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FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2013

## TACO WINS UNDER PRISON RULES: FANTASY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE 2013 NFL KICKOFF GAME

Who would win in a fight between a grilled cheese sandwich and a taco?



I love the movie "Hot Rod" with Andy Samberg. And if you have no idea who would win a fight between a grilled cheese sandwich and a taco, I invite you to put this article down right now and go watch "Hot Rod". Be sure to watch it 5 or 6 times though, as it tends to get funnier to more you watch it. Also, you might try drinking some "adult beverages" as well. That also seems to help. But I digress.

This entire "who would win in a fight" thing got me thinking about the NFL Kickoff Game between the Denver Broncos and the Baltimore Ravens. You see, my wife, before she started learning about football, use to pick which teams she liked based on the mascot. So for tonight's game, it wouldn't be an analysis of whether Denver's short-handed secondary can contain the potentially explosive Torrey Smith sans Anquan Boldin and Dennis Pitta, or whether a Baltimore defense without Ed Reed or Ray Lewis can hope to contain Peyton Manning and his up-tempo offense now featuring three amazing receivers, including newcomer Wes Welker. No, my wife would be analyzing whether she thought "Miles" the Bronco was cuter than "Poe" the Raven. Clearly, the answer is "neither", as I always had thought "T-Rac" the Raccoon (and Titan's mascot) was the cutest.



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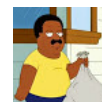
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But this all got me thinking about who would actually win in a fight between a bronco and a raven? I mean, Broncos are pretty fast, they can apparently gallop around 25 to 30 miles per hour. Ravens can only fly at speeds of around 14.3 miles per hour. So a raven certainly can't run away from a fight. And although ravens are big for birds (about 3 pounds and around 2 feet long), that's nothing compared to a bronco. But considering a raven could simply sit in a tree all day, and as far as I know, Broncos have no tree climbing ability, I guess I'd have to say that a raven would be able to outlast the bronco in a fight. And, of course, the raven also has a terribly crummy movie made about it, so there's that too (and wow, does John Cusack have anystandards? Please promise me you'll never watch this movie...). But if there were no trees, the bronco wins hands down.



OK, so now that I've wasted a good five minutes of your time (or more if you read really slowly), let's talk about my fantasy football take aways from the 2013 NFL Kickoff Game between the Broncos and the Ravens.

**Quarterbacks and Receivers**

*Peyton Manning*

Apparently, Peyton Manning's "Football on Your Phone" video made him believe he was part of a boy band, because he definitely played like he was 20 years old. He reminded all of us of the fact that he's just as dangerous as any quarterback drafted ahead him (I'm looking at you Rodgers and Brees). As it was last year, Peyton Manning started slow, basically only completing passes to Wes Welker for the first couple series (first 4 completed passes of 7 attempts went to Welker). But then his favorite target became Julius Thomas (caught his first 4 of 5 passes for two TDs), and everything broke open.

Manning opened up the second half on fire, ending a nice drivewith a long touchdown pass to Andre Caldwell. He then followed it up with two redzone touchdown passes to Welker (one after a blocked punt by the Broncos defense). Then a deep pass down the right side to Thomas. And another long pass down the left side to Thomas (who actually did most of the damage himself after the catch). Manning ended the night with almost 500 yards passing and 7 TDs. Bottom line, if he was your fantasy quarterback this week, you basically just won your fantasy matchup. And those who played against him, my condolences. I feel your pain. I really do because I'm one of those poor shleps who played against Peyton. Ugh.

an Elite 2013 Fantasy Quarterback?

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### *Demaryius Thomas*

Thomas had five targets in the first half, but only one completion for 13 yards.

But Thomas starts the second quarter with a long 34 yard catch, almost all of which was earned after a nice reversed direction move after the catch. He then had two long touchdown catches (one down the right side and one down the left side) in the fourth quarter. Other than that, he was also targeted once in the endzone on an overthrow fade. Regardless, his second half performance demonstrated why he's such a threat to opposing defenses and can rack up fantasy points quickly. He'll certainly live up to his high draft position.

### *Wes Welker*

Wes Welker started out working his magic between the numbers, where he loves to work (366 catches between the numbers in his career). He was targeted 6 times in the first half and was basically the only Denver receiver who could catch the ball. But then he muffs the punt in the second quarter on the 2 yard line leading to a Ray Rice touchdown. Tough break as he isn't the usual punt returner.

The second half was even more productive for Welker, as, although he caught a phantom pass that should have been challenged, he went on to make multiple catches including being targeted on 3 redzone passes, two of which result in touchdowns, and one additional long target in the endzone. Clearly, he's going to be the most consistent receiver in Denver as Manning likes to look for him early and often.

### *Eric Decker*

There were a lot of questions about whether Eric Decker would have any value in three receiver sets. He was targeted plenty (5 times in the first half), but only caught one tipped pass for a short gain (and once got hit with offensive pass interference).

Decker didn't improve much in the second half, as he proceeded to drop two passes (one in the endzone) and complete one which he proceeded to "luckily" fumble out of bounds. Decker may have sunk to being the fourth option in the Denver passing offense and should not be started going forward if he can be avoided. I just don't see him being as consistent as Welker or having as much upside as either D. or J. Thomas.

### *Julius Thomas*

Julius Thomas (the former basketball player in his third year in the league) was the tight end on everyone's sleeper list this preseason, and he did not disappoint, being targeted 5 times for four receptions in the first half including two long 20+ yard touchdowns in the second quarter. He unfortunately only managed one other catch in the second half, highlighting the fact that there sometimes just going to be too many mouths to feed in Denver. Thomas has significant upside if you want a second tight end, but I wouldn't want to rely on him week to week.

### *Joe Flacco*

Although he was the Super Bowl winning quarterback, expectations for Joe Flacco were decidedly less than that for his counterpart on the field. And although he looked good in the second series bringing his team 80 yards for the score, he also had some typical poor decisions, like throwing across his body into double coverage as he ran to the right in redzone during that same series. Who does he think he is, Brett Favre? He was lucky it wasn't intercepted. And in the fourth series, throws ahead of his receiver within his own 20 and is picked.

The second half wasn't too much better with many rushed passes and throwaways. He even missed a wide open Smith at the end of the third

quarter and instead went to the left getting his pass batted into the air. Then he had a terribly thrown ball on 4<sup>th</sup> and 1 in the fourth quarter, where he lucked out since the Broncos D intercepts him but manages to drop the ball before crossing the goal line, essentially fumbling it back to Ravens. He did score enough for him to be an effective fantasy QB this time, but it's clear he's not reliable as a week to week option, as all the mistakes could have been much worse. And with Michael Oher injured with a sprained ankle, who knows what the line will look like next week.

#### *Torrey Smith*

Torrey Smith was supposed to be the uncontested number one target with Boldin off to the west coast. Unfortunately, the Denver D must have gotten the same memo, as Rodgers-Cromartie showed that his time with Philly was a fluke, and he did a much better job covering Smith than Champ Bailey did last year. He was still targeted 8 times with 4 receptions for 92 yards. Not bad, and he'll get better as the year goes on.

#### *Jacoby Jones*

There were also significant questions regarding who would be the number two receiver in Baltimore after Anquan Blodin left. Jacoby Jones had shown flashes in Houston, but never really panned out as a reliable number 2 receiver. He caught three passes in the first half (one of which was in the redzone) before a bizarre punt return had his own guy taking him out and hyperextending his knee. It was later diagnosed as a right knee sprain. Jones never returned to the game.

#### *Marlon Brown*

This gave the sleeper Marlon Brown a chance to take over as the number 2 receiver. He showed some promise in the first half completing one of three targets for 23 yards (and one overthrown pass wasn't his fault).

In the second half, Brown was targeted three times, completing two with one for a nice long touchdown catch. He's a guy everyone should target in their fantasy leagues. If Jones doesn't come back right away, Brown will have the opportunity to run away with being a legitimate deep threat for Flacco.

#### *Brandon Stokley*

Bradon Stokley, playing one of his former teams, was basically a nonfactor in first half with only three targets and one catch. He did have one endzone target though in the first half.

In the second half, he had several targets with 3 more receptions.

There's not much there, though for fantasy players, even if Jones remains out.

#### *Ed Dickson*

With Dennis Pitta out for the season, and Ed Dickson with an injury, there was much discussion regarding who would take that move tight end role in Baltimore. Dickson had a nice 17 yard pass thrown his way in the first half, but couldn't hang on. He was targeted only three more in the second half, with only one completion. He can be ignored in all fantasy leagues for now.

#### *Dallas Clark*

It looks like the tight end you want in fantasy (if you must pickup a Ravens tight end, like if you were in a Raven's Only Fantasy League), is old Dallas Clark. Many of us will remember Clark's heyday when he played with Peyton in Indianapolis. Now he's playing for the other team, and there was some hope he could recover some of his former glory (though he looked pretty terrible in the preseason). He didn't get a target in the first half until the Raven's fifth series, where he had a 31 yard

reception (mostly earned after the catch after defender whiffed on an interception attempt). He then had 4 more targets in the first half, completing 2 of them, but dropping an easy touchdown pass in the redzone.

The second half saw Clark getting targeted numerous times, completing most of them (4), but getting lucky after a long 28 yard reception that he proceeds to fumble, but overturned due to facemask call against the Baltimore D. He might have some value in deep 16 team fantasy leagues, but I think there are better options out there for most others.

### **Running Backs**

*Ronnie Hillman*  
*Montee Ball*  
*Knowshon Moreno*

Another big question mark was who would get the carries in the Denver backfield. Interestingly, although Ronnie Hillman was listed as the starter on the official depth chart followed by Montee Ball, it was Knowshon Moreno that got the start. And every series in the first half. He was mostly ineffective with 7 carries for 20 yards in the first half, but knowing the system and being a good pass blocker probably helped him stay on the field.

Ronnie Hillman got only one carry for one yard in the first half, while Montee Ball, the highest drafted of the three Denver backs, was not involved at all in the first half.

Moreno continued to dominate field time on the second half starting most of the Broncos' series. Hillman got a few carries in the second half, starting two series and catching 2 nice passes out of the backfield.

Ball finally saw the field in the second half with two carries in the redzone while the game was still competitive, and then starting three series at the end of the game when the Broncos were up by 18 and 22 points. It's at least promising he got two redzone carries, which may allow him to get some cheap touchdowns in the future.

Clearly, if this continues, Moreno is the running back you want followed by Ball and Hillman. I doubt Hillman can be anything more than a change of pace back and Ball still has the most upside. So all you who spent a high draft pick on Ball, worry not, he's still the back of the future. For now. Just hope for more Peyton Manning blowouts so he can actually get on the field.

*Ray Rice*

There were no surprises as Ray Rice (who has caught more passes in the NFL of any running back since he started in the league) got the start and had at least one touch in all but one series in the first half, including 8 carries and 4 receptions (including one rushing touchdown). He only had moderate involvement in the second half, but that was likely due to the fact the Ravens were trailing most of the second half and started going into desperation pass mode.

What was really surprising was the involvement of Bernard Pierce and Vonta Leach.

*Bernard Pierce*

It was thought in the preseason that Bernard Pierce might get more work than just a backup, and that's what we saw. Pierce saw the field by the Raven's second series and had 6 carries in the first half, once in the redzone. He looked relatively fast on his first carry, but was basically ineffective after that. Doesn't look like he'll be a danger to Rice, and in fact will probably help Rice by allowing him to catch breathers during the game (as happened in the Raven's third series of the game, as Rice was involved in 4 straight downs and Pierce was brought in for one carry before Rice came back in). The second half wasn't much different,

though he did start two series. He'll continue to get more work than a regular handcuff and is worth owning in most 12-team leagues or larger even if you don't have Rice on your roster.

#### *Vonta Leach*

Vonta Leach, who is a fullback, did great things opening lanes for Rice, but fantasy owners don't care about that. What was interesting was two passes in the Raven's second series of the game ending in a short goal-to-go touchdown reception. Unfortunately for Leach, that's basically all he got with only one more catch in the second half in the fourth quarter. He isn't worth owning in any fantasy league.

#### **Defenses**

Although the Denver front four basically put no pressure on Flacco at all in the first half, the defense still managed two sacks (which were mostly coverage sacks). And the Denver secondary did manage a nice interception as Flacco throws out of his own 20. Denver then rounded out the second half with 2 sacks, a nice batted pass on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10 in the third quarter, and a completely botched pick 6 after dropping the ball before crossing the goal line. If Denver can stay consistent, though, they should be an effective mid-range fantasy defense.

Baltimore's defense was solid in the first, but completely fell apart in the second half. In the first half, they totally misread the first Julius Thomas touchdown pass leaving him alone in the flat. They also only had one sack in the first half. They got 2 more sacks in the second half, but proceeded to allow 35 points. Ouch. Yeah, I'm not sure how much you can trust the Baltimore D from this point on. I'd at least find a backup on free agency for now.

Well, that's it everyone! Hope you all enjoyed the game. I sure did.

Except for the fact that I basically was playing every Broncos player in every fantasy league except for Decker. Sigh, guess there's always next week. At least I'm not John Cusack in "The Raven".

***By Ha Kung Wong (Twitter: @Rhihan)***



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