

PLAYBOOK



QUARTERBACK SNEAK

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NFL BEFORE DENVER, THERE WAS DURHAM. WITH THE SECRET HELP OF A TRUSTED FORMER COACH AND AN MLB ALL-STAR, **PEYTON MANNING** REDISCOVERED NOT ONLY HIS THROWING MOTION BUT HIS CONFIDENCE. *By Ryan McGee*

"In free agency, ultimately the player makes the decision. But there's a lot you can't control. At times it felt chaotic. In the middle of all that, you need a home base, a center." —PEYTON MANNING

Late on March 11, Duke head football coach David Cutcliffe and his most famous pupil eased through the night in a black Cadillac Escalade. Peyton Manning's eyes were weary. Four days earlier he had been cut by the Colts, the only NFL team for which he'd ever played. Immediately afterward, he faced the national media with characteristic grace. ¶ Between that hard day and this quiet night, he'd flown to Denver to visit the Broncos and to Phoenix to visit the Cardinals. He'd met with Redskins coach Mike Shanahan, the former Broncos boss, who still has a home in Denver. He'd even squeezed in a trip to South Florida to see his wife and two kids. ¶ Now, slumped in the passenger seat of Cutcliffe's SUV, the quarterback exhaled as the pine trees and strip malls of Durham, N.C., flashed by his window. For the first time in 96 hours he was in a safe place, where no one would ask about his next team or how his surgically repaired neck felt or whether he was concerned with Tim Tebow's emotional state. No helicopters or news vans were in hot pursuit. The people in the surrounding cars had no idea who was driving next to them. The coach and the QB just rode in silence. ¶ "You going to feel like working out in the morning?" Cutcliffe finally asked. ¶ "Absolutely."

For 13 frenetic days—from his March 7 release from the Colts to his March 20 signing with the Broncos—the NFL world revolved around one question: Where will Peyton Manning play in 2012? The axis on which that world spun seemed to shift on an almost hourly basis, from the Rocky Mountains to Nashville to wherever the next blogger or on-air speculator managed to push it. The truth, however, is that the axis never moved; it just so happens that it was in the last place most people thought to look.

"I don't think Duke is on the tip of anyone's tongue if you're talking about football factories," says Broncos coach John Fox, who visited Durham on March 16 to see Manning throw in person. "But Coach Cutcliffe is a coach's coach. His success with quarterbacks is well known, from Heath Shuler

to Peyton to his brother Eli. And Peyton's comfort level with him is very obvious. That's where he really did the work to come back, long before the Broncos or anyone else ever called."

Cutcliffe has had Manning's complete trust since even before he was Peyton Manning. When he was the quarterbacks coach and offensive coordinator for Tennessee, Cutcliffe sat in the Manning living room in New Orleans and persuaded the gangly teenager to stiff-arm his two home states—Louisiana and Mississippi—and play for the Volunteers. He promised the kid a lifelong mentorship—and so had the dozens of other coaches who stopped by. But something about Cutcliffe's pledge felt genuine, sincere. In the nearly two decades since, their bond has grown only stronger. It's the kind of alliance that Manning

has been willing to trust, then and now.

"It never felt like just a recruiting pitch," says Archie Manning, who sent two of his sons to play for Cutcliffe: Peyton at Tennessee and Eli at Ole Miss, Archie's alma mater. "My boys never go more than a few days without calling Coach to talk about football or their lives."

On March 2, a YouTube video had outed the tall guy in the hoodie who had been throwing on the Blue Devils' semiprivate practice fields. Two weeks later, that same field was the site of a Manning evaluation session for Fox and Broncos front office boss John Elway.

But the real work had been in progress since September throughout Duke's football facilities, which Cutcliffe has totally

revamped since taking over in December 2007. The Broncos' visit was merely the grand finale of a six-month stretch in which Manning was in Durham as much as he was anywhere else, Indianapolis included.

During his lost season, Manning felt adrift for the first time in his life. His body was betraying him. At times, it felt as if the Colts were too. As a result, he floated into unfamiliar territory: damaged self-confidence. In the seclusion of Duke's Yoh Football Center, Manning underwent a mental and physical deconstruction, a relearning of his throwing motion and his first-ever bout with football mortality.

"I don't know if you've noticed this about me, but I kind of like to be in control of things," Manning says

Peyton and Eli joined Cutcliffe, who coached them both in college, for a North Carolina-Duke hoops game at Cameron Indoor Stadium in March 2008.





Todd Helton and Manning, pictured at Coors Field in 2001, have been close since their days as Volunteers QBs. When Manning needed someone to help him out of his injury funk, Cutcliffe knew whom to call.

facetiously. “I get to call plays. I get to set my schedule. I chose what college I went to. I chose whether or not to stay for my senior year. I didn’t choose the Colts; they chose me. But after that, it was 14 years in a controlled environment.”

Then, with a sigh, he adds: “In free agency, ultimately the player makes the decision. But there’s a lot you can’t control. The process is hard. It becomes so public. At times it felt chaotic. When you’re injured, which I’ve never been before, you have even less control. In the middle of all that, you need a home base, a center.”

As always, he found that center with Cutcliffe.

Manning made the first of more than half a dozen visits to Durham just days after having neck surgery on Sept. 9, 2011, his fourth and final operation. He came to see Cutcliffe with rehab orders from his Indianapolis doctors in one hand and a football in the other. His old coach started building a plan to get him back on track.

Cutcliffe had assumed that, like most athletes facing their first serious injury, Manning would be tentative, throwing timidly out of fear of reinjury. But reality turned out to be the total opposite—which was just as bad. The NFL season was starting without him for the first time in 14 years, and Manning came out gunning like a man who

thought he could will his way back into the lineup within a couple of weeks. The result was a spaghetti pile of a throwing motion, the mechanics of a man in a hurry. “Almost immediately I started at zero,” says Cutcliffe. “I said, ‘Let’s stop working on getting back and start working on getting healthy.’ And the first step of that process was to get back in touch with his natural throwing motion.”

Manning’s body was way out in front of his arm, forcing his throws to catch up to his chest and legs instead of pushing through with them. For reference, Cutcliffe dug through the mountain of film he’s kept on Manning over the years, much of which Manning

had emailed to him each offseason with a note: “Hey, Coach, what do you think?”

“I’ve compiled hours and hours of it, so we started there,” Cutcliffe explains. “We clocked his release time, which is so critical for any quarterback. And his has always been like a machine. We said: Okay, this is how far behind you are now. Let’s work toward this goal of getting back to this.”

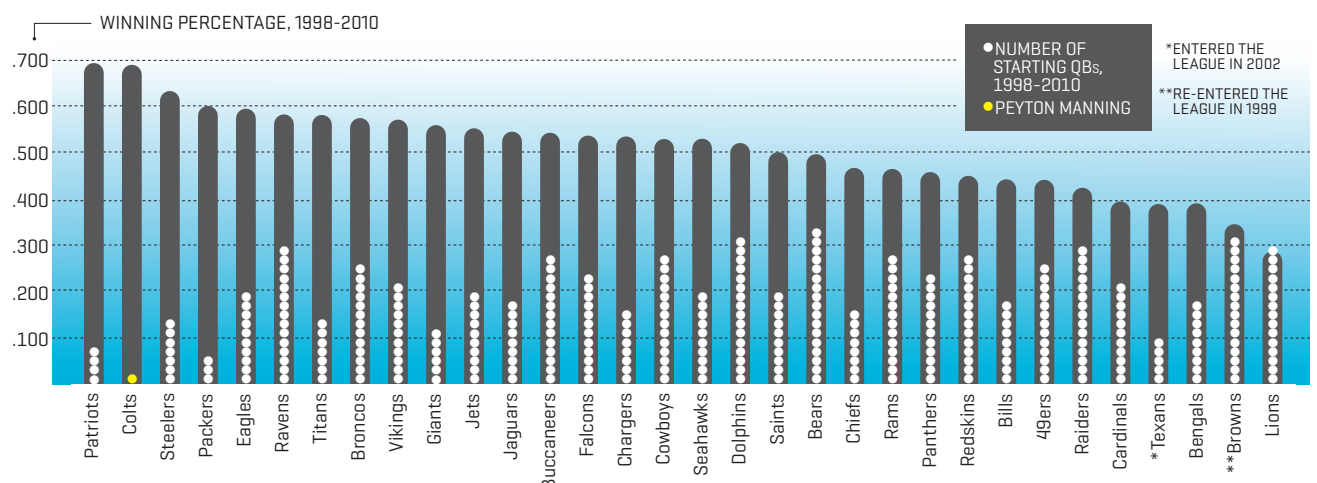
During visits to Durham and back in Indianapolis, Manning started an autumn-long ramping-up process. First were tosses to no one. When his arm began catching up to his chest, he began throwing routes to receivers, starting with one, then expanding into multiples.

Duke’s disappointing 3–9 season ended Nov. 26, and almost immediately, Manning’s trips south increased. He hadn’t wanted to be a distraction for Cutcliffe and his staff during the season, but now they were all his. He also knew he’d have more targets at his disposal for his workouts. Because of NCAA rules, Duke players weren’t allowed to run routes for Manning, no matter how much they begged. Once their senior seasons were done, however, his roster suddenly runneth over.

“After the first of the year, you’d come out here and it was like watching the Pro Bowl,” says tight end Cooper Helfet, a graduating Duke senior and NFL draft hopeful who quickly became one of the guest star’s favorite practice targets. By mid-February, when it was becoming apparent to Manning that his release from Indianapolis was imminent, he was sneaking in scores of his old pals. The entire Duke athletic department was in on it. One February weekend,

QB OR NOT QB

From 1998 to 2010, Peyton Manning was the starting quarterback for the Colts. Meanwhile, the 31 other NFL teams trotted out 336 starting QBs, led by the Bears with 17. You’d think that more stability would mean a higher winning percentage, but this chart shows that’s not always the case—unless your QB was Peyton Manning.



while most people on campus were watching the men's basketball team beat Maryland at Cameron Indoor Stadium, a fully simulated football game was going on inside the fenced-in practice field at the bottom of the hill. The lineup featured Brandon Stokley, Austin Collie and Jeff Saturday. Cutcliffe dug out tapes of old Colts games—including the 2009 AFC championship vs. the Jets—and had Manning replicate every play, every route, even every timeout and walk to the sideline.

"It was competitive. It was fun," says Cutcliffe. "It got him back onto the field with his friends. It gave him a fix. He was getting there physically, so it was time to get him there mentally."

By mid-February, Manning was essentially a full-time Durham resident. Free agency loomed, and the downstairs guest bedroom at Cutcliffe's house became his de facto office. But as his game on the field returned, his professional life became more uncertain. The coach took steps to keep him comfortable. Archie made a visit. So did Tom Moore, Manning's longtime offensive coordinator in Indianapolis, now semi-retired and living in Hilton Head, S.C. They reiterated Cutcliffe's messages of how good his arm looked and that even though he wasn't 100% yet, he would be ready come the fall.

But as the pressure of his impending decision mounted, the weight was threatening to become

crushing. Manning was already worried about the inevitable media zoo. He was showing signs of withdrawing, even from longtime agent Tom Condon. "A lot of people offered advice," says Manning. "At times toward the end, I got so tired I just wanted someone to tell me what I should do." At that point he needed more than a coach; he needed a friend. So Cutcliffe found Manning a roommate.

Todd Helton and Manning were football teammates for only one season at Tennessee, but the quarterbacks hit it off much deeper than few outside Knoxville ever realized. In 1994, Manning was a freshman, Helton a junior. Helton inherited the starting job when Jerry Colquitt went down with a knee injury in the season's first quarter. Three games later Helton got hurt, opening the door for Manning to take the job.

Now a 16-year MLB veteran, Helton has survived career-threatening injuries and multiple trade rumors. So a week before he was to report to spring training with the Colorado Rockies, he went to Durham to lend some perspective to his friend. "We've always stayed in touch," says Helton. "During the NFL lockout he worked out with us in Denver. When I first had some injury problems, he was quick to call and check on me. So I went down there. I thought it would be fun."

Helton made sure it was,



Elway stealthily visited Durham on March 16 to watch Manning's throwing session. Four days later, Manning was introduced as the Broncos' new quarterback.

he did enjoy breaking moments of postdinner silence by slapping his hands onto the table and declaring, "Let's go turn on the TV and see where Peyton's going next year!"

Two weeks later, TV cameras invaded the Duke campus. Overnight, the YouTube clip had undone six months of masterful cloak-and-dagger work by the Blue Devils football office. "You knew it was coming," Manning admits. "It's amazing it took as long as it did."

On March 7, Helton sat in the Rockies' spring training clubhouse in Scottsdale, Ariz., and watched on TV as his friend was pushed out the door by the Colts. More than 2,000 miles away in Durham, Cutcliffe was doing the same. Both were struck by Manning's sincere emotion. They wondered whether those who didn't know him so well realized how genuine his heartbreak really was.

In Denver, John Fox was also watching. And as Manning's voice cracked, the coach's did not. He stood up and told those in the room that this could be the defining moment of their careers. Fox said—and John Elway agreed—that they needed to be the first to reach out to the quarterback.

"Get his phone number," Fox recalls saying. "And find out where he's been working out." ■

BIG NUMBER

20

Only seven teams in the NFL called more than 20 total Wildcat plays from 2009 to 2011, which makes the Jets' stated wish of running up to 20 such plays every game with backup QB Tim Tebow seem wildly optimistic. Even in New York's Wildcat heyday of 2010 with Brad Smith, the Jets ran only 43 plays out of the Wildcat. Don't tell Tebow.

and at just the right time. He declared he could keep up with Cutcliffe's football workouts, then quickly demanded a TV timeout when it got too intense—"because that's what you football guys do." He played every position on the field during Manning's simulations. And he always knew exactly when to change the subject when the topics turned heavy. "He's a baseball player," says the football player with a smirk.

Manning and Helton would work out in the morning while Cutcliffe ran Duke's spring practice and watched film at lunch with his coaching staff. Come late afternoon, the three would meet on the field to run their own drills. Then they would hop in the Escalade and head to the Cutcliffe house for dinner.

There, around the table, the coach, his wife, his daughter and his two former players would eat, laugh and talk about anything other than football, neck fusions or free agency. Helton never openly campaigned for Denver, because at that point no one believed the Broncos would even be suitors. But