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Broncos' Soft-Sell Approach Helped Manning Make His Hard Decision

By ANDREW MASON

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — John Fox and [John Elway](#) were discussing various personnel issues Monday morning, doing their best to take their minds off trying to figure out what decision perhaps the most prominent free agent in N.F.L. history might make.

Then the phone rang. Fox, the coach of the [Denver Broncos](#), said his heart skipped a beat.

“I think we both froze,” Elway, the former Broncos Hall of Fame quarterback turned team executive, said.

Elway picked up the phone. On the other end was that free agent, [Peyton Manning](#).

“He says, ‘It has kind of been a rough morning because I’ve had to call these other teams and say I’m not going to go work for them,’ ” Elway said of Manning. “And he said, ‘I want to play for the Denver Broncos.’ ”

Hearing those eight words, Elway gave Fox a thumbs-up, and Fox began to jump in celebration.

“I wasn’t Olga Korbut or anything,” Fox said with a laugh Tuesday at a news conference to introduce Manning as the Broncos’ new quarterback. Manning and the Broncos completed a five-year contract Tuesday that is worth a reported \$96 million, with \$18 million for this season guaranteed.

Manning’s call to the Broncos ended a whirlwind 12 days in which he crisscrossed the country like a presidential candidate in the final leg of a campaign. His itinerary after leaving Indianapolis, where he played 14 seasons for the Colts, included stops in Miami; Stillwater, Okla.; Denver; Phoenix; Nashville; Durham, N.C.; and Knoxville, Tenn.

Manning’s choice — which he termed a “tough decision” — came down to the Broncos, the Tennessee Titans or the San Francisco 49ers.

“You really believe you can make any of them work,” he said. “It’s really up to me and the people

around me to make this the right decision.”

But for all the private planes, car rides and elegant dinners, the Broncos’ successful pursuit of Manning was defined by three phone calls.

The first was from Fox to Manning on the evening of March 7, just hours after Manning’s emotional farewell news conference in Indianapolis with the Colts’ owner, Jim Irsay.

“It was a pretty emotional day for him — as it would be for just about anybody, let alone a guy that had been somewhere for 14 years,” Fox said. “I was respectful of that.

“I was really just seeing how he was doing and what his plans were. I didn’t know what plans he had or any of those types of things. It was a conversation. We kind of felt it out — what to do, how to do it, because he had obviously never done that before.”

That conversation began the Broncos’ soft sell to Manning. It continued when the sides met at Broncos headquarters on March 9 and again last Friday at Duke University, where Manning worked out for the team. Given Manning’s discomfort with the situation, the tactic proved logical.

“Coming into a new facility, it felt strange,” Manning said. “It took time for me to get my feet planted on the ground.”

The visits and workouts helped ease his unsettled feeling, but Manning found the decision difficult, the main reason he took 10 days from his first meeting with the Broncos to make a choice.

“There was kind of that gut feeling that I was waiting on,” Manning said. “I was glad when that hit me.”

That came Sunday, but Manning said he needed to sleep on it first. The next morning, he felt confident in his choice and phoned the Broncos.

That led to the third crucial phone call — the one Elway placed that night to quarterback [Tim Tebow](#) to discuss how the signing would affect Tebow, who was one of the most popular and polarizing players in the league last season.

“He’s like: ‘We’re talking about Peyton Manning; I understand what you’re doing,’ ” Elway said, adding: “He was very positive. The toughest thing about this whole thing is Tim Tebow because of what I think about Tebow.”

Although it was readily apparent last season that Tebow was not the prototypical quarterback Elway sought in his rebuilding plan for the Broncos, the fiery Tebow, in his second year, was still the starting quarterback who helped Denver rebound from a 1-4 start. The Broncos won a weakened A.F.C. West over the San Diego Chargers and the Oakland Raiders with an 8-8 record and then defeated the Pittsburgh Steelers in the playoffs.

“Tim Tebow is a great kid; if I wanted someone to marry my daughter, it’d be him,” Elway said. “But with the opportunity to have Manning, we had to take advantage.”

Manning added: “Tim Tebow is a great person and player. If he’s here next year, I’m going to be the best teammate I can be to him.”

He may not have that chance. Elway said that the team had not made any decisions about Tebow’s future, and Broncos General Manager Brian Xanders said the team had not placed or received any calls from teams regarding Tebow’s availability. That is sure to change, however.

“It’s our goal to get him in the best situation possible,” Elway said of Tebow.

Assuming Manning’s surgically repaired neck is healthy, that situation may not be in Denver. Perhaps the best sign the Broncos could have received there was Manning’s insistence that he was ready to play right away.

“Could I play this Sunday? Yeah, I could,” Manning said. “I don’t know if I’d play as well as I’d like, but I could.”

The regular season is nearly six months away, and Manning passed physicals administered by the Broncos, the Titans and the 49ers. He worked out for all three teams last week.

But now that Manning is a Bronco, there is one phone call the team hopes never comes — one saying that Manning’s neck problems have returned. The Broncos are counting on never hearing those words, because all of their hopes of returning to the [Super Bowl](#) for the first time since January 1999 now rest on Manning.

“Plan B? I don’t have a Plan B,” Elway said, laughing. “We’re going with Plan A.”

