

Dear Mr. Manning ...

Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning's character sets him apart from so many of his peers.

I am not a sports reporter, not an NFL analyst, not a former player.

I've never studied film, and I've not catalogued all the best and worst moments in football history.

I know the game of football well, though I still can't figure out why you can challenge a first-down spot but not a pass interference call.

What I have done is played some seriously rugged flag football games, donned blue and orange every Sunday from August to January for the past 43 years, sat through some unbelievably frigid games at Mile High (once while seven months pregnant), and cheered for the Denver Broncos since before I can remember ... even during the heart-crushing games.

I even named my beloved black lab after John Mobley (who I still believe is responsible for saving the Broncos' victory in Super Bowl XXXII against the Packers).

And, most proudly, I am a mom of two little boys who adore their No. 18 jerseys and can't wait to find out "how Peyton Manning's team did" every Monday morning.

So I am undeniably biased.

And it is because of my bias — and lack of NFL analysis experience — that makes me far more qualified to talk about your legacy than any of those analysts, former players, coaches and commentators. They operate in a world where urgency dictates everything, and controversy and sensationalism make the headlines.

No, I am more qualified because I am a mom.

I actually understand — on the most basic level — what legacy truly means.

Legacy is something handed down that matters. It is something that matters to young players and athletes and kids looking for mentors to help them find their way.

You don't hand down Super Bowl trophies. You don't hand down NFL MVP titles or franchise records. And you don't hand down touchdowns, statistics or win-loss records.

You hand down an example of work ethic, of courage to come back after a career-threatening injury, of humility in victory and graciousness in defeat, and of perspective on one's own accomplishments. That legacy matters, and that's why yours is untarnished, even — and especially — after last Sunday's Super Bowl XLVIII loss.

It matters that you're professional in the way you talk to reporters.

It matters that you give credit to others — coaches, teammates, mentors.

It matters that you don't give up in a bad game and keep fighting, no matter the odds.

It matters that you take time to write notes to fans and sign autographs — even after crushing defeats.

It matters that you know the difference between being embarrassed by your team's performance and just not being the best team on the field that day.

And it matters that you meticulously prepare to play the game ... and encourage everyone around you to do the same.

I doubt you take stock in what those analysts say about your legacy (no doubt a trait your father has bestowed upon you and your brothers), but I want you to know that this mom of two young boys (who already recognize you're different from the others) believes your legacy has never been stronger.

And I'm confident thousands of others agree with me.

Whether you win another game, your accomplishments in football are nothing short of remarkable — alongside many other outstanding players. But it's your character that sets you apart from so many of your predecessors and peers.

And that's a legacy that matters.

Laurie Lattimore-Volkmann is a journalism professor, blogger, mom, and a Broncos fan.