By Troy E. Renck The Denver Post

The calendar insists the Broncos won on a 70-degree, air-conditioned fall Sunday evening. Nonsense. Their 24-12 victory took shape on the practice field in early August. Remember when the rowdy crowds sat on the inclined berm at Dove Valley, disappointed with their bad timing as veterans received a reprieve? Coach Gary Kubiak insisted on three days on, one day off from practice for several experienced players, among them Peyton Manning, DeMarcus Ware and T.J. Ward.

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The omnipotent Orange defense and the pistol Peyton offense coalesced to keep the wacky, weird, wild ride alive.

The Broncos went all metaphysical for the third straight game while joining the Detroit Lions on Sunday night, two down to one dozen.

Another opposing coach shook his head in disbelief. The Broncos “made some big plays,” Lions coach Jim Caldwell said, “and we didn’t make enough.”

HUGE plays: David Bruton, The Denver Post

By Woody Paige Denver Post Columnist

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The rest raised eyebrows, but proved eye-opening in a game more suited for Kronk Gym than Ford Field. The penalty-littered, bare-knuckle brawl required help from all comers and all corners. The Broncos failed to answer questions about their offense in general and their running game in particular. They continued to play their best when it mattered most — the Broncos secured the victory with Manning’s 11-yard touchdown pass to tight end Owen Daniels—and show how much depth matters.

“Great teams find ways to win,” Daniels said. “We have to find ways to make it easier on ourselves, but it is a win in a tough environment.”

With the outcome teetering in the balance, the Broncos received big plays from reserves: safety David Bruton, outside linebacker Shaquil Barrett and receiver Bennie Fowler.

“Our title is reserve, but we are going in to make plays,” Barrett said of his first career sack. “Not going to lie. It was exciting.”

Bruton’s play provided an indelible image for a 3-0 team built on a gnarly

Game-altering plays

A look at the top five plays, in reverse order, that led to the Broncos’ 24-12 win over the Detroit Lions on Sunday night:

5. Bradley Roby’s athletic first-quarter interception of Matthew Stafford halted a Lions drive in its tracks.
4. Emmanuel Sanders took his turn making a great catch against Detroit cornerback Darius Slay late in the fourth quarter for a 34-yard reception. The play led to an Owen Daniels touchdown catch that effectively put the game away.
3. Peyton Manning’s fourth-down pass to Demaryius Thomas over Slay gave the Broncos a 14-6 halftime lead.
2. Linebacker Shaquil Barrett’s fourth-quarter strip sack of Stafford. The Lions were driving in a bid to take the lead. Malik Jackson recovered the fumble.
1. David Bruton had a huge, fourth-quarter interception. Stafford thought he had Calvin Johnson for six points and the lead, but Bruton had other plans.

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The Lions, sputtering because of Denver's relentless pressure, were down 14-6 at halftime. Demaryius Thomas finished the second half with an acrobatic interception, followed by a 45-yard strike to Emmanuel Sanders, to send the Broncos on their way to a 24-12 victory Sunday night at Ford Field.

The offense awakened, if not evenly. The Lions jumped to a 14-6 lead at halftime with a diving block of Ford's punt and a sequence of fourth-and-7 plays, but the running game, again, failed to provide much cushion.

Aqib Talib blocked an extra point. Shaquil Barrett caused a strip sack that was recovered by Rollie Fondue. Then Manning found Demaryius Thomas for a 45-yard strike. And Ronnie Hillman ran in their first rushing touchdown of the season.

As for Barrett and Fowler, who led the club with spectac- tular catches, Bartlett, who led the Broncos in pressur- ed situations, summed up the game.

“Great job in the second half,” he said. "We had a couple of things not to win but to save their kids. We had them on the road playing for our lives tonight,” Manning said. “We put stuff together that we haven’t put together for quite some time.”

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The Lions trailed 14-6 and were driving late in the fourth quarter after completing all three of their fourth-down plays. The Lions, as it has done all season, seemed without opportunity, without hope. Quick check: Malcolm Smith was dropped for a 3-yard loss on third down; Manning’s fourth-down pass was incomplete. The Lions were now forced to punt.

The Broncos responded with their final scoring drive, fea- turing a 34-yard diving grab by Emmanuel Sanders, to send 6,780 fans to their feet.

“Ugly? All the wins look good to me,” Denver cornerback Asa Talib said. "For Barrett and Fowler, practices squad are an old- est team. On the team. They're not eligible to play, which leaves some former college star's ambition stretching only as far as their next paycheck.

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