

Broncos start strong but blow a late lead and fail to clinch a playoff berth in a tough defeat

INGLEWOOD, CALIF. — The Denver Broncos had an 11-point lead midway through the third quarter Thursday night as they closed in on a win that would punch their team's tickets back to the playoffs after an eight-year absence.

Just about everything fell apart from there in the Los Angeles Chargers' 34-27 comeback victory.

After getting outscored 21-6 in the second half, the stunned Broncos were left to wait another week before they get their second shot to clinch their first trip to the postseason since winning all in the 2015-16 season.

The wait is extra-long after a Thursday game — but it was already going to be an uncomfortable holiday break for the Broncos, who were stung by their inability to finish at SoFi Stadium.

"I just feel like the frustration comes from the fact that we knew we could have won this game, and we started the way we knew that we wanted to," linebacker Jonathon Cooper said. "We just didn't finish the way we wanted to. ... Everybody is hurt. It's a tough loss, a very tough loss. But we've just



got to learn from it and come back next week stronger and focus on getting our 10th win."

The Broncos appeared to be headed for a blowout

win late in the first half, and blame for their second-half flop could be assigned to the offense and the defense — or even special teams, which gave up three

points on the NFL's first successful fair-catch kick in 48 years to end the first half.

Denver drove for 219 yards and three touch-

downs on its first three drives, but managed only 136 yards and two field goals the rest of the night. The Broncos converted their first three third downs, but went 2 of 10 from there.

Bo Nix passed for 239 yards and two touchdowns in a steady performance, but the passing game couldn't make up for the Broncos managing only 46 yards rushing in the final three quarters.

The Broncos sacked Justin Herbert twice, adding to their league-leading sacks total, but the elusive quarterback went 11 of 16 for 144 yards and two touchdowns in the second half. Los Angeles made three touchdown drives of at least 70 yards in the second half, repeatedly breaking down the Broncos' normally stout defense with a running game that had been nonexistent earlier.

Coach Sean Payton hid neither his disappointment nor his confidence after watching his team's dismantling by Jim Harbaugh's Chargers.

"It was disappointing because there was a lot at stake, and we know that," Payton said. "We had a fast start. I was encouraged by that, and then uncharacter-

istically this season, we didn't finish or play nearly well enough in the second half, both offensively and defensively. Time of possession. The third-down numbers. Our rushing numbers fell off in the second half. Credit Los Angeles for fighting their way back in, and we didn't make enough plays in the end. So we go from there."

The Broncos can still wrap up a playoff berth with one more victory, but they missed their first chance to end the longest playoff drought for a franchise following a Super Bowl victory. The Broncos also were swept by the Chargers in the season series for the first time since 2010.

They visit Cincinnati on Saturday, Dec. 28, for a game that could be vital for the Bengals' currently faint playoff hopes. Denver's season finale is at home against defending Super Bowl champion Kansas City.

"We can't allow ourselves to relax throughout quarters," Broncos safety Patrick Surtain II said. "I think today was definitely a moment where we realized that we let that one get away towards the end of the second half."

Mikheyev stars as the Blackhawks beat the Kraken 3-1 for their 3rd straight win



CHICAGO — Ilya Mikheyev scored two more goals, Arvid Soderblom made 27 saves and the Chicago Blackhawks beat the Seattle Kraken 3-1 on Thursday night for their third straight win.

Teuvo Teravainen had two assists as Chicago closed out a perfect three-game homestand. Nolan Allan added his first career goal in the third period.

It's the first three-game win streak for the Blackhawks since they won five in a row in February 2023.

Seattle lost for the fourth time in five games and has managed just two goals during a three-game losing streak.

Kaapo Kakko made his Seattle debut after he was acquired in a trade with the New York Rangers, and Yanni Gourde returned after missing three games with a lower-body injury. But the Kraken were limited to Ryker Evans' fourth goal 11:26 into the third period.

Chicago jumped in front in the second. Teravainen sent a pass toward the net and it banked in off Mikheyev's left leg at 10:54. Teravainen picked up another assist on Mikheyev's sixth goal 6:06 into the third.

Mikheyev has four goals during a three-game scoring streak. Teravainen has seven assists in his last three games. Takeaways

Kraken: Kakko gives Seattle a big body who can get to the front of the net, but it's going to take some time to develop chemistry with his new teammates.

Blackhawks: Improved to 4-3-0 since Anders Sorensen took over as interim coach. The team appears to be enjoying Sorensen's more aggressive style. Key moment

Allan lifted Chicago to a 3-1 lead when he scored with 4:49 left. Key stat

Chicago has killed off 31 consecutive power plays over the last 11 games. Seattle went 0 for 3 with the man advantage. Up next

Valtteri Bottas Returns To Mercedes As Reserve Driver For 2025 F1 Season



Valtteri Bottas will return to Mercedes next season as a reserve driver in the wake of Mick Schumacher's decision to leave, the constructor announced Thursday. "Returning home to the Mercedes family as third driver for 2025 is what's next and I couldn't be more pleased," said the 35-year-old Finn who was not retained by Sauber ahead of their takeover by Audi. "I want to thank Toto (Wolff), the team at Brackley, and everyone at the three-pointed star for welcoming me back with open arms." Bottas won 10 Grands Prix during his five years at Mercedes alongside Lewis Hamilton from 2017 to 2021.

"Despite the challenges of the past few years, I know that I've still got so much more to contribute to F1," he continued. "As I return to the place where so many of those moments were achieved, I'm looking forward to using all the knowledge I've gained to help the team to perform and progress towards our goal of fighting for world championships."

Bottas experienced three difficult seasons in the Alfa-Romeo team, renamed Sauber, finishing tenth in the drivers' standings in 2022, 15th in 2023, and 22nd with no points last season.

Mercedes will change their line-up next year following seven-time champion Hamilton's switch to

Ferrari — George Russell will remain with Italian teenager Andrea Kimi Antonelli replacing Hamilton.

"Welcome home, Valtteri!" said Wolff. "It's great to have you back."

Wolff praised Bottas' "immense impact and contribution" in his five years with the team.

"Along with scoring multiple Grands Prix wins, he played a vital role in five of our championship victories," said Wolff. "His technical feedback and input were important in helping us to those successes and pushing the team forward."

"Not only that, but he was also a fantastic colleague and team member. His dry sense of humour and personable nature made him a firm favourite with everyone."

"In his role as reserve driver, all those qualities will be incredibly important in helping us compete for world championships and supporting both George and Kimi on track."

Schumacher, 25, son of seven-time champion Michael Schumacher, had been Mercedes' reserve for two years after spending two years with the Haas team.

Tottenham Edge Out Manchester United 4-3 In EFL League Cup Thriller, Set Up Semi-Final vs Liverpool



Tottenham survived two calamitous errors from stand-in goalkeeper Fraser Forster on Thursday to beat Manchester United 4-3 and set up a League Cup semi-final against Liverpool, staying on track for their first trophy since 2008. The home side were cruising at 3-0 in the 54th minute of a captivating tie in London after two goals from Dominic Solanke and one from Dejan Kulusevski. But Forster's mistakes allowed substitutes Joshua Zirkzee and Amad Diallo to pull the score back to 3-2 with 20 minutes to go.

It was one-way traffic after that, with United totally on top, but Spurs scored a fourth as Son Heung-min found the net from a corner and they held on despite a late Jonny Evans goal. Tottenham will face Premier League leaders Liverpool in the two-legged semi-finals, with Arsenal taking on Newcastle. Spurs boss Ange Postecoglou said his injury-hit team inflicted

pain on themselves but gave a passionate defence of his gung-ho approach. "It should have been a lot more comfortable there, but having said that, I still can't get away from the fact that this group of players have done an unbelievable job at the moment to get us through this," he said. The Australian added: "I know people will say, 'Well, don't take any risks' and all that sort of stuff, but we wouldn't be scoring four goals and five goals. "It's the hardest thing in the game to do, score goals, and we're doing it with bare bones." Tottenham, 10th in the Premier League, have not won silverware for 16 years, when they lifted the League Cup under Juande Ramos. But they are now just one stage away from a Wembley final in March, with Postecoglou still on track to deliver on his bold statement that he always wins a trophy in his second season at a club.

Chelsea Eye Top Spot In Premier League, Manchester City Aim To Return To Winning Ways

Manchester City travel to Aston Villa on Saturday desperately seeking to halt their dramatic slide while Chelsea have the chance to go top of the Premier League, if only briefly. Current leaders Liverpool face a tricky trip to Tottenham after a wobble while Manchester United are seeking to win two Premier League games in a row for the first time this season. We pick out some of the major talking points ahead of the weekend action.

Pep out to prove himself again.

Manchester City lost 1-0 away to Aston Villa last December but that proved to be their final defeat of the season as they romped to a fourth straight Premier League title. That loss for Pep Guardiola's men came after three straight draws — which was then a slump by City's sky-high standards.

This time they travel to Birmingham in a deep rut, with eight defeats from their past 11 matches in all competitions. City's chances of winning a fifth straight English top-flight title appear to be over but they must somehow halt their astonishing slide.

Guardiola took the blame after last week's painful 2-1



derby defeat to Manchester United, saying he was not "good enough", though Phil Foden said the players still believed in their boss.

Fifth-placed City, nine points behind Liverpool having played a game more, have lost five of their past seven Premier League games, as many as they had in their previous 67 matches combined. Seventh-placed Villa have been inconsistent but injury-hit City have lost the habit of winning — suffering an apparent collective crisis of confidence.

Liverpool's Slot faces new challenge

Arne Slot has made replacing Jurgen Klopp as Liverpool manager look easy. But is he about to face his first major challenge?

Earlier this month, the Reds were nine points clear at the top of the Premier

League and seemingly on course for a record-equalling 20th English top-flight title. But they could kick off at Tottenham on Sunday behind Chelsea, who are seeking a sixth straight league win at struggling Everton earlier in the day. Liverpool have drawn their past two league matches, against Newcastle and Fulham, but beat Southampton in the League Cup quarter-finals this week to stay on track for a first trophy of Slot's reign.

They are still firm favourites to win the league but Chelsea are gathering momentum under new manager Enzo Maresca.

It is difficult to predict which Tottenham team will turn up on Sunday after seven wins and seven defeats in their 16 league games so far.

Indian Army Organised Cricket League Tournament for Local Youth at Manjakote, Rajouri



TT CORRESPONDENT

MANJAKOT, DEC. 20 : Day 13 of the Manjakote Cricket League 2024-25, organized by the Indian Army, featured thrilling semi-final clashes at the Gambhir Mughlan Cricket Ground. The atmosphere was electric as fans cheered passionately, turning the event into a vibrant celebration of cricket. Both teams put up strong performances, keeping the spectators on the edge of their seats throughout the matches. Tohid played a vital role in his team's success, contributing 37 runs off 27 balls with the bat and then switching to bowling, where he delivered an outstanding performance. He picked up two crucial wickets with figures of 4-0-45-2, helping his team secure a spot in the final. His all-round performance was instrumental in the win, and he was rightfully acknowledged for his contributions.

On the other hand, Ateeq's gritty knock of 61 runs off 49 balls was one of the standout efforts of the day. His innings showcased immense skill and determination, but despite his efforts, his team fell short of the target, and they could not secure the victory. Ateeq's performance, however, was a highlight of the match and was greatly appreciated by the crowd.

The matches were graced by the esteemed panchs and sarpanch of Gambhir Mughlan Panchayat, who honored the event with their presence. Their support for the tournament added a sense of pride and respect to the entire competition. The event not only showcased the talent of the players but also highlighted the unity and enthusiasm of the local community, making the Manjakote Cricket League 2024-25 a memorable occasion for all involved.

Barcelona Face Atletico Madrid In Battle For La Liga Top Spot, Real Madrid Hunt Victory vs Sevilla

Hansi Flick's Barcelona started the season in superb form but Atletico Madrid have wrestled their way into the title race and the two sides meet on Saturday bidding to lead La Liga at Christmas. Both have 38 points and although Barcelona have played one extra match they lead the table on goal difference, with champions Real Madrid third, a point behind and still firmly in the fight thanks to the Catalans' recent slump.

Diego Simeone's Atletico have won 11 consecutive matches across all competitions and need to add one more victory at the Olympic stadium to claim top spot. The Rojiblancos made several summer signings, including Alexander Sorloth and Julian Alvarez in attack, and their deep squad started off as a problem but is becoming a positive.

Simeone regularly had to leave star names on the bench as he rotated and it took the squad a while to come to terms with it.

However now Atletico regularly have been able to win matches because of the impact of their substi-



tutes and the coach said it is their greatest strength.

"Before the (win over Getafe last weekend) I spoke with the players about thanking and recognising those who weren't going to start the game," said Simeone.

"There are very important players who are competing in an extraordinary way, and you can tell that when they come into the team. "That is our strength, to compete in the way we want, we need everyone to be as involved as they (currently) are -- it's our biggest strength."

Former Barcelona duo Antoine Griezmann and Clement Lenglet are in superb form for the visitors. As Atletico's fortunes

have changed for the better, Barcelona's season has hit a surprise slump. The Catalans, who lost 1-0 at home against Leganes last weekend, have won just one of their last six league games, with three of those ending in defeat. Flick's intense pressing game seems to be taking a toll on the team, who no longer appear as sharp as they did at the start of the season.

"I think we started the game half-asleep," admitted midfielder Pedri after that defeat.

The German coach has proven reluctant to rotate his key players, also contributing to the team's lack of freshness.

"Full concentration"

Barcelona's terrific start to the season, including thumping victories over Real Madrid in La Liga and Bayern Munich in the Champions League may have contributed to the team losing focus on a psychological level.

They started the campaign widely expected to be clinging to Madrid's coat-tails but quickly found their feet under Flick and with praise lavished upon them, the picture quickly changed.

Teams have also started to work on ways to bypass the high defensive line, with midfield runners from deep capitalising in ways Madrid and Bayern could not. "I have told the team that everything depends on us, on whether we play with full concentration," said Flick, who is completing a touchline suspension against Atletico.

"As is normal, all teams look for our weaknesses and will fight to exploit them."

Barcelona will also be without key winger Lamine Yamal, with the 17-year-old sidelined until January with an ankle injury.

Tiny Tots Hr Sec School Holds Chess C'ship



TT CORRESPONDENT

JAMMU, DEC. 20 : Tiny Tots Higher Secondary School organized a week-long Chess Championship that concluded today with impressive participation from students across various classes. The event saw intense competition and strategic gameplay over six rounds. Mehtab Din, a student of Class 12th, emerged as the champion after showcasing exceptional skill and determination throughout the tournament. Naresh and Abhiraj were declared joint runners-up, demonstrating outstanding performance

and sportsmanship.

The Chess Championship aimed to promote critical thinking, strategic planning, and healthy competition among students. Dr Vikram Handa, Principal of Tiny Tots Hr Sec School congratulated all participants for their enthusiasm and remarkable efforts.

The successful completion of this championship highlights the commitment of Tiny Tots Higher Secondary School towards fostering extracurricular excellence and nurturing young talents.