

One question before jumping on the Broncos bandwagon. Do you trust the man (Vance Joseph) driving this bus?

By Mark Kiszla
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Here's the best reason to believe the Broncos will beat the Seattle:

Does coach Vance Joseph really have any other choice?

There are no must-win games in Week 1 of the NFL season, unless you're lucky to still be employed as head coach of the Broncos. This is a must-win game for Joseph.

He desperately needs to prove his disastrous rookie season was all the fault of unsuitable quarterback Trevor Siemian, lousy offensive coordinator Mike McCoy and that messy firehose from which Joseph drank.

"It's a big job, and it takes time to digest it all. Obviously, in my second year, I'm more comfortable with all of it: Having a quarterback that I feel good about and having a better offense line and those things, because players play. It's a players' game, and I'm a coach and I don't play," said Joseph, comparing himself to the untested NFL coach who prepared to lead the Broncos on the field for their opening game of 2017. "It definitely feels better my second time around."

So fire up the Broncos bandwagon. Let's start rolling down the road to the AFC West championship. But do you really feel confident about the driver of this bus? Joseph dropped 11 games in 2017 by an average of 14.7 points.

Not to beat a dead horse, but something was rotten in Dove Valley last year. The Broncos stunk. When looking back at a last-place finish and everything that went wrong, both personally and as a team, linebacker Shane Ray said: "I'm sick to my stomach."

We know the feeling, brother. Broncos Country is still recovering from a chronic case of the orange-and-blue flu.

What's more, the queasy feeling lingers that perhaps Joseph doesn't know what he's doing. Then again, maybe adding a nearly 35-year-old cornerback with a lengthy history of off-the-field trouble is what a 5-11 team that struggled living up to the high standards set by franchise owner Pat Bowlen needs. For better or worse, Adam "Pacman" Jones will reflect on Joseph's judgment as a leader of men.

If you want to cut Joseph slack for inheriting a mess so big it made Gary Kubiak quit, that's fair. But it's also reasonable to think 18 months is long enough to establish how Joseph wants to operate his own business.

“I’m in a good place. Our team is in a good place right now,” he said. “So I’m looking forward to Sunday.”

With the signing of Case Keenum, an adult has been put in charge at quarterback. In Bill Musgrave, the team is blessed with an offensive coordinator working for the benefit of his players rather than his ego.

In first-round draft pick Bradley Chubb, second-rounder Courtland Sutton and third-rounder Royce Freeman, the Broncos have a rookie class so stellar it will make everyone forget John Elway is the same general manager who selected Paxton Lynch (first round, 2016), Montee Ball (second round, 2013) and Carlos Henderson (third round, 2017).

The Broncos have upgraded their talent from a 53-man roster that finished 5-11 a year ago. Joseph seems less like an accidental tourist on the sideline and more like a coach comfortable in his own skin and confident speaking his mind.

Is a return to the playoffs more than wishful thinking? Yes. But, truth be told, Denver probably finds itself in the pack of NFL teams that can go 10-6 if everything goes right and 6-10 if everything goes wrong. What will make the difference? The luck of a football’s bounce. The health of key players (especially Chris Harris). And the soundness of Denver’s coaching.

“We’ve put in the work,” Joseph said, “and, obviously, we’re judged on Sundays.”

No NFL team has ever been mathematically eliminated by losing its opening game. But the lone way Joseph can prove he’s a coach who has grown and changed for the better? Win.

Joseph has two choices: 1) Beat the Seahawks on Sunday, or 2) Buy an asbestos suit before Monday, when a hot seat would certainly be waiting for him at Broncos headquarters.

QB Case Keenum to make Broncos debut against familiar foe in Seahawks

By Kyle Fredrickson
Denver Post
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Case Keenum enters the 2018 NFL season with a long list of “firsts” under his belt.

His first big contract. His first franchise quarterback label. His first season starting in Denver. And, come Sunday afternoon at Broncos Stadium at Mile High, a first impression for all of Broncos Country against the Seattle Seahawks.

But dive a bit deeper. In another light, Keenum has done all this before, for better or for worse.

Keenum’s lengthy path to Denver — Texans (2012-14), Rams (2015-16) and Vikings (2017) — included one previous start on Week 1: Rams at 49ers (2016). With the Rams’ first-overall quarterback draft pick, Jared Goff, still developing, Keenum led L.A. out of the tunnel and finished on the wrong end of a rout. San Francisco rolled, 28-0, as Keenum completed less than 50 percent of his passes and tossed two interceptions.

Some might consider the Seahawks a chance for Week 1 redemption. Keenum keeps a different perspective. Different team. New challenges.

“I don’t know if that’s a box I’d like to check. That’s not something I’ve thought about before — winning an opener,” Keenum said. “Obviously, you want to start fast, you want to start the season right being at home. ... There’s a lot of reasons to play well and to win. The first game, with it being a season opener, I guess you can add it to the firsts.”

Familiarity might also play a role Sunday, though, taking further consideration into Keenum’s past as he has faced Seattle in three previous games with the Rams. Keenum beat the Seahawks as a starter in 2015 and 2016 with a combined 60 percent completion percentage, 342 yards through the air and one touchdown. Later in 2016, Keenum attempted only nine passes in reserve during a loss at Seattle.

However, much has changed since the Seahawks last hoisted the Lombardi Trophy after the 2013 season. As many as nine new defensive starters will be featured against the Broncos, and most notably, Seattle will play without Pro Bowl defensive backs Richard Sherman (released and signed with the 49ers) and Kam Chancellor (retired). Fellow all-pro Seahawks safety Earl Thomas ended his offseason holdout Wednesday, but it is unclear if he will play Sunday. Seattle’s D is also under the direction of first-year coordinator Ken Norton Jr.

“There is some experience (against Seattle) that helps,” Keenum said. “They’re a similar defense, but they’re a lot different too. ... It’s a new challenge, it’s a different offense that I’m in and it’s a different mind-set going in.”

Added coach Vance Joseph: “That defense is more of a culture than it is a certain player. They play hard and they play fast. ... As I watch the tape this year, it’s different names and numbers, but it’s the same personalities. It’s Seattle. It looks like Seattle.”

The winning formula Sunday doesn’t require Keenum to be the star. In fact, Joseph prefers Keenum doesn’t.

“Just manage the game for us. That’s the quarterback’s job. We want Case to manage the game and to use his weapons,” Joseph said. “The quarterback’s best friend is running the football and having an efficient pass game to keep the third downs manageable. I want Case to be Case. I don’t want him to be anything special. Just be our quarterback, be a great leader, take care of the football — that’s his job.”

Keenum carries the weight of huge expectations after his surprise heroics — 12 wins, 3,547 yards passing, 22 touchdowns and an NFC championship game berth — for Minnesota. It’s what teammates and coaches reference most when discussing their confidence in Keenum this season. But the sixth-year quarterback prefers to downplay his role in breaking the Broncos’ two-year playoff drought.

Keenum, whether it’s Week 1 or Week 16, keeps the same focus.

“We all want to win. I want to win especially bad, more than a lot of things,” Keenum said. “But I have only so much of me that I can give. Staying within myself, not doing too much, I’ve got a talented, talented offense in there, a talented offensive line, running backs, receivers and tight ends that can make plays for me. I can give them a chance, trust them, let them make plays. If it’s not there, hold onto the ball, take a sack, throw it away and let our defense — we’ve got a great defense ...

“Let them make some plays, too.”

Broncos Four Downs: Storylines for Week 1

By Ryan O'Halloran
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FIRST DOWN

LIGHTER IS BETTER

Inside linebacker Brandon Marshall's preseason started in ominous fashion, missing two tackles against Minnesota.

But playing at a new weight (in the 227-230 range), Marshall feels he has adjusted entering Sunday's opener against Seattle.

"I'm starting to feel good," Marshall said. "That first game (against Minnesota) was kind of weird. I didn't play well against the Vikings. But I started playing better in the second and third games."

Marshall dropped the weight during the offseason so he could play better in coverage. The flip side of that is he must play with expert technique in the run game.

"My body wasn't used to it," he said. "I haven't been this light since my freshman and sophomore years in college (at Nevada). I'm finally starting to get used to it. I'm excited about me playing in space and excited to see what this year has in store for me."

SECOND DOWN

ROSTER BREAKDOWN

Good stuff from the industry website Over The Cap this week in its roster breakdowns. Its research revealed 31.7 percent of the rosters are undrafted free agents. First-round picks make up 14.3 percent, followed by 10.7 percent for the second round and 10.4 percent for Round 3.

The Broncos' breakdown (we used the player's entry into the league, not how they were acquired by the Broncos):

Round 1: Seven players (13.2 percent).

Round 2: Four players (7.5 percent).

Round 3: Seven players (13.2 percent).

Round 4: Five players (9.4 percent).

Round 5: Five players (9.4 percent).

Round 6: Five players (9.4 percent).

Round 7: One player (1.9 percent).

Undrafted: Nineteen players (35.8 percent).

THIRD DOWN

NEW STOP FOR MARSHALL

Seattle is receiver Brandon Marshall's sixth team, including his third club in as many years. He started his career with four seasons (two Pro Bowls) for the Broncos, including years of 1,325, 1,265 and 1,120 yards receiving.

Marshall has posted 1,000-yard seasons with the Broncos, Miami (two), Chicago (two) and the Jets (one). He enters Sunday with 959 catches for 12,215 yards and 82 touchdowns.

Injuries to Doug Baldwin and Tyler Lockett allowed Marshall to create a rhythm with quarterback Russell Wilson in the preseason.

"He came in and was a little banged up so it was a little slower process," Seahawks coach Pete Carroll said. "But by the time he got back through the middle of the preseason, we had seen enough — we could see the things he could do. He has a real uniqueness about him because he's a big guy (6-foot-5), has great experience and savvy. We just needed to see him get back into shape, maintain it and come back day after day and he's done that. We're really looking forward to his contribution."

FOURTH DOWN

EXCITED TO BE BACK

Broncos rookie linebacker Alexander Johnson was training on the team's practice field Saturday when he said a member of the team's front office told him he had made the team.

General manager John Elway said the Broncos kept Johnson because they believed he would be claimed on waivers. He is one of six inside linebackers on roster. If Johnson is active Sunday, it will be his first meaningful game since November 2014 before he was suspended by Tennessee following a rape accusation. He was acquitted in July.

"Pretty great feeling," he said of making the team.

Johnson played in the final three preseason games. He said there was one big adjustment to be back on the field.

"Having a helmet and pads on that first week — my neck and shoulders, man, I was tired," he said. "My body was saying, 'I haven't done this in a long time.' But I think I stayed ready. I'm just excited to be back."

Broncos preview 2018: Assistant coach Tom McMahon brings new fire to special teams

By Kyle Fredrickson
Denver Post
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One of the most important additions to the 2018 Broncos goes by the nickname “Midge.” Quick, find it in the dictionary. Midge: A small two-winged fly, or informally, a small person.

Hardly a daunting moniker for an NFL assistant coach.

That’s until you meet Tom McMahon.

Denver’s first-year special team’s coach, while not an insect, can admit to being vertically challenged. It’s why McMahon’s former Colts’ players gave him the nickname. But what the sub-6-foot longtime NFL assistant lacks in height, he makes up for in knowledge and fire. Listen to the voices of coaches at Broncos’ practice. Few rise above McMahon’s decibel.

“He’s not afraid to let you hear it on the field,” kicker Brandon McManus.

And, McMahon’s goals are far from midge-sized.

“We’re going to be great on special teams,” he said soon after taking the job. “And, hopefully we’ll win the Super Bowl.”

For that to happen, though, the Broncos’ must first show drastic improvement on special teams from a year ago in their quest to go from worst-to-first. Last season was nothing short of a disaster. There were six Isaiah McKenzie muffed punts (two lost), a career-high eight missed field goals by McManus, two punts blocked off the foot of Riley Dixon, (since released), a kickoff returned for a touchdown by the Patriots, a punt returned for a touchdown by the Chargers and, in a pair of games, two Denver special teams penalties on the same play. You get the idea.

Head coach Vance Joseph fired then special teams coordinator Brock Olivo after the season and brought in McMahon, available from Indianapolis after a staff shakeup there.

“That hire was huge. With those guys, they’re rarely, rarely available,” Joseph told The Denver Post. “I think Tom McMahon is going to bring a teaching progression and comfort to our (special) teams, which we didn’t have in the past. He’s a great teacher, he’s a great motivator and he’s also a great game-day management guy so selfishly, that will help me on game day to figure out things.”

Among McMahon’s top priorities in the team’s quest to go from worst to first?

1. Return game clarity. McMahon gave McKenzie a fresh start on punts and he returned one for a score in the preseason opener against Minnesota. But McKenzie has lacked consistency. “I told him, ‘Go out and get reps and everything will be all right,’ ” McMahon said. The Broncos also added veteran cornerback/punt return man Adam Jones in the last week of preseason to contend for the role. On kickoff

returns, Denver has turned primarily to Phillip Lindsay and River Cracraft. But neither player has a firm grasp on the role. "It's going to be interesting to see who pops and who separates themselves," McMahon said.

2. King's comfort. The Broncos added Raiders' punter Marquette King in the offseason. He brings two things: A booming leg (third punter in NFL history to average at least 40 yards net punting over his first five seasons) and a very unusual perspective ("I actually stopped thinking about football," he said during minicamp). Denver can't afford distractions, but has a real weapon on its hands.

3. Adapt to kickoff rule changes. The preseason was a nice test-run for NFL teams to adjust to new kickoff rules — no running start for the coverage team, no wedge blocks for the return team, mandated alignment changes for both — but nothing compares to a live-game setting when it matters most. Some Broncos' players suggested return men have now gained an advantage.

"The thing that we've got right now going in our room is great communication," McMahon said. "That's our culture. They all talk. I make everybody talk and you guys know the more someone talks, the more you believe in that person around the room. They're really coming together. It's just communicate, and when we come out on the field, execute."

Denver Broncos Week 1 opponent: Seattle Seahawks scouting report

By Ryan O'Halloran
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Seattle Seahawks scouting report

Coach: Pete Carroll (ninth year with Seahawks — 79-48-1 regular season, 9-5 postseason; 13th year overall — 112-79-1 regular season, 10-7 postseason).

Last year's record: 9-7 (2nd in NFC West, no playoffs).

OFFENSE

Play caller: Coordinator Brian Schottenheimer.

Analysis:

- Schottenheimer, 44, is in his first year, replacing Darrell Bevell. Now in his 19th NFL season, Schottenheimer's first three professional posts were working for his father, Marty. The Seahawks are his third coordinator job (Jets 2006-11, St. Louis 2012-14). He was Indianapolis' quarterback coach the past two years.
- The Seahawks were 15th in yards (330.4) and 11th in scoring last year (22.9). In addition to Schottenheimer, veteran OL coach Mike Solari was hired to replace Tom Cable.
- In the starters' final preseason game (at Minnesota), the Seahawks ran only two personnel groups (3WR-1RB-1TE on 25 snaps and 2WR-1RB-2TE on 10 snaps).
- Two of the few wrinkles Seattle showed on tape was lining three WR to one side and running to the opposite edge and trying to get the RB split out wide against a LB.
- QB Russell Wilson is a terrific player. He is 65-30-1 in the regular season and 8-4 in the playoffs (1-1 in the Super Bowl). An accurate passer (64.0 career completion percentage), his 34 touchdown passes last year led the league. Smart with the football (56 interceptions), Wilson is lethal when the play breaks down. He retreats and moves back or side to side, allowing for his receivers to get open.
- RB Rashaad Penny was drafted in Round 1, the hope being he can spark a run game that has finished outside the top 20 in three consecutive years. The nation's leading rusher last year for San Diego State (2,248 yards), Penny missed most of the preseason with a broken finger that required surgery but should be available Sunday.
- RB Chris Carson (broken leg last October) is expected to start. C.J. Prosise is the third-down back.
- WR Doug Baldwin (knee) and WR Tyler Lockett (toe) were nicked up last month, but could have played last week. Baldwin has four consecutive years of at least 66 catches and 825 yards. He led the league with 14 TD catches in 2015.
- WR Brandon Marshall, the former Bronco, is with his sixth team. He could start ahead of Lockett.
- TE Nick Vannett and rookie TE Will Dissly will be on the field in two-TE personnel. They big have cleats to fill after Jimmy Graham (57 catches, 10 TDs in 2017) signed with Green Bay. Vannett was also used as a fullback in the preseason.

- The Seahawks hope they have finally found the right mix on the offensive line. The starting group is LT Duane Brown, LG Ethan Pocic, C Justin Britt, RG D.J. Fluker and RT Germain Ifedi. All are former first- and second-round draft picks (Brown by Houston, Fluker by the Chargers). Fluker is nursing a hamstring injury. If he can't play, J.T. Sweezy will start. He missed all of the preseason with a high-ankle sprain.

DEFENSE

Play caller: Coordinator Ken Norton, Jr.

Analysis:

- Norton, 51, returns to the Seahawks' staff after three years as Oakland's coordinator. Norton coached for Carroll at USC and Seattle (five years apiece). In January, he was hired as San Francisco's assistant head coach but re-joined the Seahawks a week later, replacing Kris Richard (now Dallas' DB coach).
- Seattle was 11th in total defense (323.2) and tied for 13th in scoring (20.8) last year.
- When the starters played at Minnesota two weeks ago, the Seahawks rushed four on 23 Kirk Cousins drop-backs and five players on six drop-backs.
- Their go-to pressure against the Vikings was a cornerback blitzing from the slot.
- The starting DL are Tom Johnson and Jarran Reed at DT, Clinton Jefferson or rookie Rasheem Green at "big" DE and Frank Clark at weak-side DE (called the "Leo" in Carroll's system).
- Veteran DE Dion Jordan has not practiced since December (stress fracture in leg) but Carroll has not ruled him out for Sunday.
- Clark led the team with nine sacks last year and can win matchups from stand-up and three-point stances.
- Weak-side LB K.J. Wright (knee surgery) won't play and will be replaced by rookie Shaquem Griffin, the former UCF star whose left hand was amputated at age 4. Griffin can run sideline to sideline, but is still learning the Seahawks' scheme.
- MLB Bobby Wagner never leaves the field (507 tackles in 88 games) and has three All-Pro nods. He knows how to move laterally to avoid second-level blocks.
- Journeyman and former first-round pick Barkevious Mingo is the strong-side LB and a pass-rushing threat if used in nickel situations. In base defense, he will usually line up on the ball.
- The secondary has been revamped. Gone are CB Richard Sherman (San Francisco), SS Kam Chancellor (retire) and FS Earl Thomas (holding out). Shaquill Griffin (Shaquem's twin brother) debuted last year opposite Sherman and showed promise. He can run with all receivers. He is expected to reduce his penalty total (seven last year). Against Minnesota, he stayed on the left side. Opposite Griffin is CB Dontae Johnson, a 16-game starter for the 49ers last year. Justin Coleman is the nickel.
- Bradley McDougald (45 career starts) will start at SS and Tedric Thompson at FS (none).

SPECIAL TEAMS

Coordinator: Brian Schneider.

Analysis:

- Schneider, 47, is an original Carroll staff member with the Seahawks. He attended Pomona High in Arvada. At Colorado State, he played linebacker (1990-93) and started his coaching career there (1994-2002). ... Big changes on the Seahawks' special teams this preseason.
- K Sebastian Janikowski, a 17-year Raider who missed last year because of injury, beat out Jason Myers for the kicking job. He has 414 career field goals (10th all time). Last year, Seattle kickers were 21 of 29 on field goals. Janikowski also handles kickoffs.
- P Michael Dickson won a camp competition against Jon Ryan, who was with Seattle for 10 years. Dickson, a fifth-round pick, grew up in Australia before attending Texas. He averaged 43.6 yards net on 17 preseason punts and six inside the 20-yard line.
- Last year, the Seahawks were fifth on kick returns (23.3-yard average). Lockett had a 25.6-yard average and a 99-yard TD. He signed a three-year, \$31.8 million contract extension last month but was also slowed by a toe injury.
- Lockett averaged 6.6 yards on 36 punt returns last year.

Broncos notes: There are mobile QBs and there is Russell Wilson

By Mike Klis
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There are many mobile quarterbacks in the NFL these days.

Alex Smith and Case Keenum can move around. Cam Newton is a fast-moving tank. Blake Bortles can take off. Carson Wentz, Marcus Mariota, Tyrod Taylor and Dak Prescott can all beat a defense with their legs.

But while those guys can move, Seattle's Russell Wilson can dart, spin, juke, elude and motor.

"He's the best," said Broncos' head coach Vance Joseph. "He is the best movement quarterback in this entire league. Last year he had the most 10+-yard runs as the quarterback, and that kills you—especially on third downs."

As much as any game, the Broncos need outside linebacker Von Miller to lead the way for rookie Bradley Chubb and the rest of the past rushers Sunday in the season opener at Broncos Stadium at Mile High.

"We have to have a great, great rush plan to contain this guy," Joseph said. "Obviously, he's going to escape from time to time, so our coverage guys have to cover twice. When the ball's snapped, they have to cover the concept, and when he starts scrambling, they have to cover the scramble plays. That makes it difficult, especially on third down. All of the big plays go through Russel, and most of them are outside of the pocket."

I knew Wilson was good. Then I looked up his numbers. He has started all 96 regular-seasons games for Seattle since entered the league in 2012. His average season: 11-5, 27 touchdowns, 9 interceptions, 3,696 yards and 546 rushing yards.

Goodness. I didn't know he was that good.

Fond Rockies memories

Wilson was once a Rockies farmhand, a second baseman at the low Class A levels. He didn't hit much but he didn't give the sport much chance before he went back to playing quarterback.

He still remembers his ball days, though.

"Yeah, I do," he said in a conference call with the Denver media. "Obviously, right now I'm currently with the Yankees, but I think for me, getting drafted to the Colorado Rockies, I remember flying out to Denver. I had my black suit on, I had my Rockies hat with the purple brim, I had my purple tie, I had my white shirt on. I will never forget it."

"My dad had just passed away. I got drafted June 8, 2010 and the next day my dad passed away. Honestly, to be quite frank, Denver has a lot of meaning and a lot of sentimental value to me. I love that place. I think about how the Colorado Rockies, and Denver just in general, treated me when I came out there. I don't think too many people necessarily knew who I was at the moment ... I'll never forget the likes of Todd Helton and just different people. I remember Troy Tulowitzki—he's not there anymore—how they brought me into the locker room and just embraced me. I'll never forget those memories—guys like Carlos Gonzalez and people like that. I'm very, very grateful for the Colorado Rockies organization and what they did for me. They gave me a chance and allowed me to just take my mind off of my dad, who was my best friend. I'll never forget that. Also, some of the guys I got to play with. I remember being in the batting cage all the time, early in the mornings with (Nolan) Arenado—early, early in the mornings and just all the hard work. I'll never forget those moments."

Of course, Earl Thomas returned

The Broncos can't shake Earl Thomas. Starting with the year before he was drafted.

It was a swap of draft picks, not players, but replace the draft number with the player taken and it's among the worst trades in Broncos history.

In Josh McDaniels' first draft of 2009, he was in such a hurry to rebuild the Broncos that he gave up his first-round pick from the following year's draft of 2010, so he could get Seattle's second-round pick right then and there.

With the No. 37 overall selection in the second round of the 2009 draft the Broncos took cornerback Alphonso Smith. A year later, the Broncos gave up on Smith and traded him to Detroit for backup tight end Dan Gronkowski. Smith was out of the league after his fourth season.

The Broncos' first-round pick in 2010 turned out to be No. 14 overall. Only the Seahawks had it and they used it to select Earl Thomas, who is already a six-time Pro Bowl safety, a three-time All Pro and on pace to become a Pro Football Hall of Famer.

Ugh. Here it is eight years later, and Thomas is still trying to haunt the Broncos. Just in time for the season opener Sunday at Broncos Stadium at Mile High, Thomas ended his five-month contract holdout Tuesday and returned to the team.

Seattle head coach Pete Carroll said he'd wait to see what kind of shape Thomas is in before determining whether he would play Sunday.

But the Broncos might as well count on it.

"He's one of the best I've ever played against," said Keenum, the Broncos' starting quarterback. "I've played him a bunch, watched him a bunch and he does some things on film that nobody else can do. He's a guy that you just have to know where he's at, at all times. He can play his assignment from almost anywhere on the field. Knowing where he's at, he's a heck of a player and I guarantee you, he can step in and be right where he wants to be."

Bronco Bits

Joseph said that in a normal week (game on Sunday), he would have his team practice in pads on Thursdays. Teams can only have one padded practice per week through the first 11 weeks, then three more in the final six weeks. ...

The Broncos are – get this – 17-1 in home openers this century. Their only first-game home loss was in 2011 to Oakland. ...

Joseph on if he finds it easier as a head coach now that he's in his second season: "It's a lot easier. It's a big job and it takes time to digest it all. Obviously, in my second year, I'm more comfortable with all of it—having a quarterback that I feel good about and having a better offensive line and those things, because players play. It's a players' game and I'm a coach and I don't play. But, it definitely feels better my second time around."

McKenzie endures emotional swing, but beats alternative

By Mike Klis
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This year's Chad Mustard Award goes to Isaiah McKenzie.

First, the Broncos' second-year returner and receiver was told he had been cut.

"It was very tough," McKenzie said. "I didn't know what to do at the moment. I went home, thought about it. I'd been working so hard returning the ball, learning the plays at receiver and then when it came to an end like that ... I was just hoping and praying somebody would pick me up or come back here."

Mustard is a former Broncos tight end who was cut six times and re-signed five times in the 2006-08 seasons. In recent years, Broncos' defensive tackle Kyle Peko went through a similar yo-yo effect.

It became McKenzie this year starting when his agent Pat Dye Jr. called and said the Broncos wanted him back on the practice squad. So, McKenzie went to Broncos' headquarters late Sunday morning to sign his practice squad papers.

"When I came here they said, 'Oh, you're up this week,'" McKenzie said. "I hadn't signed my practice squad contract yet. So, I called my agent and he said, 'OK, you're on the 53-man roster now.' It was a very weird 24 hours but I'm here now."

It's unclear whether McKenzie will be activated on the 46-man game roster Sunday against Seattle as the Broncos have five receivers and punt returner Adam Jones ahead of him.

Will Broncos' Royce Freeman be an every-down back and fantasy threat?

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

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The Denver Broncos are always talking about finding a running back to be “the guy.” Carry the rock, and keep carrying it.

Yet their last two 1,000-yard rushers were C.J. Anderson (2017) and Knowshon Moreno (2013). Anderson now plays for the Carolina Panthers, and Moreno hasn’t played in an NFL game since 2014 with the Miami Dolphins.

The Broncos, in fact, haven’t had a running back top 250 carries or an average of a rather pedestrian 15.63 per game since Reuben Droughns had 275 in 2004. As a result, the football world, real or fantasy, might cast a skeptical eye on rookie starter Royce Freeman in the season opener against the Seattle Seahawks.

“He can carry the load from a physical standpoint and a mental standpoint,” Broncos coach Vance Joseph said. “ ... That’s what he showed at Oregon. He was their main guy. He had a lot of work, and he stayed healthy through the work. That’s an issue for most young backs. Can they carry the load for 16 weeks? I think with his background, his body type, he should be able to carry the load for 16 weeks.”

When the Broncos trimmed their roster to 53 players this weekend, they kept three running backs in addition to fullback Andy Janovich, and two of them -- Freeman and Phillip Lindsay. -- were rookies. That was one fewer than a year ago, and it speaks to what Freeman presents.

Broncos president of football operations/general manager John Elway hinted as much during the draft in April, when he said “it’s been a while” since the team had a back like the 6-foot, 229-pound Freeman, who ran 4.5 in the 40-yard dash in his pre-draft workouts. While some in the league took a pause at Freeman’s college workload before the draft -- 947 carries in four seasons at Oregon to go with 79 career receptions -- the Broncos saw it as a career compliment.

“I think they thought I had to be on the field, in the lineup, every week to have those carries,” Freeman said. “... That when my number was called, I was there.”

Freeman led the team with three rushing touchdowns in the preseason -- he didn’t play in the preseason finale -- and flashed both elusiveness and grind-it-out efficiency. It was clear two weeks into training camp, as the Broncos consistently rotated him with the starters, that he was on track to be the starter.

Now, it remains to be seen what that means in a Broncos offense, with Bill Musgrave calling plays. Musgrave called plays for the final six games last season after Mike McCoy was fired, but the Broncos came down the stretch in a hodge-podge of what they had been doing with McCoy and things Musgrave wanted to do.

This year's playbook is Musgrave's, and while Joseph has made it no secret he wants a team that can pound the ball, the Broncos' biggest offseason investment came at quarterback, with the signing of Case Keenum.

"We're always looking for that balance," Musgrave said during camp. "We're going to do things we think we need to do to finish drives with touchdowns."

For Freeman, that doesn't yet mean he is the every-down back. Joseph said Monday, even as he described why Freeman would be the starter, that Devontae Booker will get plenty of considerations as the third-down back and Lindsay will have a role each week.

"... Royce is our leading runner, but on third downs you'll probably see Booker, and obviously having a package for Phillip is going to be important to each game plan we have each week," Joseph said.

Joseph added that Freeman has been "really good" in pass protection situations both in practice and in preseason games, so Freeman could see at least some three-down work along the way. Ultimately, the Broncos seem inclined to give him as much work as he can handle, and if they play with a lead more than in last season's 5-11 finish, there will be plenty of work to go around.

History or not, Freeman said if the Broncos want to hand him the ball, he'll take it, over and over again.

"Like I said, if my number is called, I'll be ready, as many times as they think they should call it," Freeman said.

John Elway Is Looking for Himself

By Robert Klemko

MMQB

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He's 58. He tore an ACL in high school and never got it repaired, so his left leg bows slightly. He had a knee replaced in 2007. He stands in the shadow of the Broncos practice facility and looks out at the first-rounder, Paxton Lynch, whose biggest contribution to Broncos lore at the moment is the dark brown leather scuff on a white-painted wall in the indoor practice facility, from the time he winged a football at the wall rather than throw into coverage in a goal line scenario ... on fourth down. Soon the first-rounder will be demoted, then released. Next to Lynch is the undrafted veteran of six teams, here on a two-year prove-it deal. Case Keenum will do for now.

The hardest part—the torture of it all—is that he knows exactly what he's looking for. He just doesn't know how or where to find it. He sees it when he looks in the mirror and reaches back in time, to the stubborn young man who wouldn't take no for an answer. He won Super Bowls in the NFL as a player and then again as a general manager. But pro football has little patience, and no one can understand why one of the greatest quarterbacks above ground, given ample resources to identify and draft a franchise quarterback, hasn't been able to do so.

"With the QB position there's as much that you have to have on the inside as the outside," John Elway says. "You can see the physical traits, but you don't know how [players are] going to handle it mentally when they get to this level. The world's going to cave in on you, no matter who you are. How are you going to battle back when that time comes? And that's the hardest thing to read."

He told his close friend, John Lynch, to jump at the opportunity to move from a post-football career in broadcasting to a general manager position with the 49ers. Lynch wasn't sure he could hack it, but his friend told him not to think twice. Without a doubt, Johnny. You know people, you know how to lead, and you've been successful at everything you've ever done. Just like him.

Lynch took the job, but he soon realized there was one thing he couldn't do: By his own admission, John Lynch can't scout safeties. He went to nine Pro Bowls at the position, picked off 26 passes and made 736 tackles, and now his standards are too high. "I look at a safety and I say, 'I'm jaded on this one. Help me out,'" Lynch says. "People think you should know that position so well, but you hold it to a higher standard that can be unrealistic." He may have a hard time scouting his own position, but as luck would have it Lynch found his quarterback of the future in the middle of his first season; last fall the Patriots accepted a second-round pick from the Niners for Jimmy Garoppolo, who came on strong in the final five games, completing 67.4% of his passes with 1,560 yards passing, seven touchdowns and five interceptions in five victories.

Maybe Lynch can't scout safeties, but that doesn't mean Elway can't scout quarterbacks. At least, he hopes not. His friends aren't so sure. Some of the guys who huddled around him on NFL Sundays when he and Denver were winning Super Bowls have theories as to why the man who led the team on the field for 16 seasons hasn't been able to find a young QB. "It's simple," says Terrell Davis, the Broncos' Hall of Fame running back. "There aren't a lot of John Elways out there."

“We look at Michael Jordan and say he should be able to find and identify the best basketball players in the world, but it doesn’t work that way. The problem is, it’s hard for John to see a QB and the kid can’t do what he can do. Because he thinks everybody should be able to do it.”

Maybe that’s true, but let’s stick to facts. Seven years after he convinced Peyton Manning to come to Denver, and three years after Manning and a historically outstanding defense brought the city its third Super Bowl title, the Broncos are looking again. In the meantime, two seasons have essentially been lost.

John Elway is looking for an arm, and more importantly, the brain to go with it. He’s looking for that thing none of us can adequately define, so we use that nebulous cliché: it. He’s looking for himself, the hardest thing to find. He’s taken two big swings in the draft. The 2012 second-rounder, Brock Osweiler, is on his fifth team now. Lynch, the 2016 first-rounder, earned four starts before the team released him over Labor Day weekend.

“I’d imagine that eats at him a bit,” Lynch says. “You’re talking about one of the most gifted players of all time, at any position. You ever seen the movie *The Natural*? That was him. A sure-fire thing. That’s what people were saying about John.

“I’m sure he remains resolute and determined that he’ll find that guy.”

He’s 41. He’s three years retired and resolved to embark on a career in football management after selling his six car dealerships. (“They offered to pay me too much money for them, so I took the deal,” Elway says.) Broncos coach Mike Shanahan invites his former quarterback to sit in on the scouting meetings in advance of the 2001 NFL draft. Elway’s father, Jack, a longtime college coach and former Broncos scout, also joins the meetings. For John and his father, it’s their first opportunity to talk football in a global sense. They’d always had conversations about specific Broncos personnel and other players around the league, but they never discussed what they were looking for in the ideal college prospect.

John would have been a guest in the Broncos war room during that draft, but his father passed away six days earlier. Jack had few hobbies in the two years he spent out the game, and he died at the age of 69 having spent the last month talking football with his son.

In that 2001 draft, Denver chose cornerback Will Middlebrooks with the 24th pick. Armed with a quarterback, Brian Griese, who once backed up Elway and was coming off his first Pro Bowl, Shanahan was set on shoring up a pass defense that had just given up more yards than any other team in the league. But Jack Elway was in love with another prospect. A former colleague, Joe Tiller, had coached a six-foot passer out of Purdue and gave Jack the rundown. The kid’s lack of size was to be overlooked, Tiller said. He could play, and he led. Jack was sold, and put his stamp on the player eventually chosen with the first pick in the second round by the San Diego Chargers.

Days before his death, Jack Elway demonstrated an eye for quarterback talent that his son would aspire to almost two decades later. Jack had wanted Drew Brees. It wasn’t the arm that sold him, and it certainly wasn’t the size. There was nothing that really wowed you on film, but there was something intangible there. John didn’t necessarily see it, but his dad did.

The word on Elway the GM, among those who wonder about his history with young quarterbacks, goes like this: He’s willing to make concessions on intangibles if the kid has an arm. If a prospect can throw a football 50 yards from his knees on a dime, they say, Elway believes he and his accomplished staff of

quarterbacking minds can teach him how to be a pro. They can break bad habits, because they're just that good.

"One of the things about ego is you'll look at a guy who isn't developed, maybe doesn't have the best work ethic, but he's super gifted," says former Broncos offensive lineman and current Fox Sports analyst Mark Schlereth, "and you think, Under my expert tutelage I'll get this guy right, and we'll have a diamond in the rough. My experience has been, that rarely happens. If a guy doesn't have great football character off the bat, it's very hard to develop that in him. If he's got the type of character to take a day off and play video games instead of studying, and he'll do that, there's nothing you can do."

The public record seems to back that up. Both Osweiler and Lynch are 6'7", the tallest quarterbacks in their respective drafts. Even the quarterback who led Elway's Arena League team to a championship, John Dutton, was 6'4", 225. All three were bigger than Elway, and Osweiler and Lynch had arm strength and mobility reminiscent of Elway when he was the No. 1 overall pick of the 1983 draft. (Meanwhile, among the prospects the Broncos could have taken since 2011, given their draft position each year: Russell Wilson, Kirk Cousins, Derek Carr, Jimmy Garoppolo and Dak Prescott.)

But critics might be surprised to find out that before Elway knew what he had in Osweiler, and before he drafted Lynch, he had a future starter in mind, and it came in the shape and skill set of a Drew Brees. In 2015, when Case Keenum was backing up Nick Foles with the Rams, Elway offered either a fifth- or sixth-round pick (he can't recall which) for the backup. The Rams declined, then benched Foles and elevated Keenum to starter that November. Three seasons later Keenum hit the open market after leading the Vikings to a conference title game, and Elway made him a Bronco.

But just because Elway has long pined for Keenum doesn't make skeptics wrong. It might be that he sees Keenum as merely a stopgap or stepping stone to the next rookie who can touch a basketball rim standing and throw a football to the moon. If that's the case, Elway's not saying. In the end, the only thing that will persuade the critics—and it's always been this way—is winning.

He's 45. His only son, Jack—nicknamed after John's dad—is a quarterback at Cherry Creek High in suburban Denver. Elway is at the helm of the AFL's Colorado Crush. That gives him the opportunity to attend his son's high school games, and that's what he would do for a while—watch. He wanted to let his son have a football experience independent of his direct influence. But he would agonize over the play-calling, and lament the option-heavy offense Jack's coaches were running. At times he was visibly distraught.

Schlereth recalls watching a Cherry Creek game with his former quarterback. "John is sitting there calling out plays and protections and route combinations," Schlereth says. "I'm out there spectating a high school game, and he's out there with great angst watching it, and actually coaching it from the stands. I'm like, settle down dude. That's just the way he's wired. Everything he did, he did it that way."

It was the same way Elway would watch Broncos games years later in a luxury box as GM, ignoring his friends and sweating over the details below. "It's hard for competitive people when they can't control the outcome," Davis says. "When you watch a Broncos game around him, you can see the worry and the concern. I think it eats him up that he can't control what's happening on that field."

No one who knew John was surprised he wound up on the sideline at Jack's high school, because if you know Elway you know a very basic thing about him: He knows what to do with the ball in his hands, and he feels better the closer he stands in proximity to the ball.

At Cherry Creek, he would eventually step in and coach the quarterbacks, in 2007 Jack's senior year. Jack describes it as the best year of his life. His parents had divorced, which meant he saw his dad half as much—until John joined the staff and Jack got to see him every day. "I think it got to a breaking point for him where he was like, okay, I'm coming in here, we're gonna tear it up," Jack says. "And he really cared. He was a great leader for our team. I ended up seeing him daily. It was so fun. We have similar personalities and we butt heads a lot, but football was our main way to connect."

Jack throws for 25 touchdowns as a senior, a jump from his 13 the year before, and earns a scholarship to Arizona State. The hype machine grows louder. He receives a three-star rating from Rivals.com, named the 14th-best player in the state by the recruiting site. He wonders what life would be like if he had others around to help shoulder the expectations. "I was raised in this environment of going to my dad's football games, hearing my dad's name everywhere, seeing my dad's jerseys everywhere, being the only son. I'm sure if I had brothers it would have taken some pressure off. I would have really appreciated a brother. And then I'm playing football, I'm wearing No. 7. I'm in Colorado. I'm at Creek, there's cameras everywhere my first game. And this is all stuff I didn't want. At that point I just wanted to be a guy."

In the spring of 2009, after a redshirt season at Arizona State, Jack decides to quit football. On the way to the coaches' offices, he calls his dad to tell him. "Quitting is not something I take lightly, and I would never have done it if didn't think it was absolutely necessary just for my mental health," Jack says. "Looking back on it, I don't think I would change anything. Would I love to still be playing football? Hell yeah."

But in that moment, Jack is ashamed. He feels as if he's let his father down. John had talked about road-tripping to his college games, tailgating in the parking lot with friends. When he hears the news, John is taken aback. His first question for his son speaks to a lifetime of leading men, and bringing them together. "What about the camaraderie?"

"I didn't understand it at first," Jack says. "As I got older I understood. It's so enriching to your life to have a brotherhood of guys that you know have your back." Jack acknowledges how right his dad was then, but that's not the point. John was skipping steps. He was envisioning the brotherhood Jack would build with his teammates, and envisioning his own brotherhood—his Broncos teammates and friends—joining him on the road to watch Jack play football. Meanwhile Jack was cringing in anticipation of the moment in class when the professor would read his birth name for attendance, and students would search the room for John Elway.

The elder John loved to lead, and he couldn't imagine anyone giving up the opportunity to do so. His son was too ashamed to discuss that mounting internal pressure with someone who never seemed to acknowledge that sort of thing. So Jack didn't reach out until the last minute, and John couldn't see it coming. Maybe it was the proximity that blinded him. The quarterback in question was his flesh and blood. Or maybe he didn't understand a very basic human response to pressure: to wilt.

He's 54. The Broncos are in the Super Bowl. He's trying to do something no one has ever done: win NFL championships as a quarterback and a general manager. Just two years after Pat Bowlen hired him in 2011 to take the helm after the brief and disastrous Josh McDaniels era, Elway has recruited Peyton Manning to Denver, and they've made it to the final stage, Super Bowl 48. Then it all falls apart. Elway watches a

young, hyperathletic Seahawks defense run wild against his team. In Richard Sherman, Kam Chancellor and Earl Thomas, he sees what the Broncos need to become. He wants athletes.

In scouting, Elway put less emphasis on experience and football character and more on ability. While his draft picks have largely struck out (Julius Thomas and Von Miller are the only Elway draft picks to make a Pro Bowl), he strikes gold with a handful of defensive free agents. In a 2014 spending spree, in the wake of that Super Bowl loss, John signs veteran edge rusher DeMarcus Ware, hard-hitting safety TJ Ward and cornerback Aqib Talib, the moody, mercurial, modern football mercenary.

In 2015 the Broncos return to the Super Bowl, and win it this time. Manning retires, but the defensive pieces are all there, waiting for Elway to bring in the next stud QB and go get another ring. Instead they get Trevor Siemian, a seventh-rounder out of Northwestern, and Paxton Lynch. (Elway says he also discussed a trade with the 49ers for Colin Kaepernick in 2016, but a deal never materialized.) There's a 9-7 season, and then Gary Kubiak steps down as coach, and Vance Joseph steps in, and the two quarterbacks continue to struggle. Talib is at the forefront of a rift between a world-class defense and a stagnant offense. Something important had been lost, something Elway had taken for granted.

"Everybody's got to have hope, and the quarterback gives your team hope," Elway says. "You have to know that if we're all having a bad day, that guy can keep you in the game and give you an opportunity to win. I think we lost hope. And when you lose hope, you get down and you keep making mistakes."

Could John Elway have forgotten just how important his old job was, how it lifted people? Perhaps he could scarcely think about just how much he was lifting when he was doing the lifting, or just how far his team would fall if he dropped them.

Resolved to move forward with Joseph in 2018, Elway empowers his second-year head coach, both in staff decisions and in the draft. A handful of longtime assistants are let go and replaced for the most part with coaches from Joseph's extended network. Joseph and Elway go about choosing the kind of players who wouldn't lose hope. All but one of Denver's 10 draft selections in 2018 were team captains at their respective schools. First-rounder Bradley Chubb was a two-time captain at N.C. State, and second-rounder Courtland Sutton was a three-time captain at SMU.

For three years, Manning had been a transformational presence, keeping the focus and keeping the faith by virtue of his performance and experience, in much the same way Elway had as a player. Now the Broncos have finally transitioned in earnest to life after Peyton.

"We're still trying to be athletic and have good speed," John says, "but when you're in a losing skid you need more leadership in the locker room, to pull you out of a dive. I didn't feel we had that, so one of the main goals was to find more of that, so we can prevent a skid like that from happening. We wanted to get that maturity level where we felt like [the young players] could help us early. Last year proved to me that our locker room needed to be a little bit stronger."

The re-evaluation mirrored an evolution in Elway's personal life, friends and family say. He's always competing, always taking his work home with him, but on summer trips to the Elway house on Lake Coeur d'Alene in Idaho over the last few years, John started opening up. "The change I see in him is how he communicates with us," Jack says. "It feels like a different guy. He's become extremely patient, and I think it's because he's had to deal with so much stress. He's more open."

Jack doesn't know what changed his dad, but something did. It could have been becoming a grandfather. Jack's older sisters had their first children in 2014, and John's smartphone case is a collage of pictures of grandkids. It's that, Jack says, and it's the losing. It's watching a quarterback in orange and blue botch throws and miss reads, and watching a season go down the drain. "It has to be humbling for him to watch the losing, because he's not out there contributing," Jack says. "He knows if he was 30 years younger he could go down there and get it done. It's probably incredibly frustrating for him to watch guys miss reads and not make the right throws. I think he's been forced to be patient and understanding, and that extends to the rest of his life. It's a different type of competitiveness when you have to watch."

In 2010, when Elway's friends and family threw him a 50th birthday party at the Soiled Dove Underground in Denver, it had been 14 months since Jack quit the team at Arizona State. Father and son hadn't talked about it since. Loath to discuss emotions, they each tied a few on and found themselves admitting things to one another. Jack told his father he felt he'd let him down. He hadn't, John said. His dad loved him no matter what he chose to be. It just would have been nice if they'd discussed it sooner than the day he planned to quit. "He kind of consulted me on the way there, and I don't think he wanted to know what I thought," John says now. "That's the only thing I was disappointed in. I can understand how big those expectations must have felt for him."

He's 58. He's looking back on his past, and out at the practice field, to his football's team's future. He pauses. Understand that this game and its vast contents mean something more to him than to 99.99% of us who follow and watch. When John Elway talks about football, he's talking about friends who become family, about leadership, about walking on air (or helicoptering through it). He's talking about mastery. And he's coming to terms with the fact that only a handful of people see the game through that lens.

His son had the arm, though not the steel. The same could be said for the first-round pick Elway is about to cut. That's the stuff that's tough to scout, especially if you've never left home without it.

"Football's not for everybody," he says.

Jake Plummer remembers the “big learning curve” in the NFL. Now he wants to spare others with ReadyList PRO.

By Nicki Jhabvala
The Athletic
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You know what Jake Plummer remembers from his first NFL start? Being tricked.

It was Oct. 26, 1997 and Plummer, a second-round pick by the Cardinals, was given a brutal welcome to the NFL by the Oilers. He threw for 195 yards, was sacked six times and fumbled once as the Cardinals were shellacked, 41-14. He told reporters after that he’d “remember this day the rest of my life” and for 21 years he has.

Every bitter detail.

“Coming out of college, I knew about defenses, but I didn’t know them to the depth that you had to know them in the league,” he told The Athletic. “My first game, live-action start, I threw four interceptions because the Oilers showed a blitz on the left and then they blitzed from the right. My eyes were on the left. They tricked me. Then I realized, ‘Oh, OK. I see what’s going on here.’”

“It was a big learning curve for me.”

Plummer went on to play 10 NFL seasons, including four with the Broncos. When he was traded away in 2007, he left Denver with the third-most total offensive yards (12,301) in Broncos history, the fifth-most passing yards (11,631) and the second-best winning percentage as a quarterback (.722, 39-15) behind only Peyton Manning.

But that steep learning curve at the start of his career stuck with him, and the difficulty in relearning the playbook season after season never seemed to fade. He also remembers the difficult transition experienced by some of his teammates, like Chad Frieauf.

Once the top NCAA Division II player in the nation, Frieauf graduated from Colorado School of Mines with a degree in engineering and a record as the school’s all-time passing leader. He signed with the Broncos as a college free agent in 2005, just as Plummer was about to embark on a career year and lead Denver to its first postseason victory since Super Bowl XXXIII.

Frieauf knew how to study. He knew more than most in the NFL. But the Broncos’ playbook gave him fits. Where Plummer received a rough welcoming from the Oilers, Frieauf’s welcome to Denver was realizing he was the only one of five quarterbacks on the roster at the time who didn’t have at least a year in the offense.

Plummer and a fax machine would help him through.

“I faxed my mom a sheet of play calls and between 11 p.m. and midnight she’d read the plays over the phone and I would practice saying it back to her because that’s really where I struggled,” said Frieauf, who bounced to nine different NFL teams in seven years. “When I got done playing, I was like, ‘There’s

got to be a better way to do it.' Jake and I study the same way. We'd draw all the plays on paper and you have to double-check each play and it just wasn't very efficient."

So last year, he and Plummer teamed up again to try to spare future generations of the same steep curve. Together they founded ReadyList PRO. It's a web-based platform for creating digital playbooks and teaching schemes and concepts, using audio and visual aids.

Instead of simply providing a digital replica of playbooks, ReadyList makes them interactive and uses the uploaded plays to create quizzes. Players at every offensive position can be tested on formations, route choices, protections, run plays and personnel, among other things, and the results are shared with coaches to potentially tailor meetings or signal a need for extra practice. Players and coaches can also communicate directly through the app.

"When football was over for me (each year), I kinda said, 'Ah, I'm done,' " Plummer said. "I'd come back into every season in the offseason and have to almost have to relearn. After Day One installing, days two, three, four and five were always still hazy in my mind. I'd have to relearn them. I didn't have that photographic memory, so every year I spent tons of time in the playbook, just over and over, drawing up plays, going through my routes, my progressions, the defenses. And a tool like this, I can't tell you how much time it would have saved."

ReadyList has already signed the University of Louisville and the University of Arizona as college clients, and about 10 high schools use their youth application. But the first person approached about the idea of ReadyList is now their first NFL client.

Before Plummer and Friehauf made the rounds at the NFL scouting combine and coaching conferences to pitch their idea, they sold it on Dolphins' coach Adam Gase, back when he was the Broncos' offensive coordinator. Gase brought ReadyList to Miami this year.

Of course, Plummer and Friehauf hope the Dolphins are just the first of all 32 teams to use ReadyList, which why they took it to Mike Shanahan too.

Shanahan is on the company's board of advisors, offering not only a coach's perspective on teaching playbooks, but also providing a ready-made network of both established and up-and-coming coaches in the league.

"For us, it was to bounce it off, from my standpoint, one of the greatest coaches ever in football," Plummer said. "You look at the (coaching) tree he started not only Denver, but the tree in Washington. That was one of the youngest staffs in the history of the NFL and now look at where all those guys are."

The playbook for Shanahan's and Gary Kubiak's West Coast system in Denver was thick and the playcalls notoriously long. But the NFL is a copycat league and, although each system differs slightly, there are always similarities.

"That's why we developed this, because it's all terms. What they're teaching in Tennessee is the same thing they're teaching over in L.A., but it's just tweaked a little bit and called something else," Plummer said. "Every team you go to, every offensive coordinator you come across there's some carry over, but otherwise you're just relearning terms and distances and depths and protections and who's hot and this

and that. It's time consuming. A lot of guys who think they know a lot about the game learn that they don't once they go into coaching."

Although ReadyList has tried to differentiate itself with his testing tool, it certainly isn't the first platform for digital playbooks.

For six seasons, the Broncos have used PlayerLync, a tablet-based solution for distributing and managing digital playbooks and film. PlayerLync incorporates many of the same features as ReadyList, and allows teams to update players' tablets immediately and strip them clean in a moment's notice.

Plummer and Friehauf approached the Broncos about ReadyList last year, but that was when Vance Joseph and his new offensive staff with Mike McCoy had just taken over and had yet to finalize their playbook.

In the future, Friehauf says, ReadyList's testing features could be used in conjunction with PlayerLync. But the goal now is simply about efficiency, for players and coaches.

"Out of the gate here, coaches are pretty routine-oriented and in the meantime they can continue what they're doing and add ReadyList as a value to get the most out of their investment — their investment in the coaches and players," Friehauf said.

And as Plummer can attest, the more a player knows, the less he can be tricked.

'Just manage the game for us': Broncos seek balance, ball security in Case Keenum's first start

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

Sept. 6, 2018

Case Keenum burst out of the tunnel through a cloud of smoke as blasts of fire erupted behind him and cheers from some 91,000 filled the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

L.A. hadn't seen anything like this in more than two decades so Keenum embraced his moment as the Rams starter against the Seahawks.

"I made sure as I'm running out just to savor that moment," Keenum told reporters after the Rams' 9-3 victory. "I'm going to remember it forever. It might not have been the prettiest game, but it was a lot of fun."

Sunday, Keenum will experience a new kind of feeling, as he bursts through the tunnel at Broncos Stadium and emerges as not just a starter, one keeping the seat warm for a first-round pick, but the starter for a Denver team seeking a resurgence.

"A lot has been different," said Keenum, who will be the 20th quarterback in Broncos history to start a season opener. "I know what it takes and I know what my schedule is to be a starter, what I want to be put into it. I think what's been cool is I've been able to do that during the offseason too. I haven't had an offseason really. In L.A., I was (the starter), but I was kind of the placeholder for Jared (Goff) until he was ready."

Playing quarterback is a pressure-packed task in Denver, not simply because of the past but also the present. The Broncos lost two years searching for Peyton Manning's successor, and the man calling the shots is only the greatest player in team history: John Elway. The coaching staff and front office feature a total of four former quarterbacks, all of whom wore a Broncos jersey at some point, and the comparisons are inescapable.

The big-game spotlight is hardly new to Keenum, who went 12-4 as a starter for the Vikings and peaked with the Minnesota Miracle in the playoffs.

But the expectation for Keenum in Denver is not to try to be the next Manning or Elway.

"Just manage the game for us," coach Vance Joseph said. "That's the quarterback's job. We want Case to manage the game and use his weapons. The quarterback's best friend is running the football and having an efficient pass game and keeping the third downs manageable. I want Case to be Case. I don't want him to be anything special. Just be our quarterback, be a great leader, take care of the football, and that's his job."

Ball security was among the Broncos' tragic flaws the last two years, as they cycled between three different starting quarterbacks, two head coaches, three offensive coordinators and multiple system changes.

In 2017, the Broncos had the second-most turnovers in the league (34), trailing only the winless Cleveland Browns. They averaged a mere 18.1 points per game to rank 27th in the league, had the worst red-zone offense (39.6 percent), averaged the fifth-fewest yards per play (4.82) and watched their defense suffer as a result.

The struggles of the offense allowed opponents to jump to early leads and avoid the need to pass against Denver's self-titled No Fly Zone secondary. Although the Broncos' defense still ranked among the top five in net yards (290), passing yards (200.6) and rushing yards (89.4) allowed per game, its impact was reduced, and replaced by growing frustration within the locker room.

Their cornerbacks' targets in coverage plummeted, along with their red-zone defense (58.5 percent) that finished the year ranked 23rd.

Sunday will be the first real glimpse of the Keenum-led offense, but evidence of stability appeared in training camp and preseason.

"I'm so excited because they're putting up points and they're putting teams in situations where we have the ability to rush and our back end can do what they do best in coverage," linebacker Shane Ray said. "I'm looking forward to it. I think this is the best O-line we've had since I've been here, Case is doing a hell of a job, we brought in more receivers, you got Royce (Freeman) and Book (Devontae Booker) — I mean, we have all the tools to be a successful offense. And the better they are, the more we can shut teams down, because it leaves teams one-dimensional, they have to pass. Teams don't want to pass against us."

When the NFL's legal tampering period for free agency began in March, the Broncos bypassed the Kirk Cousins frenzy and went after Keenum, reaching an agreement on a two-year contract within hours. The thinking was multifaceted; his season in Minnesota gave Denver reason to believe he could replicate his performance, if not exceed it, if given the right pieces around him.

Even more significant for the Broncos' rebuild: His seven interceptions last year. The Broncos' trio of quarterbacks combined for 22 interceptions last year, and the self-inflicted wounds often sealed opponents' victories after three quarters.

Toeing the line of conservative play vs. smart play is a balancing act for quarterbacks. But for Keenum, it's an internal challenge he has welcomed and probably the biggest reason he'll run out of the tunnel on Sunday as The Guy in Denver.

"It's kind of the name of the game — the name of my game," he said. "We all want to win. I want to win, especially. Bad. More than a lot of things. Making sure that you're not doing too much ... stay within myself. Not try to do too much. I've got a talented, talented offense in there — a talented offensive line, running backs, receivers and tight ends that can make plays for me. I can give them a chance, trust them, let them make plays for me, and if it's not there, hold onto the ball, take a sack, throw it away and let our defense — we got a great defense too. So let them make some plays too."

Broncos Case Keenum embraces pressure of regular-season debut

By Troy Renck
KMGH
Sept. 6, 2018

Watching Case Keenum zip passes into the flat or air drop them to a receiver in front of the safety, it's hard to believe this remains uncharted territory.

No Broncos player enters the season with more pressure than the new quarterback. To begin his new life successfully, Keenum, at age 30, must do something he's never done before: start and win a season opener.

"You want to play well at home," Keenum said to my question. "It's something, I guess, to add to the list (of things he has accomplished over the last year). I really, really want to win. But you have to balance that with not trying to do too much."

The odd statistic reflects his gypsy existence. Keenum bounced from the Houston Texans to the Los Angeles Rams to the Minnesota Vikings before cashing in with a two-year, \$25-million deal with the Broncos. Only once has Keenum started an opener as he enters his eighth season. It is fair to say it fails to conjure positive vibes.

Starting for the Los Angeles Rams opposite of the San Francisco 49ers on Sept. 12, 2016, Keenum completed 17 of 35 passes with no touchdowns, two interceptions and was sacked twice. Keenum finished the season 4-6 as a starter before first overall pick Jared Goff took over.

All quarterbacks in the Rams stable benefited from coach Jeff Fisher's exit. Keenum landed in Minnesota, starting Week 2 after Sam Bradford's injury, going 12-3 as the Vikings QB1. Nick Foles won Super Bowl MVP honors with Philadelphia and the Rams' Goff ascended to Pro Bowl status.

Keenum, whose new book "Play for More: Trust Beyond What You Can See," has exceeded expectations in his short time in Denver. He began his first regular-season week by being voted an offensive captain, and "it wasn't even close," coach Vance Joseph said. He provides leadership, work ethic and accountability.

"Come on. He's played in big games. He got to within one win of the Super Bowl last year," said Joseph, when asked if the moment was too big for Keenum. "I think he's going to be even better than we've seen."

Yet, the question lingers: Was last season the real Case Keenum or a mirage? His teammates believe, touting Keenum after watching a trio of quarterbacks throw 22 interceptions last season.

"We like him. He shows that he wants it. That's all you want. You want a guy that puts it on the line every day. He's hungry," veteran cornerback Chris Harris Jr. told Denver7. "He's getting comfortable. Playing preseason doesn't get you all the way there. Hopefully we can make it easier for him, starting

really fast, and the running game helps with that. If we can run the ball like we did in the preseason, I think it will make it an easier transition for him."

History sits squarely on the Broncos' side. They have won six straight openers, the longest active streak in the NFL. They are 29-7-1 overall in home openers. Being in Denver provides confidence, allows for an offense to use all of its audibles, which becomes crucial on third down.

The Seahawks present a formidable opponent. Few NFC teams have been better over the last five years. However, Seattle is in transition. The Legion of Boom has been replaced by the Legion of Whom? Even with safety Earl Thomas reporting on Wednesday, the group features a new look. It's ripe for Keenum and the passing game to produce a healthy start.

"It's a big thing when you have one quarterback you can go with," veteran Demaryius Thomas said. "I think we will look to establish the run, but there's more to the passing game that you haven't seen."

Rocky mountain respect

Colorado holds a special place in Seattle quarterback Russell Wilson's heart. A day after his dad died, the Rockies drafted Wilson. They saw him as a future big league second baseman. Former minor league teammates like Corey Dickerson told me they believed Wilson would reach his goal.

"No one worked harder," Dickerson said.

In the end, football interrupted his journey. Wilson landed with the Seahawks -- the Broncos hosted him for a visit but drafted Brock Osweiler -- and he has been a star ever since. Wilson looks back fondly on his baseball experience.

"To be quite frank, Denver has a lot of meaning and sentimental value to me, honestly. I love that place. How the Rockies treated me when I was out there was tremendous," Wilson said. "I remember talking with Todd Helton, Troy Tulowitzki and Carlos Gonzalez, and how they brought me into their locker room and embraced me. I am very grateful for what the Rockies did for me. It allowed for me to briefly take my mind off what happened. My dad was my best friend. I will never forget it."

Wilson, who is now a member of the Yankees organization, spent part of his minor league career hitting in the cages with Nolan Arenado. The third baseman's success doesn't surprise him.

"When I saw him work," Wilson said, "I knew he would be a star."

Footnotes

Thomas said he's preparing as if Seahawks safety Earl Thomas will play. "You have to," Thomas said. ... In talking about outside linebacker Von Miller, Wilson called him one "best ever, a gamechanger". He said Miller is like LeBron James and Kobe Bryant. That he's going to make plays regardless of how you prepare. Miller's 83.5 sacks are the most in the NFL since he entered the league in 2011 ... In case you were wondering, Keenum would need to throw for at least 304 yards to break into the all-time passing yardage mark for a season opener.

Broncos find rhythm, chemistry with Keenum under center

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
Sept. 6, 2018

For the first time since 2014, the Denver Broncos spent their summer without a job-share arrangement at quarterback, something they expect to give them a big boost Sunday when they open against the Seattle Seahawks with Case Keenum under center .

"That's the best thing if you've got one quarterback you can go with," receiver Demaryius Thomas said. "Like, for example, Antonio Brown's been with Ben Roethlisberger since forever. That's why they're so good."

Gary Kubiak spelled Peyton Manning with Brock Osweiler in 2015, and that plan paid off during a special season in which Osweiler stepped up while Manning was sidelined with a bum foot and kept the Broncos' Super Bowl hopes alive until Manning's return.

Protracted quarterback competitions at training camp in 2016 and '17, however, seemed to hinder the team's rhythm and chemistry, two qualities that are so vital in a league where timing is everything.

In 2016, Trevor Siemian beat out veteran Mark Sanchez and rookie Paxton Lynch, and last year Siemian beat out Lynch again but not before the two shared a significant number of snaps with undrafted Kyle Slotter, who wasn't even in the mix for the Broncos' starting job.

Upon signing Keenum to a prove-it two-year free agent deal worth \$36 million in March, general manager John Elway declared Keenum as the Broncos' undisputed starter .

The only question, he said, was who would back him up.

While all the drama in QB-crazed Denver this summer centered around Chad Kelly leapfrogging Lynch, the first-rounder who was ultimately cut , for the backup job, Keenum was getting almost all the work with the No. 1 offense.

Thomas and an energized Emmanuel Sanders appreciated the consistency and both had terrific training camps. Thomas said that chemistry puts the offense way ahead of where it was at this time in the last few seasons.

"We've gotten enough run routes, passing plays in," he said with a smile. "So, it was a good thing."

Having an established starter also paid dividends for the O-line.

"Absolutely, you want one guy back there knowing that's your guy and where he sets up and how he controls the offense," left tackle Garrett Bolles said.

This in many ways marks Keenum's first time being "The Guy."

Keenum led the Minnesota Vikings to the NFC championship game last season after injuries to Sam Bradford and Teddy Bridgewater.

He started the Rams' opener back in 2016 but he would give way later that year to top draft pick Jared Goff before going to Minnesota and having a career year in which he threw for 3,457 yards with 22 touchdowns and seven interceptions.

The Broncos are his fourth team in six NFL seasons after Kubiak gave him his first chance with the Texans as an undrafted free agent out of the University of Houston in 2013.

His Denver debut got a little more daunting Wednesday when Seahawks safety Earl Thomas ended his lengthy holdout in time for the team's trip to Denver even without a new contract.

Although Seattle coach Pete Carroll wouldn't commit to whether Thomas will play in the opener at Denver this weekend, the Broncos have no choice but to prepare for his presence.

"Earl is a special player," Keenum said. "He's one of the best I've ever played against. I've played him a bunch, watched him a bunch and he does some things on film that nobody else can do."

Missing all of the Seahawks' offseason program, training camp and the preseason makes Thomas no less formidable, either, Keenum suggested.

"He's a guy who you just need to know where he is at all times because he can play his assignment from almost anywhere on the field," Keenum said. "So ... I guarantee you he can step in and be right wherever he wants to be."

Thomas is a three-time first-team All-Pro and was the anchor for the Seattle defense that appeared in consecutive Super Bowls, winning the first in a wipeout of the Broncos.

Seattle used Tedric Thompson as its primary free safety during Thomas' holdout.

Regardless of whether it's Thompson or Thomas that they'll be facing Sunday, the Broncos have a healthy respect for Seattle's stingy defense even though it has lost fellow "Legion of Boom" members Kam Chancellor and Richard Sherman.

The Broncos feel better about their offense, too, after Elway infused his roster with talented rookie receivers Courtland Sutton and DaeSean Hamilton, rookie running back Royce Freeman and second-year tight end Jake Butt, who missed last season on IR.

"I've got a lot of respect for 29," Keenum said of Thomas. "But we trust our guys running routes and catching the ball versus anybody out there."

Paxton Lynch isn't alone among Denver Broncos QB draft busts

By Woody Paige
Colorado Springs Gazette
Sept. 6, 2018

Paxton Lynch isn't the Broncos' first, or worst, first-round bust.

At least, Lynch, selected 26th overall in 2016 to presumably follow Peyton Manning, won one game of four as a starter in two seasons – before being unceremoniously dumped on the curb this week.

Tommy Maddox, who was chosen 25th overall in 1992 to ostensibly succeed John Elway someday, lost all four of his starts in two seasons for the Broncos – before being jettisoned.

Lynch may end up as Maddox – becoming a nomadic pro quarterback. Maddox would play for four NFL teams and one team in the XFL (in which he would be named the MVP). Maddox, who was hand-picked by Dan Reeves as an underclassman at UCLA, would have a comeback with the Steelers and started 32 games over five seasons (and usually over former CU QB Kordell Stewart), compiling a 15-16-1 mark.

The oddity of this is: Elway was agitated when Reeves stuck it to him by sticking Maddox on the roster – particularly when one must remember that Elway played another seven years – and won two Super Bowls. The same Elway traded up to draft Lynch and eventually would release Lynch.

The Broncos also dumped two other quarterbacks drafted in the first round by the franchise. And Elway didn't like either. Jay Cutler, taken No. 11 overall in 2006 (after a trade) by Mike Shanahan, actually was the biggest QB bust of all. He would replace Jake Plummer, who was the quarterback for the Broncos in an AFC Championship Game, and busted, winning only 17 of 37 games as a Broncos starter and not reaching the playoffs in his three seasons.

Elway didn't care much at all for Tim Tebow, picked in the first round of the 2010 draft by Josh McDaniels. Tebow barely played in his first year, but took over for Kyle Orton in 2011 and helped get the Broncos into the playoffs and to an overtime victory against the Steelers. He was "supposed" to be the Broncos' starter the following season, but Manning was signed, and a day later, Tebow was traded.

As a matter of record, all four quarterbacks the Broncos have drafted in the first round didn't last long in Denver — three, three, two, two seasons — and had a cumulative sub-.500 record.

The Broncos aren't alone with first-round flops at quarterback. Also, Brock Osweiler was chosen 57th in 2012, and his flame was extinguished twice. Brady Quinn, drafted 22nd by the Browns in 2007, was a dud in Cleveland, didn't play in a game in two seasons with Denver and finished his illustrious career in Kansas City in 2012, the same year Tebow was through in the NFL.

What comes around goes down.

Consider 2006, The Year of the Cutler, to 2016, the Year of the Lynch.

Here are several quarterbacks selected in the top 50 that didn't turn out to be Hall of Fame candidates:

JaMarcus Russell, who heads the list along with Vince Young and Matt Leinart; EJ Manuel and Geno Smith; Jake Locker and Blaine Gabbert; Christian Ponder ; Jimmy Clausen and Pat White; John Beck and Kellen Clemens, and Brandon Weeden, who Elway wanted to draft at one point.

And Robert Griffin III. And Johnny Manziel.

For every Deshaun Watson, 12th overall, there are two more like DeShone Kizer, who was selected 40 picks later in 2017.

What did Tommy Maddox and Paxton Lynch have in common? X's in their names, and both were Busted Broncos' Exes.

Denver Broncos legend Steve Atwater tackles new NFL rules — and deserves spot in Hall of Fame

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
Sept. 6, 2018

Right after Steve Atwater demonstrated a proper tackle by tackling me, causing my palms to sweat, we discussed the tackle. The tackle on “Monday Night Football.” The tackle we’re still talking about 27 years and 354 days later.

It was the tackle where Atwater stood up Christian Okoye straight, as if the Broncos legend had the Chiefs’ 250-pound running back on a list.

“You mean the one from the ‘60s?” Atwater said with a laugh.

NFL rules now prohibit players from lowering their helmet to initiate contact. After he reviewed the YouTube clip, I had to ask: would the Okoye hit be a legal tackle in the NFL in 2018?

“No, no, no,” Atwater said with full conviction. “It wouldn’t. It would be a penalty.”

When it comes to Atwater’s candidacy, there should be a flag thrown on Pro Football Hall of Fame voters. Can you explain how a franchise with a defense nicknamed the “Orange Crush” and eight Super Bowl appearances still has zero defensive players enshrined in the Hall of Fame?

I sure can’t.

Now the NFL is poking an experimental finger at the core of the game: what’s a legal tackle and what’s a 15-yard penalty?

What I sought to learn is how the most intimidating defender in Broncos history would have handled the NFL’s controversial “lowering of the helmet” rule.

“It’s tough, I’ll tell you. We’d find a way. If you have to, you always find a way,” Atwater said. “Everything’s always changing and adapting. I think we would have found a way to tackle without our heads. I know I used my head. I didn’t lower it. But I tried to hit with the top of my head...”

(Atwater took a slow-motion running start to level his dome into the bottom of my face ...)

“... and put your head right there, on the chin. Not now, though. Can’t do that. Got to adjust.”

The smart defenders, as Broncos safety Justin Simmons has said, will adjust. And here’s a hunch all the player and media angst over a flag-filled preseason amounts to much ado about nothing, if officiating crews revert to the traditional rules when the Falcons and Eagles open the regular season Thursday night.

“Let’s just wait and see how they call it,” Atwater said.

No one personifies a Denver defense better than No. 27, and the Pro Football Hall of Fame is swirling around Atwater. He made the trip to Canton, Ohio, for the enshrinement ceremony for good friend and fellow safety Brian Dawkins, who played 13 seasons with the Eagles before a few with Denver.

“I’m hoping I get in one day, but that night was about Brian Dawkins. It wasn’t about me at all,” Atwater said. “I was really happy for him. He had a heck of a career, the impact that he had on our players here, Chris Harris and DT (Demaryius Thomas) and those guys. He put something in them to make them work hard and be the best at their position.”

And it was Atwater, along with team president Joe Ellis, who delivered the news to Pat Bowlen when the longtime owner was nominated as a Hall of Fame finalist two weeks ago.

“Steve was one of Pat’s favorite players,” Ellis said. “(He) deserves to be in the Hall of Fame.”

“I had a great relationship with Mr. Bowlen right from the start. I’d be working out and he’d be on the Stepmaster. Just a real personable guy. We could talk to him about anything,” Atwater said. “I was kind of blown away by a man of his stature spending time, talking to the players. I just thought it was cool. I felt like it was unique.

“I couldn’t imagine as many owners would interact with their players as much as he did. Gave me a sense of comfort and made me want to go out there and play even harder. I already had great reasons to play hard. I had great coaches and great teammates. Then you know the guy who is writing the checks really cares about you as a person, it makes you want to dig even deeper.”

Atwater’s omission is proof there’s too much PR and not enough (football) IQ involved in the Hall of Fame process. The reasons for Bowlen’s delayed entry into the Hall of Fame also help to explain, but not justify, Atwater’s wait. They were and are dreadful self-promoters. They take credit like it’s a flu shot, and they didn’t conduct the bulk of their Hall of Fame-worthy careers in Chicago, Dallas or on the east coast. I asked Steve three questions about himself; he deflected all three to someone else — his family, his teammates and, yes, the owner who finally earned a nomination himself, several years after it should’ve happened.

“It’s 100 percent in the hands of the Hall of Fame voters and writers,” Atwater said. “I’ve gotten the chance to meet a lot of those guys. I’m not one to go up and beg the guys for votes. But it’s been interesting to get to know those guys. Whenever it comes up most of the guys say, ‘I vote for you whenever it comes up.’

“I haven’t met one yet that says he hasn’t voted for me. And yet ... I’m still here.”

Eight Pro Bowls, tied for the third-most by an NFL safety. Starting safety on three Super Bowl teams, including a Super Bowl XXXII performance worthy of MVP honors. Five-time all-NFL pick. Member of the 1990s all-decade team. As classy and respected as an athlete can be.

“If I had to wait another 10 years I’d do that to make sure Mr. Bowlen goes in,” Atwater said.

“And I really mean that.”

Steve Atwater should be in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and I really mean that.

Klee with Three: Broncos vs. Seahawks: Russell and the Rockies, Gary Kubiak's influence, Colin Kaepernick's reality check

By Paul Klee
Colorado Springs Gazette
Sept. 6, 2018

Gazette columnist Paul Klee offers three observations before the Broncos host the Seahawks in Week 1:

Russell, the Seahawks muscle

OK, full disclosure: if I'm starting a team there's not a single player I'd take ahead of Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson. Yes, the Colorado Rockies had the right idea. It was the Rockies who drafted Wilson with a fourth-round pick in 2010. And he won't soon forget — for reasons other than baseball. "I had my black suit on. I had my Rockies hat with the purple brim. I had my purple tie, my white shirt on," Wilson said. "My dad had just passed away (from cancer). I got drafted June 8 and the next day my dad passed away. So, honestly, to be quite frank, Denver has a lot of meaning and a lot of sentimental value to me. I love that place." The Yankees now own Wilson's baseball rights. But Wilson owns the Broncos. In two wins against the Broncos he's 42 for 59 with 464 passing yards and four touchdowns. While the Seahawks figure to be down after a long run of being up, there's one reason Seattle opened as only a 1.5-point underdog at Denver: Wilson. No matter the offensive line in front of him or the talent around him, Wilson is the rare quarterback who makes defensive game plans go kaput. And his pro career began right here in Colorado. "I remember being in the batting cages with (Nolan) Arenado," Wilson said. "I knew he was going to be a star, just the way he worked."

Gary Kubiak's fingerprints

No, Ol' Kubes hasn't been arrested. That's Pacman's (other) job. But one glance over the Broncos' 53-man roster proves that some of the most influential fingerprints belong to Kubiak, the team's senior personnel adviser. From the Senior Bowl (where the Broncos coached draft pick DaeSean Hamilton) to new quarterback Case Keenum (whom Kubiak signed out of college), Kubiak's influence can be seen all over this Broncos outfit. And you know what? That's a good thing! This rookie class is deep and smart enough to shape the franchise for the next half-decade. The Bradley Chubb pick made itself. After that? College captains and Kubiak-type guys. The likes of Courtland Sutton (who played his college ball in the Houston area, Kubiak's stomping grounds), Hamilton, Josey Jewell and Isaac Yiadom are players as much as they are athletes. The Broncos are fortunate to have Kubiak back in the fold. It remains to be seen what is his end game — to ultimately succeed John Elway as general manager, or to operate in the shadows as a no-pressure personnel adviser. Shoot, I'd take the second one. If it fails, no one's pointing the blame in your direction. If it succeeds — and I believe it will — local media write nice things about you. Good spot to be.

Earth to NFL players

NFL players would benefit greatly in the realm of public perception if they would take one big step back into reality. Do they not realize the majority of their fans are normal, hard-working folks who are just trying to make ends meet? Two examples just in Week 1 underscored how a chunk of pro athletes are

detached from the real world: Seahawks star Earl Thomas and former quarterback Colin Kaepernick. When Thomas announced he would return to the Seahawks after a preseason-long contract holdout, the All-Pro safety said on Instagram: "I've never let me (sic) teammates, city or fans down as long as I've lived and don't plan on starting this weekend. With that being said, the disrespect has been well noted and will not be forgotten." Welcome to the NFL, where getting paid \$55 million to play a game is being disrespected. Hey, if The Gazette wants to disrespect me by giving me \$55 million, please, disrespect away. Then there's the catchy (it is!) and made-for-social-media Nike advertisement that features Kaepernick: "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." Dig a little deeper, and here's what Time.com reported on Kaepernick's contract with Nike: it "could be worth millions of dollars a year." Must be nice, right? Earth to the NFL: Come back to us! The air is too thin up there! It's blurring your connection to reality! Now I'm off to win the Colorado lottery. Time to sacrifice everything.

LeBron? Kobe? Steph? Russell Wilson says Von Miller compares to other greats

By Zach Pereles
DenverBroncos.com
Sept. 6, 2018

The Seattle Seahawks are well aware of how dangerous the Broncos' edge-rushers are.

Seattle quarterback Russell Wilson's comparisons for Von Miller have combined for seven MVP trophies and 11 championships. But the accolades for that trio come on the hardwood, not the gridiron.

"When you're playing certain guys, when you're playing LeBron James or you're playing guys like Kobe Bryant or Steph Curry, they're going to make good plays," said Wilson on a conference call Wednesday. "He's one of those guys for sure."

For Seahawks head coach Pete Carroll, the toughest part of the task is that's he can't worry about just Miller. Rather, he must game plan against both Miller and Bradley Chubb, who had 10 sacks last year with NC State before being selected with the No. 5 overall pick in this year's NFL Draft.

"You can't get much better," said Carroll of the outside linebacking duo. "You can't get much more athletic. You can't get much more playmaking out of your two edge guys. It's been clear from Von's play for a long time, the great performer that he is and producer, you've got problems whether you have anybody on the other side or not. But Bradley has just done a lot of really good things in preseason. [He] looks very comfortable, the scheme fits him, the style of play fits him, and he's a big, physical kid. It really looks like he's on top of his game already. They obviously have a great guy, and it's going to be a big complement to the defense."

It's high, high praise for one of the league's most-feared pass rushers and his rookie teammate, but the respect is mutual from the Broncos' end as well.

"[Wilson's] the best," Broncos Head Coach Vance Joseph said. "He is the best movement quarterback in this entire league. Last year he had the most 10-plus-yard runs as the quarterback, and that kills you — especially on third downs. We have to have a great, great rush plan to contain this guy. Obviously, he's going to escape from time to time, so our coverage guys have to cover twice. When the ball's snapped, they have to cover the concept, and when he starts scrambling, they have to cover the scramble plays. That makes it difficult, especially on third down. All of the big plays go through Russell, and most of them are outside of the pocket. He's a dangerous guy. ... He's a special player and their offense obviously goes through him."

Outside linebacker Shane Ray knows Wilson will require Denver's defense to combine smart play, everyone being on the same page and a heavy dose of discipline.

"It can't be 'OK, I got off the ball and I can beat this guy, but if I don't make the play there's this huge lane,'" Ray said. "It can't be that. We all have to be on the same page, we all have to contain, we all gotta basically play with our hair on fire. The more we can chase him and run after him, the less opportunity he has to find those guys downfield and make plays."

The stats back up Joseph and Ray's points of emphasis. Wilson ran for 586 yards last year, second only to Cam Newton among quarterbacks. His 5.9 yards per carry was tops among quarterbacks with at least 60 carries. Whether through the air or on the ground, Wilson accounted for all but one of Seattle's 38 offensive touchdowns last year.

When things break down, Wilson is a great escape artist, and he takes advantage of any small mistake.

That's what makes him so tough, according to Chubb.

"You can't just be up the field, can't just be coming out here all fast and stuff like that," Chubb said. "You've got to make sure you keep them in the pocket because with any crease he can take off with it. Just make sure that we all have our gaps that we need to be in and just make sure that everybody is doing their job."

One aspect playing in the Broncos' favor is their depth at outside linebacker. Chasing Wilson is an exhausting exercise throughout a game, but Denver can rotate Miller, Chubb, Ray and Shaquil Barrett on the edges, allowing the pass rush off the edge to stay fresh, even against one of the game's most nimble signal callers.

"It's huge," said Ray about the position's depth. "You think about it, we have four elite pass rushers. To be able to rotate all of us guys in, or [to have] the packages we can do that have us all four in at one time, I feel like it creates a lot of versatility and it keeps them tired. They're like 'Damn, there's another guy who's coming in who's a very, very good football player. I'm tired.' [It's] just wearing guys out, and that's what we want to do."

Wilson's a unique matchup — one that the Broncos likely won't face for the rest of the season — but he's also well aware of the Broncos' talent all over the defense, not just at outside linebacker.

"Obviously Chris Harris [Jr.] is one of the best corners in the world," Wilson said. "He can make a lot of plays. [Bradley] Roby's an absolute star, too. And then you think about their safeties, they play tough, they play physical downhill and make a lot of plays, so it's not an easy feat. ... They're a defense that plays physical, they play fast and make a lot of plays. Obviously it starts with Von, one of the best players in the game of football ever."

Wilson has made a career out of making the most out of plays that look like they're going nowhere. For Broncos defenders, making sure those plays actually do go nowhere will require a balance of playing aggressively enough to force the issue but smartly enough to not get caught out of position.

"It's all about discipline," Ray said. "When you play guys like this, what it comes down to is who's going to be the most disciplined defense that plays against this quarterback. How are you going to contain him? How are you going to take away his traits? Because the offense runs through him."

Casey Kreiter's small gesture helps Iowa school heal after gun-related lockdown

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
Sept. 6, 2018

Days after an Iowa junior high school was placed into lockdown when a seventh grader took out a loaded gun during class, Broncos long snapper Casey Kreiter did what he could to help the small-town Iowan community heal.

Kreiter, who grew up in nearby DeWitt and worked as a science teacher in Iowa City before signing with the Broncos, sent coffee and donuts on Tuesday to the teachers and staff at Eldridge's North Scott Junior High. The Broncos' long snapper, who is entering his third season with Denver, is quite familiar with the school.

His uncle works there and his grandmother was previously employed at North Scott. When Kreiter was growing up, he competed against the Eldridge school and knows a number of the coaches and teachers.

"My hometown, DeWitt, and Eldridge are pretty close and kind of a tight-knit community," Kreiter said. "Really, just because being a teacher, I can't imagine that happening to me and kind of going back to work. Trying to have normalcy would be tough. I thought maybe it would be a good gesture."

Kreiter wasn't the only one who send a small act of kindness Eldridge's way.

"I called over to make sure they got it, and it sounds like I wasn't the only one who was thinking of them," Kreiter said. "It sounded like every [local] school almost held a potluck with all the free stuff and gifts they were getting sent."

The communal spirit replaced what could have been a much more somber tone, and Kreiter was more than aware of that when discussing the incident on Wednesday.

While one of the school's teachers ensured no shots were fired and no one was hurt, Kreiter reflected what could have happened — and how he would've handled the situation if he were still in the classroom.

"I couldn't imagine as a parent and being in the classroom and trying to think, 'How the heck am I going to go back to school and try to shape these kids into young adults when someone showed up and could have potentially killed some of the [students and teachers]?'” Kreiter said. "That would be tough."

That won't stop Kreiter, though, from returning to the classroom at some point.

"I'll always have a connection there," Kreiter said. "My dad was a teacher. Teaching's what I love to do and what I'll do when I'm done playing football, I think.

"... There's just something special about being in the classroom. Teachers don't do it for money, obviously. They do it for other reasons. I miss that part of it."

Could Denver see former All-Pro safety Earl Thomas on Sunday vs. Seahawks?

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
Sept. 6, 2018

Seattle safety Earl Thomas reported to the Seahawks on Wednesday after a lengthy holdout, but head coach Pete Carroll did not provide much of an indication of whether the former All-Pro would play Sunday in Denver.

“We’ll let you know,” Carroll said with a laugh on Wednesday.

Carroll did confirm he met with Thomas, who missed the entirety of the Seahawks’ offseason and preseason programs.

When asked what he needs to see from Thomas for him to play Sunday, Carroll again offered few specifics.

“There’s all kinds of stuff,” Carroll said. “I don’t know what kind of shape he’s in and all that kind of stuff. We’ll figure it out.”

Should Thomas play on Sunday, he could change the dynamic of both the Seahawks’ secondary and their defense.

Thomas, the last remaining member of the “Legion of Boom,” has been making that kind of impact for years. He recorded three consecutive First-Team All-Pro honors from 2012-2014, and he earned his sixth Pro Bowl nod after the 2017 season.

The 29-year-old Texas product has intercepted at least two passes in all but one of his eight seasons in the NFL. In 2017, he took one of those interceptions 78 yards for a touchdown.

Thomas has started every regular-season game he’s appeared in during his career and has missed just seven regular-season contests during that time.

If Thomas isn’t ready to play Sunday, though, Carroll should still have confidence in his secondary.

“We’ve been working hard at it,” Carroll said. “We like our guys. We’ve got really good talent. We’re fast. We’ve got the kind of know-how we need. Bradley McDougald does a really nice job. Dontae Johnson’s played some games in our division, [as] we know, and he’s played well for us since he’s been here. Shaquill Griffin has been a terrific player for us since the start. And probably the highlight guy in camp has been Tedric Thompson. We’re excited to get these guys back out there. Our nickel guy, Justin Coleman, played all last year for us. So we’re excited to see how these guys turn out.”

Biggest injury questions for all 32 teams in Week 1

By STAFF

ESPN

Sept. 6, 2018

Chiefs safety Eric Berry missed practice on Wednesday. Will he be healthy enough to play against the Chargers in the season opener? NFL Nation's reporters assess the biggest injuries across the league for Week 1.

Scan through all 32 teams by division, or click here to jump ahead to your team: [AFC EAST](#)

Buffalo Bills

There were questions entering this week about the availability of starting DT Kyle Williams (knee) and DE Trent Murphy (groin) after they missed time this preseason, but those questions were answered when the Bills' injury report Wednesday included neither player. That means the Bills are almost fully healthy entering Sunday's opener in Baltimore, with only rookie WR Ray-Ray McCLOUD (knee) not practicing Wednesday while LB Julian Stanford (nose) was limited.-- Mike Rodak

Miami Dolphins

WR DeVante Parker could miss Sunday's game against the Titans. He hasn't practiced since breaking his middle finger on Aug. 12. Dolphins coach Adam Gase said they haven't had him catch a ball yet. It seems unlikely, at best, that Parker will be able to suit up. Expect an increased load for Albert Wilson and Jakeem Grant, along with regular starters Kenny Stills and Danny Amendola. -- Cameron Wolfe

New England Patriots

Rex Burkhead and Sony Michel didn't play in the preseason, but the two running backs have been participating in practice -- Burkhead for the entire session and Michel on a limited basis. Burkhead is cleared to play in the opener but expect him to be eased into the mix because there is an acclimation process that still needs to take place. Starting RT Marcus Cannon is coming back from a strained calf muscle that kept him out of preseason and he could fall into the same category, although he has been a full participant in practice. Ditto for DE Trey Flowers, who led the team with 6.5 sacks last season but didn't play in the preseason. Flowers said the plan is for him to play Sunday. -- Mike Reiss

New York Jets

There's a chance the Jets won't have starting wide receiver Jermaine Kearse (abdomen) on Monday night against the Lions. He missed the last two preseason games and hasn't practiced, leading some on the team to question his availability. If he's out, look for Quincy Enunwa to replace him in the slot, with Robby Anderson and Terrelle Pryor on the outside.-- Rich Cimini

AFC NORTH

Baltimore Ravens

In what has been an extremely healthy summer, the Ravens will be without two starters against Buffalo: TE Hayden Hurst (foot) and DL Willie Henry (hernia). With Hurst sidelined at least a couple of games, rookie third-round pick Mark Andrews should see increased playing time. Andrews is the second-best pass-catching tight end behind Hurst. Slot receiver Willie Snead could also absorb some of Hurst's targets because of his ability to get open over the middle. -- Jamison Hensley

Cincinnati Bengals

Bengals LT Cordy Glenn was limited in practice with a shoulder injury after exiting the third preseason game early. Glenn has said he's fine and will be ready to go against the Colts in Week 1, so it's likely they're just being cautious with him. -- Katherine Terrell

Cleveland Browns

WR Josh Gordon and OT Desmond Harrison were listed as limited after Wednesday's practice, but expect both to play against the Steelers. Gordon will get plenty of time, and Harrison, an undrafted rookie, may start at left tackle in his first professional game.-- Pat McManamon

Pittsburgh Steelers

TE Vance McDonald (foot) is practicing for the first time in more than a month and is hopeful to play in Cleveland. The Steelers will assess him throughout the week. Jesse James had a solid preseason and is a candidate to start, but McDonald's speed makes him a friendly target for Ben Roethlisberger.-- Jeremy Fowler

AFC SOUTH

Houston Texans

The Texans got WR Will Fuller (hamstring) back at practice on Wednesday. Fuller did not play in a preseason game but is expected to play in the season opener against the Patriots. Cornerback Kevin Johnson practiced in full for the first time since his Aug. 19 concussion and is expected to be cleared from the protocol on Thursday. -- Sarah Barshop

Indianapolis Colts

LT Anthony Castonzo practiced for the first time in five weeks due to a hamstring injury. Coach Frank Reich wants Castonzo to practice before making a final decision on his status against Cincinnati. Castonzo's responsible for protecting QB Andrew Luck's blindside and the Colts don't have much depth behind Castonzo at that position. Luck will be playing in a regular-season game for the first time since Week 17 of the 2016 season.-- Mike Wells

Jacksonville Jaguars

The Jaguars are pretty healthy with the exception of C Brandon Linder and RT Jeremy Parnell, both of whom are dealing with minor knee injuries. They will both play against the Giants but the injuries bear monitoring -- especially Parnell's, because he has had knee issues that impacted his play late in each of the past two seasons.-- Mike DiRocco

Tennessee Titans

ILB Rashaan Evans (hamstring) and OLB Derrick Morgan (knee) were limited in practice but spent a lot of time working one on one with coach Mike Vrabel during the individual period of practice this week. Evans missed most of training camp but worked diligently in the classroom to learn the defense. Morgan missed a week of practice but made his return on Monday. He said he feels good and is ready for the season opener against Miami.-- Turron Davenport

AFC WEST

Denver Broncos

The Broncos are mostly healthy heading into Week 1 against Seattle, but two players to keep an eye on are guard Ron Leary, who missed substantial time in the offseason program as well as some time in training camp because of knee pain, as well as tackle Jared Veldheer, who finished the 2017 on injured reserve for the Arizona Cardinals (foot). The Broncos were cautious with both in the offseason, but are confident the two are ready to go for the regular season. -- Jeff Legwold

Kansas City Chiefs

Eric Berry's chances of playing on Sunday took a dive when he was held out of Wednesday's practice. Berry hasn't played or practiced in almost a month because of what the Chiefs are calling a sore heel. It's unlikely the Chiefs would let Berry play against the Chargers if doing so puts his availability for future games in doubt. But if anyone can play well after missing a month of work, it's Berry. -- Adam Teicher

Los Angeles Chargers

DE Joey Bosa did not play in any preseason games due to an injured left foot suffered during a training camp practice on Aug. 7. Coach Anthony Lynn took a cautious approach with Bosa, with the hope that he would be fully healthy for the team's season opener against the Chiefs. Bosa was a limited participant in practice on Wednesday, but the expectation is he should be ready to go by Sunday. -- Eric D. Williams

Oakland Raiders

RB DeAndre Washington. As the fourth running back, behind Marshawn Lynch, Doug Martin and Jalen Richard, Washington probably was not going to see much time or even be activated for Monday night's opener against the Rams. After all, Washington is still recovering from a knee scope late in camp, though he was named to the team's 53-man roster. Washington was also the lone Raiders player not on the field in Wednesday's practice. -- Paul Gutierrez

NFC EAST

The Cowboys entered the week knowing they wouldn't have Travis Frederick (Guillain-Barre), Xavier Woods (hamstring) and Datone Jones (knee) but they were able to see Tyron Smith (hamstring), Maliek Collins (foot) and Zack Martin (knee) get through Wednesday's practice so well they are not even on the injury report. Safety Kavon Frazier, who is replacing Woods, was limited but the expectation is he will be

able to play Sunday against the Panthers. Collins missed almost all of training camp recovering from offseason foot surgery and could play limited snaps. -- Todd Archer

New York Giants

Olivier Vernon didn't practice Wednesday. Coach Pat Shurmur said in a radio interview this week that the outside linebacker was dealing with a high ankle sprain. It has been only a week since he suffered the injury. Even though the Giants consider Vernon an unusually fast healer, it's not looking great for Sunday's opener against the Jaguars. -- Jordan Raanan

Philadelphia Eagles

The Eagles will be without WRs Alshon Jeffery (shoulder) and Mack Hollins (groin) on Thursday night against Atlanta, meaning Shelton Gibson could get a healthy amount of reps on the outside opposite Mike Wallace. RB Jay Ajayi expects to play despite a lingering foot issue. DE Michael Bennett (knee) appeared on the injury list Tuesday but there were no alarm bells going off internally when it comes to his status. -- Tim McManus

Washington Redskins

LB Zach Brown practiced for the first time in more than a week after sitting out with an oblique injury. He should be ready to play the Cardinals on Sunday. The other questions surrounding the starters focused more on how much players such as TE Jordan Reed (toes) and RB Chris Thompson (right leg) will play. Thompson has looked terrific in practice and doesn't believe he should be limited. Coach Jay Gruden said Reed would play Sunday and "I would expect him to play quite a bit." -- John Keim

NFC NORTH

Chicago Bears

Bears rookie ILB Roquan Smith said on Wednesday that he's optimistic he'll be able to contribute in Chicago's season opener against Green Bay, but Smith is still working his way back from a hamstring injury. "It [the hamstring injury] was never anything too crazy, it was just tightness and stuff," Smith said. "It definitely feels a lot better." Smith -- the eighth overall pick of the 2018 NFL draft -- also missed the first couple weeks of training camp due to a contract dispute. The plan is for Smith to eventually be an every-down linebacker in the Bears' defense, but the rookie may be forced to accept a more limited role in Week 1. -- Jeff Dickerson

Detroit Lions

The Lions are remarkably healthy heading into Week 1. Every player went through the non-padded practice Wednesday and with no injury report due until Thursday everyone appears on track to play against the Jets. The biggest question mark would be guard T.J. Lang, who didn't play in the preseason but said in August he hoped to be ready for Week 1. He has been at practice for the past week, so everything looks good there. -- Michael Rothstein

Green Bay Packers

After losing Jake Ryan for the season, the Packers turned to rookie third-round pick Oren Burks at inside linebacker -- then he dislocated his shoulder in the third preseason game. Burks was a limited participant in Wednesday's practice, but it might be a long shot for him to play Sunday night against the Bears. Safety Josh Jones (ankle) also has played some at inside linebacker in certain packages, but he did not practice at all. Burks, Jones and linebacker James Crawford (hamstring) were the only three players on the first injury report of the season. Antonio Morrison, who was acquired in an Aug. 26 trade from the Colts, could start alongside Blake Martinez at inside linebacker. -- Rob Demovsky

Minnesota Vikings

Pat Elflein came off the PUP list and returned to practice this week, but he is not expected to play against the 49ers. Mike Zimmer wouldn't confirm or deny a report that Danny Isidora will start at center while Kirk Cousins noted that Brett Jones was his center during a walk-through on Wednesday. Left tackle Riley Reiff (ankle) was limited on Wednesday while RB Roc Thomas and CB Mackensie Alexander were sidelined with ankle injuries. If Alexander isn't ready, rookie Mike Hughes may get the nod at nickel corner. -- Courtney Cronin

NFC SOUTH

Atlanta Falcons

Falcons coach Dan Quinn said long snapper Josh Harris is a game-time decision coming off a hip injury. Harris practiced Tuesday but was limited. If Harris can't go, the Falcons would have to elevate Jeff Overbaugh from the practice squad. That the move hasn't been made already might be an indication that Harris is OK. -- Vaughan McClure

Carolina Panthers

RT Daryl Williams (knee) and G/T Amini Silatolu (knee) returned to practice on Sunday and have been working on a limited basis. Coach Ron Rivera said it's too early to say whether they will be available against Dallas, but Silatolu said on Sunday that both are ready to go. With Taylor Moton moving from right tackle to left tackle to replace Matt Kalil, who was placed on injured reserve with a knee injury, Carolina needs either Williams or Silatolu at right tackle since the replacement there, Jeremiah Sirles, was placed on injured reserve. If not, the Panthers could be in the desperate situation of playing recently acquired Corey Robinson on the right side. -- David Newton

New Orleans Saints

The Saints have only one name on their injury list, but it's an important one: starting left guard Andrus Peat. He didn't practice Wednesday because of a quad injury. And his status to play against Tampa Bay is uncertain, considering New Orleans has re-signed two veteran guards to the roster this week, Josh LeRibeus and Michael Ola. The good news if Peat doesn't play is that the rest of the Saints' loaded offensive line is intact, and LeRibeus has plenty of experience. -- Mike Triplett

Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Left tackle Donovan Smith returned to practice Wednesday for the first time since suffering a sprained right knee two weeks ago. He was wearing a brace and participating in blocking drills with his

teammates during the 30-minute portion of practice that was open to the media. The initial estimated time frame for healing was two to four weeks. The Bucs are hopeful he'll be ready to play New Orleans. Smith has started 48 consecutive games at his position, tied for fifth-most in the league. -- Jenna Laine

NFC WEST

Arizona Cardinals

The status of DE Markus Golden for Sunday's game against Washington remains unknown as he rehabilitates from a torn ACL suffered last season. He was the only player to not practice Wednesday even though he has been taken off the PUP list. Tight end Jermaine Gresham (Achilles) was also limited but is expected to play Sunday. -- Josh Weinfuss

Los Angeles Rams

The Rams are healthy going into Week 1, which is no surprise after coach Sean McVay played it safe through the preseason, keeping his offensive starters on the sideline and limiting the defensive starters to seven plays. There is no official injury report until Thursday with the Rams opening on Monday night against the Raiders. If there are any questions regarding health, it will be at outside linebacker, where Matt Longacre returns after recovering from back surgery and Dominique Easley returns after recovering from a third major knee injury. -- Lindsey Thiry

San Francisco 49ers

The 49ers could be without DB Jimmie Ward (quadriceps) and LB Malcolm Smith (hamstring) this week against Minnesota. Both have been battling nagging issues and coach Kyle Shanahan said Wednesday there will be some players who have an unknown status leading in to the game. Smith has been a projected starter, but if he's out, it would leave rookie Fred Warner and veteran Brock Coyle to handle the two inside linebacker spots. Ward is a key backup at every spot in the secondary and if the Niners are without him, they'd have options but most of those options are largely inexperienced. -- Nick Wagoner

Seattle Seahawks

DE Dion Jordan was activated off the PUP list over the weekend, but his status for the opener against the Broncos seems questionable at best. Remember, he missed organized team activities and minicamp while recovering from another knee surgery, then he missed all of training camp due to a stress issue in his leg. So it might be asking a lot of Jordan to play after practicing for all of one week. Coach Pete Carroll isn't closing the door on the possibility, however. "He's close," Carroll said Monday. "We'll see. I'm not going to be opposed to playing him this weekend." -- Brady Henderson

Nike plans Colin Kaepernick 'Just Do It' ad during NBC's NFL opener

By A.J. Perez
USA Today
Sept. 6, 2018

Colin Kaepernick's "Just Do It" advertisement for Nike is slated to run on NBC on Thursday night as the Atlanta Falcons and the defending champion Philadelphia Eagles kick off the NFL regular season, a person with knowledge of the commercial's placement told USA TODAY Sports.

The two-minute ad is voiced by Kaepernick and is scheduled to run near the start of the game, according to the person who requested anonymity because plans for the ad had not been made public as of Wednesday afternoon.

"If people say your dreams are crazy, if they laugh at what you think you can do, good," Kaepernick says at the start of the ad. "Stay that way because what non-believers fail to understand is that calling a dream crazy is not an insult, it's a compliment."

The ad features LeBron James, Serena Williams, the U.S. women's national soccer team, Canadian national team/MLS soccer player and African refugee Alphonso Davies and Shaquill Griffin, a one-handed former University of Central Florida linebacker who made the Seattle Seahawks' roster last weekend.

"So, don't ask if your dreams are crazy," Kaepernick says at the end of the ad. "Ask if they are crazy enough."

Kaepernick is pursuing a collusion grievance against the NFL over allegations that owners have conspired to keep him out of the league due to his protests of police brutality and social inequality. He started the protest by taking a knee during the national anthem two years ago and other players have followed suit - showing support in various ways and sparking the ire of President Trump. Kaepernick hasn't played in the NFL since 2016.

"Nike's Dream Crazy campaign will air this week during sporting events such as the US Open, MLB and college football in addition to Thursday Night Football. It also will stream across various music, gaming, entertainment platforms," Nike's Sandra Carreon-John told USA TODAY Sports.

ESPN was the first to report the ad would air Thursday night.

The Helmet Goes on the Head. After That, the N.F.L. Is Confused

By STAFF

New York Times

Sept. 6, 2018

Football season is starting on Thursday with a not-so-small problem. The players don't know what to do with their helmets.

Alarmed by rising concussion rates and the lasting effects of repeated hits to the head, the N.F.L. adopted a new rule — 49 indistinct words — prohibiting any player from lowering his head to make contact with an opponent.

Put simply, it outlawed using the helmet as a weapon. And it applies to everyone, including the running back digging in for the extra yard and the lineman bowing to prevent it.

Violating the rule would draw a 15-yard penalty or, possibly, an ejection from the game, plus a fine or a suspension.

It was another, perhaps tortuous step by a league fighting for its future as awareness and research deepen about the long-term consequences of large men crashing into each other.

Yet the helmet rule, directed at such an elementary piece of equipment and focused on the basic idea of the game to knock down the guy with the ball, has touched a particular nerve.

It has infuriated players, baffled coaches and placed the league's already embattled game officials under greater scrutiny and pressure.

Some players who do a lot of the hitting have insisted it will lead to more injuries, not prevent them.

Richard Sherman, the San Francisco 49ers' Pro Bowl cornerback, called the new rule a "disaster" and mocked the notion that every tackle could be made without helmet contact.

"There are going to be times when players tackle with their shoulder, as they should, but the fact is your head comes before your shoulder," Sherman said. "If there was a way somebody could pull their head back and only lead with their shoulder, I'm sure they would — but your body doesn't work that way."

Jets Coach Todd Bowles, noting that the new rule applied to every player on the field, wondered how it could be policed.

"I don't know if we have enough referees to call all that," Bowles said.

In Chicago, the Bears' 2018 first-round draft pick, Roquan Smith, refused to sign a rookie contract for 29 days until there was language in the deal that prevented the team from withholding his salary should he be suspended for violating the new rule.

Giants defensive tackle Damon Harrison feared the rule exposed players to debilitating, career-threatening knee injuries — and a rules quandary, too.

“Guys will be afraid to hit up high now, so they’ll have to lower the target,” Harrison said. “That causes more lower-leg injuries. And there’s already a rule against those kinds of hits.”

And John Harbaugh, coach of the Baltimore Ravens, said he had prepared his players for botched calls and inconsistencies.

“I told our guys that there are going to be some penalties called that they’re going to come back and say shouldn’t have been called,” Harbaugh said. “There are going to be others not called that they’re going to say should have been called.”

Harbaugh added, “The officials on the field, they expressed that it’s tough.”

Football has always been governed by a plethora of exacting rules. Every year nothing seems to agitate and unnerve the sport like tampering with them.

It is still figuring out what a catch is.

Bad Tackles vs. Good Tackles

Bad Runs vs. Good Runs

For several recent seasons, the N.F.L. has attempted to legislate the most jarring collisions out of the game, hits that were once not only legal but celebrated. The league has instituted penalties for hits on what it calls “defenseless” players. Nearly an entire page of the rule book is now devoted to what defenders cannot do to the quarterback, painstaking instructions that even ask defenders to avoid falling on the quarterback while tackling him.

The N.F.L. has also zeroed in on the safety of the helmet itself, with laboratory testing this spring leading to the banning of 10 helmet models and the ranking of 24 other models.

But none of these efforts have provoked the kind of tumult that this year’s helmet rule has spawned as the league tries to balance its inherent ferocity with the practical imperative of keeping its high-priced work force functioning.

Since the passage of the rule in the spring, the N.F.L. has worked to inform players, coaches and fans about what everyone in the league is calling “the helmet rule.” Alberto Riveron, the league’s senior vice president for officiating, delivered a presentation on the details of the new edict at the league’s annual meeting in May, and the N.F.L. also posted a video of Riveron’s talk on its website.

As Riveron emphasized, while other recent, new rules on contact have forbidden the most brutal helmet-to-helmet hits — and almost exclusively penalized defensive players — the 2018 rule pertains to any offensive or defensive player who initiates contact with his helmet against any part of an opponent, from the head to the lower body.

If that message did not get through, in August, on the eve of the first preseason games, the league tried another informational salvo when it issued a fact sheet about the rule that also included a series of explanatory videos prepared by N.F.L. head coaches to elucidate what is an accepted tackle and what is now unacceptable.

But the uproar has continued unabated, in part because the contact that was flagged in last month's preseason games varied greatly and at times seemed to contradict the rule as written. Less than five minutes into the first game of the preseason, Baltimore linebacker Patrick Onwuasor was penalized under the rule in what was clearly a headfirst hit. But later in the game, two other Ravens were whistled for the same infraction and at least one appeared to be a shoulder-first tackle with incidental helmet contact.

On Aug. 11, an Indianapolis Colts safety, Shamarko Thomas, became the first player ejected from a game under the rule after an egregious helmet-to-helmet hit on a diving, defenseless wide receiver (see video below). In what may or may not have been a statement, two days later, Thomas was cut by the Colts.

A week later, Arizona's Travell Dixon appeared to be going out of his way to keep his head up and made an open-field tackle on a wide receiver by lunging forward with his chest and shoulder. A millisecond later, Dixon's helmet, inches from his shoulder pads, made contact with the opponent as well. A yellow flag fluttered to the turf.

Dixon rose from the tackle and waved his hands in the air as if to say: What more could I have done to avoid using my head?

By Aug. 22, the N.F.L. issued a clarification. While standing by the new rule, league officials added that "inadvertent or incidental contact with the helmet and/or face mask" would not be a foul.

It did not quell the controversy, probably because finding a way to completely remove head contact from football has proved to be more challenging than N.F.L. officials may have expected, especially when it comes to tackling. Also, the clarification asked game officials, in a split-second, to determine whether a helmet-first hit was intentional or inadvertent, a slippery slope generally avoided.

"The more layers you add, the more difficult it becomes to implement a rule consistently," said Dean Blandino, a Fox Sports rules analyst who until last year oversaw officiating for the N.F.L.

Even the wide receivers, who stand to benefit the most from the rule, are expressing some sympathy for their defensive counterparts.

"Some of those calls we're seeing, you say, 'Come on, man,' " Ravens wide receiver Willie Snead said last month. "I get it that they're trying to be safe and protect players, and I can appreciate that because I've taken a big helmet-to-helmet hit.

"At the same time, it's hard to take the aggressiveness out of the game. It's about not dropping your head on both sides of the ball, not just the defensive side."

This summer, when the N.F.L. sent its referees to team training camps to help assuage the concerns of players and coaches, the move often backfired, with more exasperation and confusion ensuing.

One of the referees on the training camp tour, Carl Cheffers, acknowledged that the rules enacted for the N.F.L. in 2018 represented “a pretty significant cultural change for the football community.”

If that is true, the shift in the landscape continues to happen slowly, with some willing to adapt and others less accepting of change.

“These things take time,” Zak DeOssie, the Giants’ long snapper and a vice president of the Players Association’s executive committee, said. “So you have to start somewhere.”

Andrew Sendejo, a hard-hitting safety for the Minnesota Vikings who was suspended for one game last season for a collision that sent an opposing receiver into the N.F.L.’s concussion protocol, has taken a different approach.

Early in the Vikings’ training camp, he wore a baseball cap embossed with a message: Make Football Violent Again.

The NFL's Best Players Are Getting Richer Than Ever

By Andrew Beaton
Wall Street Journal
Sept. 6, 2018

For years Khalil Mack has been one of the most productive pass rushers in the league. So this summer, he held out from the Oakland Raiders in search of a richer contract. And he got it.

But he didn't get it from the team for which he became a superstar. The Raiders balked when the negotiations became too expensive. In exchange for two first-round draft picks, Mack was traded to the Chicago Bears, where he was rewarded with the richest contract ever for a defensive player in NFL history, worth a reported \$141 million over six years. That broke a record that had lasted...less than a week.

The buildup to this NFL season has consisted of routine concerns and drama. People are still wondering who Tom Brady will throw passes to, whether or not Blake Bortles is good and just what sort of disaster will unfold in Cleveland.

But the biggest theme heading into the season, which opens Thursday night, has been the gamut of historic deals. The NFL's best players are getting richer than ever.

In a slew of deals in recent days, stars have broken the bank like never before. Right before the Bears forked over a fortune to Oakland for the right to pay Mack a fortune, the Los Angeles Rams had made defensive lineman Aaron Donald (briefly) the highest paid defensive player in the NFL at \$135 million over six seasons. Prior to that, the Giants' Odell Beckham Jr. inked a record deal for a wide receiver for \$90 million spanning five years.

Then there was the deal that broke records and didn't need a qualifier for position. Rather than entering contentious waters in negotiations in years to come, the Packers made quarterback Aaron Rodgers the priciest player in the game's history.

Record contracts in the NFL aren't exactly new. Rodgers's deal, with a reported \$100 million or so guaranteed and worth up to \$174 million over six years when totaled with his current contract, broke a record set by Falcons' quarterback Matt Ryan in May, which broke a record that had already been broken several times in the previous year. Prior to that, quarterbacks Kirk Cousins, Jimmy Garoppolo, Matt Stafford and Derek Carr had all been able to claim they were the top-paid player in the NFL by some reasonable measure. And the fact that Carr, whom nobody would call the best passer in the league, once topped that list says everything about how timing can be crucial.

But at a time when professional football faces headwinds and questions about its long-term strength, a run of megadeals are a sign of the game's financial health. In a rapidly shifting landscape in which players are more powerful than ever, teams have the resources to shell out for top talent.

"It shows the prosperity of the game," said Peter Schaffer, an NFL agent. "Teams are not afraid to spend."

Indeed, the NFL's coffers have never grown so rapidly. During this NFL season, the salary cap is \$177.2 million. That number isn't just an all-time high—it has gone up pretty much every year since its implementation in 1994—but it's a figure so astronomical that it's the product of breakneck growth in recent years.

From 2008 to 2013, the cap rose from \$116 million to \$123 million—or a grand total of 6%. From 2013 to 2018 it rose from there to the current mark, a surge of 44%.

The salary cap's rise is a product of growth in league revenues. Despite questions about how player protests during the national anthem have affected interest and declines in television ratings, partners have continued to shell out big and bigger bucks to partner with the NFL—and the cap has grown as a result.

The barrage of eye-popping deals is a product of this record growth, and also a dash of careful planning and coincidence. Some teams had been hoarding cap dollars for years in anticipation of a moment like this. Unused dollars can be carried over into future years. The 49ers had been well below the cap for years, allowing them to give big bucks to their franchise quarterback, Garoppolo, without being financially constrained in years to come.

The run of deals is also, in some respects, sheer happenstance. Players of this caliber just happened to be in the market for new deals at the same time. Beckham, despite an injury that kept him out almost all of last year, is arguably the most talented wide receiver in the NFL. Donald is the game's reigning Defensive Player of the Year. Mack may be his top rival this year.

It's also about the positions these players play. Rodgers may be the best passer in the game. Mack and Donald are the two players perhaps most capable of making passers like Rodgers writhe with nightmares.

"It's easy when you're talking about two positions specifically: Quarterback and pass rusher," said Bears general manager Ryan Pace about committing big dollars to one player. "We're going to emphasize those positions."

But even more broadly, there's a growing sentiment that within this lucrative landscape, the best players may not be simply cashing in on circumstance. They are controlling their destinies more than ever before.

Donald held out during training camp last year and even missed a game in his pursuit of more money. He stayed away again this preseason while demanding a new deal. He eventually got it. Mack was also holding out from Raiders camp before the rare pre-season trade of a superstar. Rodgers's extension almost assuredly released the team from similarly contentious negotiations in years to come.

One of these dramas is still playing out: running back Le'Veon Bell has skipped training camp for the second consecutive season, with his future as a star of the Steelers hanging in the balance. While Pittsburgh has controlled him by placing a franchise tag on him, his abilities make him unlike any other running back in the league and the Steelers offering him enough money could determine whether or not they're legitimate threats to the Patriots this season in the AFC.

One team executive had an explanation for these high-profile dramas: The NFL has felt the wind blowing in from the NBA, where in recent years players have shown their outsize influence in the future of a franchise and have become more assertive in controlling their own destinies.

While the league structures are irrevocably different—NBA deals have a maximum value, for example, and NFL ones typically are only partially guaranteed—the executive said that desire for control has seeped over into football, a topic Rodgers has expressed hope for in the future of the NFL.

“NFL guys have looked at that happening and decided to exert their power themselves,” the executive said.

Pete Carroll on Earl Thomas playing Sunday: We'll figure it out

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
Sept. 6, 2018

Safety Earl Thomas is reporting to the Seahawks on Wednesday in a reversal of his demand that the Seahawks extend his contract to get him back or trade him to another team more willing to sign him to a new deal.

Thomas didn't take part in offseason workouts, training camp or preseason games, which led to questions for Seahawks coach Pete Carroll about whether Thomas will play against the Broncos this weekend. Carroll said on a conference call with Broncos reporters that he's met with Thomas and that the team will sort out the answer to that question in the next few days.

"There are all kinds of stuff," Carroll said, via Nicki Jhabvala of The Athletic. "I don't know what kind of shape he's in and all that kind of stuff. We'll figure it out."

There are differences between the two players and the two situations, but the Seahawks had safety Kam Chancellor in the lineup after he ended his holdout by reporting on a Wednesday before a 2015 game.