

**Denver's playoff
loss last season
was among the most
devastating setbacks
of John Elway's career,**

THE LINES ARE ETCHED DEEP around John Elway's eyes, more visible than ever in his leathery skin. There is gray in his short sideburns and temples. When he walks he moves slowly and gingerly, as if he just got off a horse. Fourteen years of NFL battle scars are apparent in Elway's 37-year-old face, his droopy and tired eyes, his aching body—14 years of euphoria, frustration, anger, satisfaction, and bitterness.

He has been through the ultimate wringer. As the leader of the Denver Broncos, Elway has experienced the elation of three AFC championships, an NFL-record 40 fourth-quarter comeback victories, and a steady climb up the all-time

tion of the most recent playoff loss to drive him, time no longer seems to be running out on Elway.

Time actually appears to be on his side.

"That's exactly right—that's exactly the way I feel," he says enthusiastically, digging into a beef patty. "I have never felt better about our chances. I sincerely believe this is the best team we've had since I've been here. This is by the far the most balanced team offensively, and with our defense improved with guys like Neil Smith, we have a better chance to win now than in any of those other years we went to the Super Bowl."

Over the past few seasons Elway has watched Steve Young of the San Francisco

A MAN OF DESTINY

**but the legendary
quarterback insists
the best is still ahead
for the Broncos**

By RICK WEINBERG

passing charts. He also has suffered through the pain and embarrassment of three Super Bowl losses, a decade of mismanagement by previous Broncos coaching regimes, and a jolting playoff defeat last season to the Jacksonville Jaguars inside his kingdom, Mile High Stadium—a defeat, as it turns out, that could be the best thing that ever happened to Elway and the Broncos organization.

As Elway sits behind a mountain of beef, rice, fries, and salad in the cafeteria at the Broncos' training facility, there is childlike excitement and heart-stirring passion in his voice. He's entering his 15th season with the Broncos, and this well could be the best team he's been associated with. Not so long ago, Elway and almost everyone around him talked about how his chances of winning a Super Bowl were vanishing. Today, given the way he feels physically and the way coach Mike Shanahan has altered the offense to fully take advantage of Elway's skills, and with the motiva-

49ers and Brett Favre of the Green Bay Packers suffer the emotional pain of losing in the NFC title game one year, only to know the ecstasy of clutching the Super Bowl championship trophy next to their hearts the next. This, he hopes, is his time, his moment in history. If it is—if this is the season of destiny for Elway and the Broncos—the 14 years of anguish and pain will have been well worth it.

"I obviously wish I would've won a Super Bowl before, but maybe this is the way it was supposed to be," Elway says, setting aside a forkful of rice as he carefully chooses his words. "Maybe this is the way it was planned: to suffer through the Super Bowl and playoff losses, to have Mike Shanahan leave and go to a world champion like the 49ers and see how it's done, then bring that over here to help us. Maybe this is how the script is written. I certainly hope so. All I know is that if this is really our year, if this is the year we win it all, I'll appreciate it more than anyone