

Coaching experience seperates playoff teams

OWINGS MILLS, Md. (AP) — Brian Billick has to hope that coaching experience won't be a huge factor in Sunday's playoff game between the Denver Broncos and Baltimore Ravens.

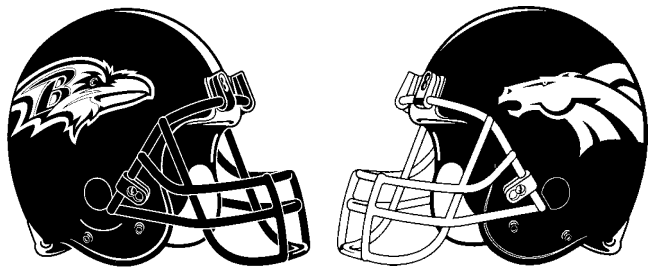
Denver coach Mike Shanahan owns two Super Bowl rings and has a 7-1 record in the playoffs. Billick, now in his second season, has never before been a head coach in a playoff game.

"If this game comes down to Mike and I standing toe to toe at the 50 yard-line throwing resumes at one another, we are going to come up way short," Billick said Wednesday.

It's not that Billick has never been a part of the postseason. In 1998, he was the Minnesota Vikings' offensive co-ordinator when the team reached the NFC championship game. His success in Minnesota got him the job in Baltimore, and shortly after accepting the position, he decided to observe the work of Shanahan.

"When I took the job, one of the things I did was look very hard at what they were doing in Denver," he said. "I looked at what Mike was doing, how he started up there, the people he brought in. I tried to emulate a little of what they have done."

The Broncos went 8-8 in 1995,



Shanahan's first season as their head coach, the same record the Ravens had in Billick's debut last year. Denver made the playoffs in Shanahan's second season, but was ousted in the first round.

Billick hopes the Ravens avoid a similar fate.

"We would certainly like to leapfrog that learning curve," he said.

Billick was regarded by some as an offensive genius in Minnesota, but the Ravens have struggled to score points this year. Baltimore went five straight games without a touchdown in October and managed only five first downs Sunday in a 34-20 win over the New York Jets.

Shanahan also is known as an offensive whiz, and he's delivered this year under trying circumstances. Despite playing without Terrell Davis and with two injured quarterbacks, the Broncos have put together a potent offense that should provide a stiff test a Baltimore defense that set an NFL record for few-

est points allowed in a 16-game season.

"You've got to get there some way, just like I did when I first got started. The main thing you do is work to get this opportunity," Shanahan said. "Once you get in, anything's possible, which we've proven. "It doesn't matter if you have home field or are on the road, whatever the scenario, you've got a team that's hungry to separate themselves from the rest of the pack. That's what you play for, that's what you coach for."

One thing Shanahan and Billick have in common is tight end Shannon Sharpe, who starred for 10 years in Denver before signing with Baltimore as a free agent last February. Sunday's game will be a reunion of sorts, and the Broncos expect him to be yapping at them on almost every play.

"Shannon's going to be Shannon. I expect him to do a lot of talking on the field, but I also expect him to do a lot of playing, too," Denver tight end Byron Chamberlain said.

It just won't be the same, with Sharpe directing his barbs at the Broncos instead of trash-talking on their behalf.

"We're used to laughing with him, not him laughing at us, so it's going to be a little different," Broncos defensive tackle Trevor Price said.

Rams' player honored with title

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Marshall Faulk spotted the rest of the league two games and still won the NFL's Most Valuable Player award going away.

"He's the greatest player in the NFL and that's something that's obvious to us," St. Louis Rams tight end Roland Williams said. "We're glad everybody else can see it."

Faulk was a last-minute scratch for Rams' game against Carolina in Week 9 when loose cartilage locked up in his right knee, and he underwent arthroscopic surgery the following day. He missed the next game and the Rams used him sparingly the two games after that, which didn't keep him from setting an NFL record with 26 touchdowns and topping 2,000 yards rushing and receiving the second straight season.

The first half of the season, Faulk was probably the MVP favorite.

"I think once I got injured the talk went away," Faulk said. "Just deciding to get it done when I did was probably the best thing I did. I guess it was just good timing on our part."

Last season, teammate Kurt Warner was the MVP.

"The guy, I felt, deserved it as much as anybody last year, and definitely deserves it this year," Warner said. "He'd get my vote every year."

Faulk, 27, received 24 votes from a

nationwide panel of 50 sports writers and broadcasters. Philadelphia quarterback Donovan McNabb (11) was second, followed by Tennessee running back Eddie George (8), Oakland quarterback Rich Gannon (5), Indianapolis quarterback Peyton Manning (1) and Baltimore linebacker Ray Lewis (1).

Faulk set the NFL record with 2,429 yards last year. This year he set a record with three four-TD games and totaled 2,189 yards, second behind Edgerrin James' 2,303.

In the last three games, the drive to the playoffs for the defending Super Bowl champions, Faulk totaled 11 touchdowns and 572 yards rushing and receiving. He saved the best for last, rushing for 220 yards and catching seven passes for 41 yards in a victory over the Saints that, combined with the Bears' upset of the Lions, put the Rams in the postseason.

"I think these last three weeks I found myself back to where I was before I got hurt," Faulk said. "I could feel the difference. I could see the difference. As that happened, my workload increased."

His game isn't just statistics. Coach Mike Martz has often complimented Faulk for his on-field awareness and leadership off the field, and he doesn't mind doing the little things.

"He does everything so well," general manager Charley Armey said. "He had three or four really big blocks in the Saints game, he picks up the blitz real well and lead blocks when he has to."

"I don't know if anybody has ever had a ballplayer that could do everything as well as he can do it."

Martz knew Faulk was different early last season, his first with the Rams. Faulk played a minor role in a victory at Cincinnati in Week 3, touching the ball 14 times for only 40 yards, but didn't need an apology.

"A player of his stature, invariably in professional sports, has this certain amount of selfishness and that lower lip starts to hang," Martz said. "That's not Marshall at all."

"He's the most unselfish professional athlete I think I've ever been around."

Faulk, the 1999 Offensive Player of the Year, is the 14th running back to be voted MVP. He joins such Hall of Fame runners as Jim Brown, Walter Payton, Jim Taylor, Paul Hornung, Earl Campbell and Marcus Allen.

"There's not too many of those guys that you won't see in the Hall of Fame, or those guys that didn't (make it), got everything out of every play on every down," Faulk said. "It's good company."

Player makes comeback for the Penguins

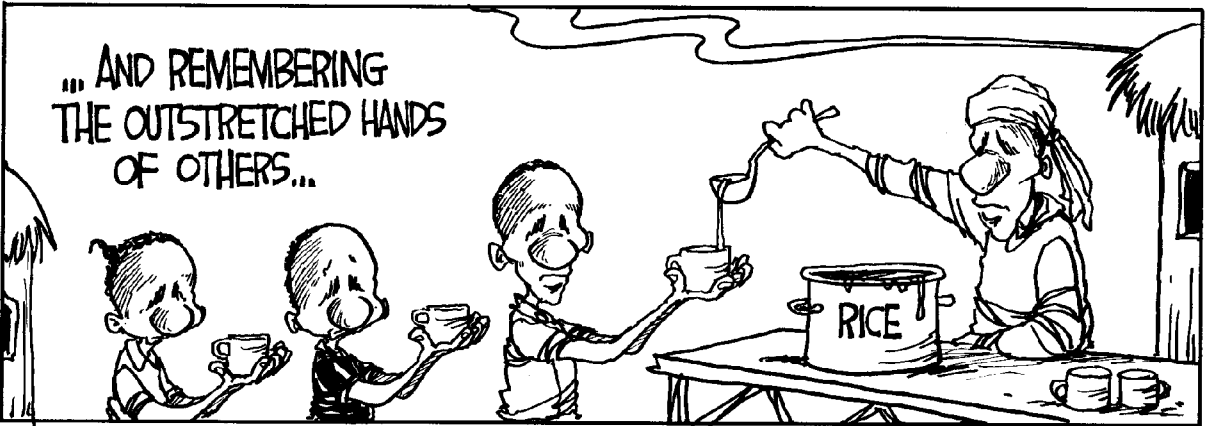
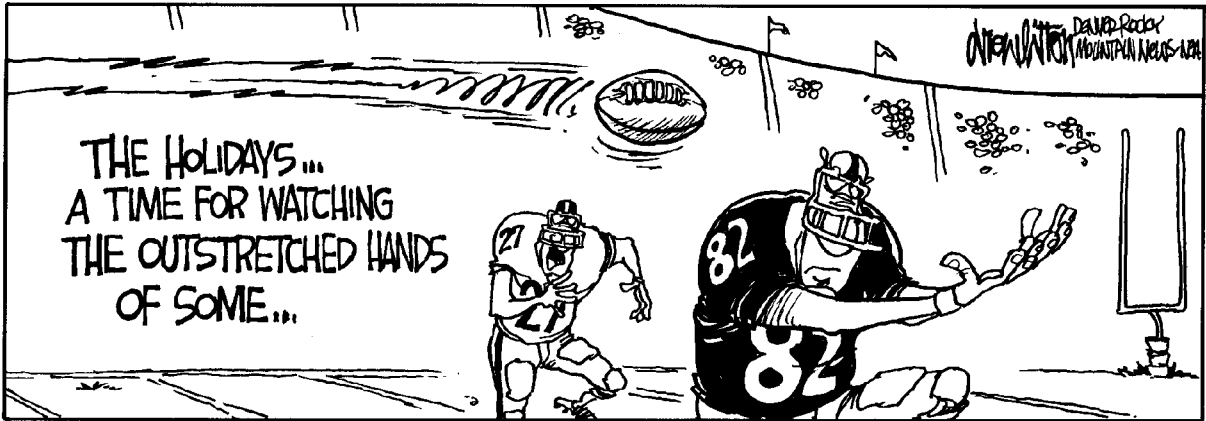
PITTSBURGH (AP) — Mario Lemieux made a remarkable comeback after 3 1/2 years of retirement, scoring a goal and assisting on two others — one on his first pass on his first shift, no less — as the Pittsburgh Penguins beat the Toronto Maple Leafs 5-0.

Lemieux estimated it would take 2-to-3 weeks to get his game back. Instead, it was more like 33 seconds — the time that had elapsed when he assisted on Jaromir Jagr's goal on his first shift in an NHL game since April 1997.

TRACK AND FIELD

bowling results

Happy Our League Dec. 26, 2000	Dec. 27, 2000
B&B Electric split with B.O.S.S. 2-2	9 ProLine Inc. over Bowladium Lanes 11-
Hooker Seed over Blind Team 3-1	3 Sigco against Burlington (postponed)
Rasure's over Kanorado Coop 3-1	3 Fitzgibbons over Eisenbart Trucking 17-
Bowladium Lanes over AR Supply 4-0	3 Weber Kennel over Alcorn Shelter Insur-
	ance 11 1-2/8 1/2
Individual high game: Neal Thornburg-241	Individual high game: Jerry Amthor-269
Individual high series: Don Seeger-632	Individual high series: Darren Hickson-848
Team high game: Bowladium Lanes-756	Team high game: Weber Kennel-619
Team high series: Bowladium Lanes-2131	Team high series: Sigco-2289
League Standings: No. 1 B&B Electric 16, 4; No. 2 B.O.S.S. 13, 7; No. 3 Rasure's 11, 9.	League Standings: Fitzgibbons 17, 3; Weber Kennel 11 1/2, 8 1/2; ProLine Inc. 11, 9; Bowladium Lanes 9, 11; Alcorn Shelter Insurance 8 1/2, 11 1/2; Sigco and Burlington (to be made up).
Wednesday Night Men's Scratch Classic League	



Avalanche beat Oilers 3-2

DENVER (AP) — Milan Hejduk comes through when the Colorado Avalanche most need a goal.

The third-year forward scored his second game-winning goal in three games — and fifth of the season — as Colorado beat the Edmonton Oilers 3-2 Wednesday night.

"If you give him a clear shot from the slot, he has the talent and skill to turn a game around," Colorado coach Bob Hartley said of Hejduk. "The great thing about Milan is his skill level."

Adam Foote also had a goal in the third period and Ray Bourque added two assists for the Avalanche, who won for the third time in four outings.

Chris Drury scored his first goal in seven games and Patrick Roy stopped 18 shots for the Avalanche.

"I don't know what to say," Hejduk said. "One day somebody scores the winning goal for this team. Another day somebody else does."

Janne Niinimaa and Daniel Cleary scored for Edmonton, 1-1-1-1 in its last four games. Doug Weight posted his

600th career point with an assist, while Tommy Salo made 28 saves for the Oilers.

Edmonton killed off the final 15 seconds of Tom Poti's holding minor to start the third period and then survived a double minor on Sergei Zholtok 3:49 into the period.

But Foote, who also had an assist, tied the game 2-2 with a power-play goal at 8:55 of the third. The Avalanche went 1-for-6 with the man advantage and are 7-for-40 in the last seven games.

Ice keeps players from practice

DALLAS (AP) — Six key Tennessee players missed the Volunteers' first team meeting Wednesday and practice for the Cotton Bowl because of an ice storm that delayed flights across the region.

Flying separately, the Vols were stuck in Memphis and Little Rock. Three even began their travels on Christmas night.

Tennessee faces Kansas State in

the Cotton Bowl on New Year's Day.

Four starters — wide receiver Cedrick Wilson, offensive tackle Reggie Coleman, linebacker Dominique Stevenson and defensive back Andre Lott — had not arrived by Wednesday afternoon. Wide receiver Eric Parker and tailback Travis Stephens also missed practice.

At least 30 players arrived late be-

cause of the wintry conditions.

"Obviously, I've been concerned about this," Tennessee coach Phillip Fulmer said. "First off, the safety of our players. Secondly, the continuity of our practices."

But once all the players are together, Fulmer doesn't expect any lingering effect. "I don't like distractions, but I'm still looking for a really good carry-over here," he said.

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