

# The Bo Nix Injury: Quantifying the Damage

Bo Nix broke his ankle on the second-to-last play of Denver's overtime win against Buffalo on January 18, 2026. The Broncos advanced to the AFC Championship. They also lost their starting quarterback.

How much does this actually matter? I used three independent methods to find out: historical precedent from playoff QB injuries, FiveThirtyEight's ELO-based VALUE metric, and Vegas betting lines. All three land in the same place.

**-181**

Modeled Elo Penalty

**12%**

Denver W SB% (modeled)

↓ -18.3% vs Latest Model

**-240**

Vegas implied Elo Penalty

**8.3%**

Denver W SB% (Vegas)

↓ -13.0% vs Look-Ahead Line

## THE BACKUP PROBLEM

Jarrett Stidham hasn't thrown a regular season pass since January 7, 2024. He'll be the first QB to start a conference championship without a regular season pass that year since Roger Staubach in 1972. That's not company you want to keep for this reason.

Bo Nix vs Jarrett Stidham: Career Numbers

STATISTIC	BO NIX (2025)	STIDHAM (CAREER)
Games Played	18	20
Starts	18	4
Pass Yards	4,210	1,422
Pass TD	28	8
Interceptions	12	8
Rush Yards	385	101
Rush TD	5	0
Record as Starter	13-5	1-3
Last Reg Season Pass	Jan 5, 2026	Jan 7, 2024

Stidham's only win as a starter came against a 5-12 Chargers team resting starters.

## HISTORICAL PRECEDENT

Playoff QB injuries are rare. When they happen, outcomes depend on whether the backup had game reps that season. The backups who won conference championships or Super Bowls after an injury (Hostetler in 1991, Foles in 2018) had started multiple games before the playoffs began. Backups without starts that season have uniformly failed.

Playoff QB Injuries → Backup Starts (Since 1970)

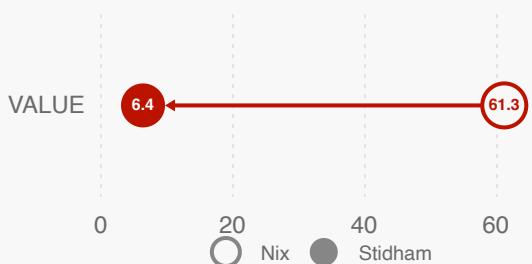
YEAR	TEAM	INJURED STARTER	BACKUP	STARTS (SEASON)	GAME	RESULT
2026	Denver	Bo Nix (ankle)	Jarrett Stidham	0	AFC Championship	TBD
2023	San Francisco	Brock Purdy (elbow)	Josh Johnson	0	NFC Championship	Lost 31-7
2018	Philadelphia	Carson Wentz (ACL)	Nick Foles	3	All 3 playoff games	Won Super Bowl
2001	New England	Tom Brady (ankle)	Drew Bledsoe	2	AFC Championship	Won (Brady played SB)
1991	NY Giants	Phil Simms (foot)	Jeff Hostetler	2	All 3 playoff games	Won Super Bowl
1972	Dallas	Craig Morton (shoulder)	Roger Staubach	0	NFC Championship	Lost 26-3

The 2023 49ers are the cautionary tale. Purdy's elbow injury in the NFC Championship forced Josh Johnson into action. Like Stidham, Johnson had zero starts that season. San Francisco lost 31-7 to Philadelphia. The game wasn't competitive.

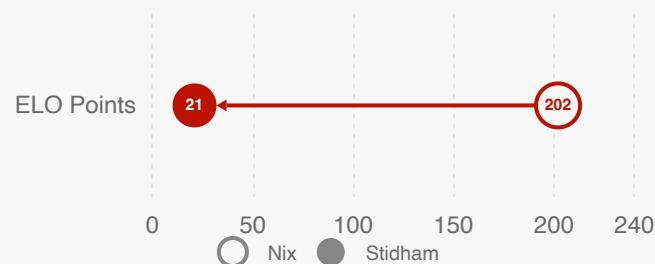
## THE ELO MODEL

FiveThirtyEight's QB VALUE formula converts box score stats into a single number measuring contribution above replacement. Multiply VALUE by 3.3 to get ELO points. This gives us an objective way to measure how much Denver's rating should drop. While my model is not an exact replica of 538, the methodology is directionally correct and useful as a data point.

VALUE per Game



ELO Contribution



Nix's VALUE of 61.3 per game translates to 202 ELO points. Stidham's career VALUE of 6.4 translates to just 21 ELO points. The gap is 181 points. For context, the Rodgers-to-Hundley drop in 2017 was 172 ELO points and produced a 3-6 record. Stidham's VALUE is less than half of Hundley's 14.

**Formula:**  $\text{VALUE} = -2.2 \times \text{Att} + 3.7 \times \text{Cmp} + \text{Yds}/5 + 11.3 \times \text{TD} - 14.1 \times \text{INT} - 8 \times \text{Sacks} - 1.1 \times \text{RushAtt} + 0.6 \times \text{RushYds} + 15.9 \times \text{RushTD}$

## VEGAS VALIDATION

Before Nix's injury, Denver was a 1.5-point favorite at home against New England. After the injury, the line moved to New England -5.5. That's a 7-point swing, one of the largest injury-driven line moves in playoff history. The NFC line didn't move at all. Seattle remains a 2.5-point favorite over the Rams.

Using the formula **Spread = (Home ELO - Away ELO + 48) / 25**, the line implies Denver's ELO dropped by **240 points**.

Model vs Vegas: Conference Championship & Super Bowl

TEAM	CURRENT ELO	CONF CHAMP LINE	CONF WIN%	SB% (W/ NIX)	SB% (-181 ELO)	VEGAS SB%
Seattle Seahawks	1790	-2.5 vs LAR	61%	35.7%	37.0%	40.8%
Denver Broncos	1581	+5.5 vs NE	39%	30.3%	12.0%	8.3%
LA Rams	1758	+2.5 @ SEA	39%	20.0%	24.0%	32.3%
New England	1708	-5.5 @ DEN	61%	14.1%	27.0%	28.2%

The model with the 181-point penalty gives Denver a 12% chance to win the Super Bowl. Vegas implies 8.3%. Both agree this is bad. Vegas is slightly more bearish, possibly reflecting practice reports or concern about Stidham's limited experience.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

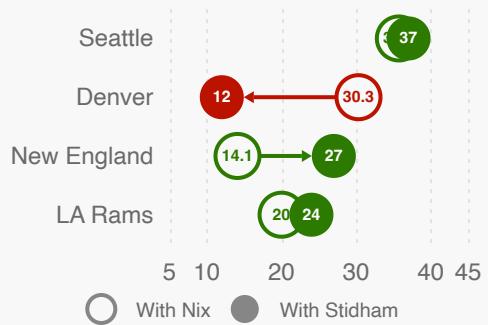
Three methods, same conclusion. Bo Nix's injury is devastating.

**Historical precedent:** Backups without regular season starts that year have uniformly failed in conference championships. The only backups who won (Hostetler, Foles) had game reps before the playoffs.

**The ELO model:** A penalty of 181 points drops Denver from the 2nd-best remaining team to the 4th-best. AFC Championship win probability falls from 64% to 39%.

**Vegas:** Implies a 240-point penalty and prices Denver at just 8.3% to win the Super Bowl.

SB% Change: Pre vs Post Nix Injury



Denver's defense can keep games close. They held the Bills to just one touchdown in regulation during the divisional round. But Stidham has to execute against Drake Maye and a Patriots offense that just dismantled Houston's top-ranked defense. His last meaningful snaps came over a year ago.

The numbers say this is a long shot. The history says it's worse.

**Sources:** Pro-Football-Reference (player stats), FiveThirtyEight (VALUE methodology), DraftKings/Vegas Insider (betting lines), mdsbox ELO model (team ratings). Analysis date: January 19, 2026.