

can ever imagine. I'll guarantee you that."

**INSIDE SPORTS:** How devastated were you after the Broncos' shocking loss to Jacksonville?

**JOHN ELWAY:** Pretty devastated. It was definitely a heartbreaking moment. But it didn't take me too long to get over it because I told myself, "If we can't beat Jacksonville, we don't deserve to be in the Super Bowl." The best team always wins the Super Bowl—or at least 99% of the time—so my feeling was that if we couldn't beat Jacksonville, we weren't the best team, period.

**IS:** Did you take that loss harder than most? There were reports that you weren't seen or heard from for weeks afterward.

**JE:** Well, I took it hard, but let's just say I

the best team, that does not happen to us.

**IS:** Was that loss as difficult or more difficult than the Super Bowl defeats?

**JE:** No. The Super Bowl is the ultimate win or the ultimate loss. Losing the Super Bowl is like going from the second-best team in the league to feeling like you're the *worst* team in the league. Plus, by losing to Jacksonville, we didn't get nearly the scrutiny that we would have had we lost another Super Bowl.

**IS:** Is it possible that losing to Jacksonville could be the best thing to have happened? Green Bay proved to be unbeatable, and the way your defense was exposed by Jacksonville prompted your team's management to improve the defense during the offseason.

**JE:** It's definitely possible that it could've

to Jacksonville before we go on to the next level.

Mentally, I feel we benefited from that loss and that we're ready to take our game to new heights this year. See, Mike Shanahan's been through it before—he was with the 49ers those two years they lost to Dallas and then went on to beat them and win the Super Bowl—and that's what he told us after the Jaguars game: It seems like all great teams have to overcome obstacles, and when they do they reach that next level. Maybe this is the plan for us.

**IS:** So you believe in teams of destiny?

**JE:** In a sense, yeah. The last few Super Bowl champions, Green Bay and San Francisco in particular, seemed like teams of destiny. But destiny alone can't take you to a Super Bowl—you have to have the players, the coaches, the system, the work ethic, the execution, the commitment, *and* get some breaks along the way. Green Bay and San Francisco had all that. I'm hoping we're the team of destiny this time because we have all the qualities of a great football team. And we've suffered the pain, too. We've gone through some painful times, just like Green Bay and San Francisco did.

**IS:** Do you find it ironic that where your chances of winning a Super Bowl once seemed to be running out, they now seem better than ever?

**JE:** Absolutely. What's more ironic is that the salary cap had something to do with it. The salary cap, believe it or not, has made us better and put us on the same level with everyone else. The salary cap has essentially evened everybody out: Now the team that doesn't necessarily spend the most money can win. Before the cap, you had Dallas and San Francisco outspending everyone and winning the Super Bowl. Now, with a spending limit, some of the most important factors are your organization and management of the cap.

**IS:** How do you feel about some of the reinforcements on defense, particularly Neil Smith?

**JE:** He may be the free-agent pickup of the year. I thought it was a great move, a move we had to make. We desperately needed to do something defensively to get a little better. Management did that.

**IS:** Actually, *you* did it. Didn't you restructure your contract, allowing the Broncos to save \$3.1 million against the cap so they could sign Smith?

**JE:** Yeah, I did, but hey, that's all part of it. The organization has been very loyal to me, and I owe it to them to be loyal to



ALLEN KEEB/ESP

*"The loss was heartbreaking, but if we couldn't beat Jacksonville, we didn't deserve the Super Bowl."*

never thought about suicide. My second year in the league we went 13-3 and lost to the Steelers in the first round of the playoffs. That was a devastating loss, and this one to Jacksonville is in the same category. I didn't want to keep on rehashing it, so I sort of went away, undercover.

What disappointed me most is the *way* we lost. We were way up and then didn't take advantage of the opportunity to put the game way out of reach. But hey, the Jaguars did a great job. They scored the last six times they had the ball. You've got to give them a lot of credit. But again, I look at the situation this way: If we were

been the best thing to happen to us. I certainly hope so. We've talked about it in those terms, using that loss to our advantage. We'll use it as a lesson and apply it to this season. We're under the belief that you have to go through tough times and overcome certain obstacles to reach the ultimate goal, to reach the next level.

Look at the last few Super Bowl winners: Green Bay lost in the NFC title game to Dallas before they went on to win the Super Bowl; San Francisco lost to Dallas twice in the NFC title game before beating them and going on to win the Super Bowl. So maybe we had to absorb a loss like that