Sports

Photo of the Day | Happy Friday!



UConn cheerleaders at PeoplesBank Arena on Jan. 3, 2026. UConn women's basketball beat the Pirates with a final score of 84-48. PHOTO BY NORA MARIANO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/ THE DAILY CAMPUS

POINT-COUNTERPOINT: WILL THE PATRIOTS OR BRONCOS WIN THE AFC CHAMPIONSHIP?

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The No. 2 New England Patriots will face off against the No. 1 Denver Broncos on Sunday, Jan. 24, with a trip to Superbowl LX on the line. Though the game was set to be a high-flying showdown between two of the league's top young quarterbacks in Drake Maye and Bo Nix, Nix suffered a fractured ankle on the second to last offensive play of the Divisional Round and is out for the season.

Can the Broncos' defense fend off an offense led by MVP finalist Maye? Can former Patriot Jarett Stidham channel his inner Nick Foles?

In this week's Point-Counterpoint, we give our takes on who will advance from the AFC and earn a spot in the big game.

Denver Broncos- Thaddeus

The general sentiment around New England this week is that the Patriots have punched their ticket to another Super Bowl — the potential start of a new dynasty less than a decade after the last one ended. There's no way the Broncos can win without their starting quarterback, right?

Let's pull the brakes on the "Crazy Train" for just a second and really look at what Nix was asked to do this year.

In the regular season, Nix ranked 15th in QBR, 25th in completion percentage and 28th in yards per attempt. While the 25-year-old was top 10 in both passing yards and touchdowns, he also attempted the most passes of any signal caller in the NFL.

The second-year starter gained only 356 yards on the ground, accruing a decent 4.3 yards per carry but not especially impressive on the whole.

Nix had a fine year and is a fair bet to be under center for the Broncos for the next decade, but it would be an overstatement to say his production is irreplaceable.

Enter Jarrett Stidham. The 29-year-old career backup with four career starts to his name will be thrust into the starting lineup for the first time as a Bronco. While a drop-off is to be reasonably expected, there are a couple saving graces that Broncos fans can look at for hope.

Stidham has spent the past three seasons learning head coach Sean Payton's offense. The former Patriots fourth rounder also spent time under Josh McDaniels and backing up Tom Brady in New England.

Beyond just the pedigree of his mentors, the seven-year veteran steps into an offense with plenty of pieces surrounding him on both the offense and defense.

Left tackle Garett Bolles was an All-Pro, as was right guard Quinn Meinerz.

Receiver Courtland Sutton reached the 1,000-yard mark for the second straight season and the third time in his career, and Marvin Mims had his best game of the season against the Bills in the Divisional Round.

Running back J.K. Dobbins, who was averaging five yards per carry while healthy, also returned to practice this week.

The focal point of this Broncos team, like it was in 2015, is the defense. The unit ranked second in the NFL in yards allowed.

The team also led the league in sacks, led by All-Pro Nik Bonitto (14 sacks, fifth most in the league) along with New England native and first time Pro Bowler Zach Allen (7 sacks).

2024 Defensive Player of the Year Patrick Surtain II was a second-team All-Pro at cornerback, as was Talanoa Hufanga at safety. Big ticket free agent addition linebacker Dre Greenlaw also recently returned to action.

The Broncos defense is dangerous at all three levels. The offense has plenty of accomplished pieces around a well-respected backup quarterback. If you couple that with the advantage of playing in front of home fans and factor in New England having to adjust to high altitude, there's a chance we could see some mile high magic this Sunday.

New England Patriots- Jack

On Sunday, the New England Patriots face off against the Denver Broncos in the playoffs for the sixth time in history, and it's almost identical to their last matchup ten years ago: AFC Championship, winner goes on to play in the Super Bowl in Santa Clara, Calif.

The Patriots' post-Brady return to relevance has been quick and undeniable, going from the bottom of the AFC East to second in the entire conference in just one year. Second-year quarterback Drake Maye was officially named an MVP finalist yesterday, with many expecting him to finish in the top two alongside Los Angeles Rams' QB Matthew Stafford.

Denver's QB situation looked good all season, but a Nix broken ankle late in the Divisional last week against the Buffalo Bills has made that unsteady. Denver now enters its most important game in 10 years with backup Stidham.

New England is no stranger to facing backup QBs in playoff games, falling on the wrong side of an incredible story when the Nick Foles-led Philadelphia Eagles took the team down in Super Bowl LII.

But this isn't the same scenario as that season. Wentz went down in week 14, giving Foles real-game action in the regular season in addition to playoff games.

Stidham hasn't attempted a pass since the 2023 season. Now, he will become the first QB in history to start a championship game without attempting a pass during the rest of the year.

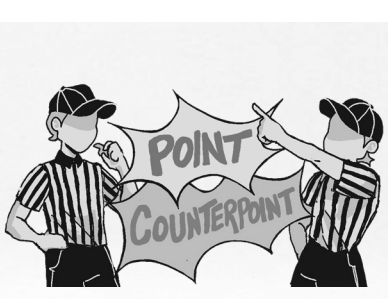
Denver's offense was already its weaker side of the ball, ranking 10th in offensive yards. Specifically, it was 11th in passing and 16th in rushing. Losing Nix means the better part of its offense will likely suffer, putting even more weight on the defense it has relied on all year.

While their defense ranked second in total yards this year, the Broncos allowed 449 yards to the Bills last week. Much of the win can be attributed to Buffalo losing the turnover battle.

Denver's iffy run game could be boosted if JK Dobbins is able to return Sunday, but the team will still be facing the sixth-best rush defense in yards allowed. New England's pass defense is solid too, and likely will be benefitted by the change at QB.

Foles proved that sports are unpredictable. Stidham hasn't played in two years, but has remained the backup, so it's hard to know whether he'll be good or bad.

Under the assumption that Denver's passing game takes a hit, New England matches very well with the Broncos, and all signs point toward it being their game to lose.



FILE LOGO/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Marcus Jones, New England Patriots player, training. The Patriots will play against the Broncos on Jan. 25, 2026 PHOTO COURTESY OF @PATRIOTS ON INSTAGRAM