



## 2009 Preview: Denver Broncos

### Denver begins post-Shanahan and Cutler era

by [Herbie Teope](#)

#### Outlook

A monumental collapse to close the 2008 season where the Broncos lost a three-game lead over the San Diego Chargers sealed coach Mike Shanahan's fate. But the meltdown wasn't entirely Shanahan's fault, as he lost seven tailbacks to injured reserve, 16 total players for the season, and the offense remained one of the league's best.

Still, citing a need for change, Denver fired Shanahan and hired Josh McDaniels, the former offensive coordinator for the New England Patriots.

McDaniels didn't waste time rocking the foundation when he attempted to trade for QB Matt Cassel from the Patriots despite having Jay Cutler, who was coming off a Pro Bowl season. The situation fractured McDaniels' relationship with Cutler and Cutler was eventually traded to the Chicago Bears in exchange for QB Kyle Orton, who was recently named the team's starter over Chris Simms, who signed as a free agent.

The good news for Orton, who threw for 2,812 yards and 18 TDs against 12 INTs for Chicago last season, is he'll have quality receivers in what will be a pass-happy system. Or will he?

WR Brandon Marshall, who is recovering from offseason hip surgery, returns in a

contract year. However, Marshall was a no-show for a recent mandatory minicamp and reportedly asked to be traded. If Marshall isn't moved, there's a potential training camp holdout and he also has pending legal issues.

Marshall was cleared by the league for a March 1 disorderly conduct charge, but still faces an August trial for a March 2008 misdemeanor battery charge. The league could take action under its personal conduct policy if Marshall, who served a suspension last season for violating the same policy, is found guilty.

Second-year WR Eddie Royal, who had 91 receptions for 980 yards and five TDs last season, will obviously experience a spike in production if Marshall is out of the picture. Expect Royal to play the same role Patriots WR Wes Welker did for McDaniels in this offense.

Unfortunately, the Broncos lack depth behind Marshall and Royal, as Brandon Stokley is best suited for the slot and free agent acquisition Jabar Gaffney, although familiar with the offense from his days in New England, isn't starting material. Denver recently signed seven-year WR Brandon Lloyd, who worked with Orton in Chicago, but he's now with his fourth team and has missed 13 games to injury the last two seasons.

The TEs, specifically the talented Tony Scheffler, should be downgraded in the new system if New England's TEs are an indication.

Meanwhile, the RB situation is unique. With so many tailbacks lost to injury in 2008, the Broncos cut ties with last season's starter, Selvin Young, and brought aboard LaMont Jordan, Correll Buckhalter, J.J. Arrington, who was recently released after failing a physical, and drafted Knowshon Moreno.

Moreno's talent virtually ensures he'll see the field, but Jordan is running with the starters during recent organized team activities (OTAs). A battle for the starting job will be settled in training camp.

Defensively, the Broncos were once again mediocre and ranked 30th in points allowed and 29th in total yards allowed. Denver hired former defensive-minded 49ers coach Mike Nolan and he installed a 3-4 base defense. LB Andra Davis and S Brian Dawkins, a seven-time Pro Bowler, signed as free agents and offer veteran experience and leadership.

The team also drafted 6-foot-3, 272-pound LB Robert Ayers, whose versatility and size could see him play DE, and DBs Alphonso Smith, a ball-hawker who should see action immediately alongside All-Pro CB Champ Bailey, and Darcel McBath.

Unfortunately for Denver fans, Marshall's situation and change in numerous areas brings uncertainty. The Broncos have a new identity and questions exist whether they'll contend despite playing in arguably one of the league's weakest divisions.

## **Key Offseason Moves**

### **a. Acquisitions**

#### **Kyle Orton, QB**

Could produce in pass-happy offense.

#### **Chris Simms, QB**

Veteran offers depth.

#### **LaMont Jordan, RB and Correll Buckhalter, RB**

Neither warrant early draft consideration with rookie Knowshon Moreno waiting in the wings.

#### **Andra Davis, LB**

Should be effective for Individual Defensive Player (IDP) leagues.

#### **Brian Dawkins, S**

Played a high level last season for the Philadelphia Eagles, but enters his 14th season.

### **b. Losses**

#### **Jay Cutler, QB**

Departure leaves hole in Denver's passing game.

#### **Selvin Young, RB**

Last season's starter became expendable after failing a physical.

#### **Dre' Bly, CB**

Gave up too many big plays.

### **c. Impact Draft Picks**

#### **Knowshon Moreno, RB, Georgia**

Arguably the best tailback of this year's class and in a good situation to see immediate playing time.

#### **Robert Ayers, LB, Tennessee**

Big and versatile. Expected to contribute in team's 3-4 scheme.

**Alphonso Smith, CB, Wake Forest**

Solid coverage skills and gets after ball.

**Star Tracker**

**Rising:**

RB Knowshon Moreno will be a draft day favorite and he has a good chance to see action from Day 1 considering the competition for the starting job.

**Falling:**

Numerous red flags are waving around WR Brandon Marshall. If it's not his recovery from hip surgery, there's a new QB. If it's not the QB, there's a potential suspension. If it's not the potential suspension, there's his contract situation. If it's not the contract, well, you get the picture by now.

**Could Surprise:**

There's no doubting the potential of the team's offensive system, as a pass-happy offense is music to drafter's ears. While there are concerns with his receivers, QB Kyle Orton will pass enough to produce bottom line numbers. Target him as a backup, but ensure you draft an elite starter.

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