifted the Broncos back to the elite status that had been slip-sliding away since Elway retired as quarterback in 1999.

How did Manning do it? On the practice field, he can be a perfectionist who is a pain in the ass. On the team plane, he can be a comedian who has teammates rolling in the aisles.

To get inside football's most beautiful mind, award-winning journalist Mark Kiszla takes readers from raucous locker rooms to quiet film rooms for a behind-the-scenes look at Manning's remarkable revival. Football is a violent game. Life can be a contact sport.

Before moving to Denver, Manning was sacked 231 times by NFL defenders, but never harder than the 232nd, when Colts owner Jim Irsay hit him with a shot that shook the veteran QB to his core. So the toughest question for Manning was the same as the uncertainty facing any proud worker who has been slapped with a termination note:

How does a man respond after he gets knocked on his butt?

Manning is the master of the no-huddle offense.

But, with his physical ability fading and anything less than a championship considered failure, Manning has never had to beat the clock with such urgency.

There's no time to waste. No excuses. No looking back. No Plan B.

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